

A Pragma-dialectical Study of Persuasive Strategies in Religious Debates

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ABSTRACT:- The present study primarily focuses on investigating the pragma-dialectical strategies of persuasion and explores the way they are used to persuade their audience and to win the debate. It analyses the debate entitled 'Islam is a Religion of Peace' pragmatically in an attempt to identify a way to defend Islam and persuade others with its truth, and to fill a gap that has not received enough attention. In the context of Mahdi Hassan's (year) debate, an eclectic model is designed in order to achieve the aims of the study; it comprises three theories: van Eemeren's (2018) *Critical Discussion*, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and Grice's (1975) Theory of cooperative principle. It has been found that persuasion can be achieved by using and/or flouting different strategies and certain speech acts can be used in the four stages. Moreover, politeness strategies play an important role in the persuasion process and flouting the maxims of the cooperative principle can serve much in persuasion. Finally, Hassan seems to be more convincing in terms of adhering to the standards of an effective speech act of persuasion.

Keywords: argument, critical discussion, persuasion, Pragma-dialectic, religious debates.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin (2015) state that as they shaped human life and to a large extent and influenced the way history has been unfolded, religions are "central to the lives of many people around the world". Religion also affects the believers' views in morality, politics, and even science, they (ibid.) add. Hence, all religious traditions can be argued to be born in argumentative contexts and religious argumentation has been perhaps as old as human history (p.449).

Nowadays, religious debate has a great significance in discussing issues, revealing the truth, changing the way of thinking and convincing people. Accordingly, it is thought to be essential to investigate the way persuasive strategies are used by religious debaters for forging and supporting certain ideologies and persuading audience. So, the present paper proposes the following questions to be answered.

1. What are the persuasive strategies utilized in religious debates?
2. How are these strategies pragmatically realized and by what type of speech acts?
3. What are the most frequent persuasive strategies used in the religious debate?

In relation to these questions, it aims at:

1. finding out the persuasive strategies employed by Muslim debater.
2. identifying the pragmatic realization of each of these strategy.
3. specifying the most frequent persuasive strategy employed in religious debate.

II. THE PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL ASPECTS OF PERSUASION

In theory, pragma-dialectic "examines interactive arguments, those in which (typically) two arguers advance, defend, and challenge standpoints in a sequential fashion" (Mohammed & Zarefsky, 2011, p. 89). As its name implies, it entails the merging of dialectic, the regimentation of critical exchanges, and pragmatic, the study of language in actual communication and interaction, (van Eemeren & Garssen, 2009; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009b; van Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2008).

One of the central assumptions of pragma-dialectic theory is the use of argumentative language explicated as part of an exchange of views between two parties who do not share the same position (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 59). As proposed by Van Eemeren with the main purpose of resolving a difference of opinions, the pragma-dialectical theory organizes an ideal model of critical discussion for

analyzing argumentative discourse. Since then, the terms ‘critical discussion’ and ‘persuasion dialog’ are widely used interchangeably. In a critical discussion aiming to settle a difference of opinions through reasoned arguments, both the proponent and the respondent, as two participants, must provide evidence to support their respective arguments (Walton, 2007, p.25).

The model of critical discussion is devoted to examine the functional aspects of speech acts in structuring the discussion’s four stages, with the intention of resolving people's difference of opinion, influencing their beliefs to accept the debaters’ suggestions and propositions and directing them towards the determination of their resolution. Hence, in this model debaters can employ many strategies to serve the same purpose and achieve their aim. The figures of speech that are resulted from flouting Grice's maxims can be utilized by debaters.

In addition to that, as Freeley (2013) suggests the best way to examine the ethical consequences is through debate, and critical thinking ought to include ethical considerations. According to Broda-Bahm (2004), the term “ethics” describes the human concern with issues of what is morally right and wrong, fair and unfair, and just and unjust in our behavior and communications. Brown and Levinson (1987) depict politeness in universal terms as “a complex system for softening threats”. So, politeness strategies in religious debate play an important role in affecting and convincing others.

III. PROCEDURES

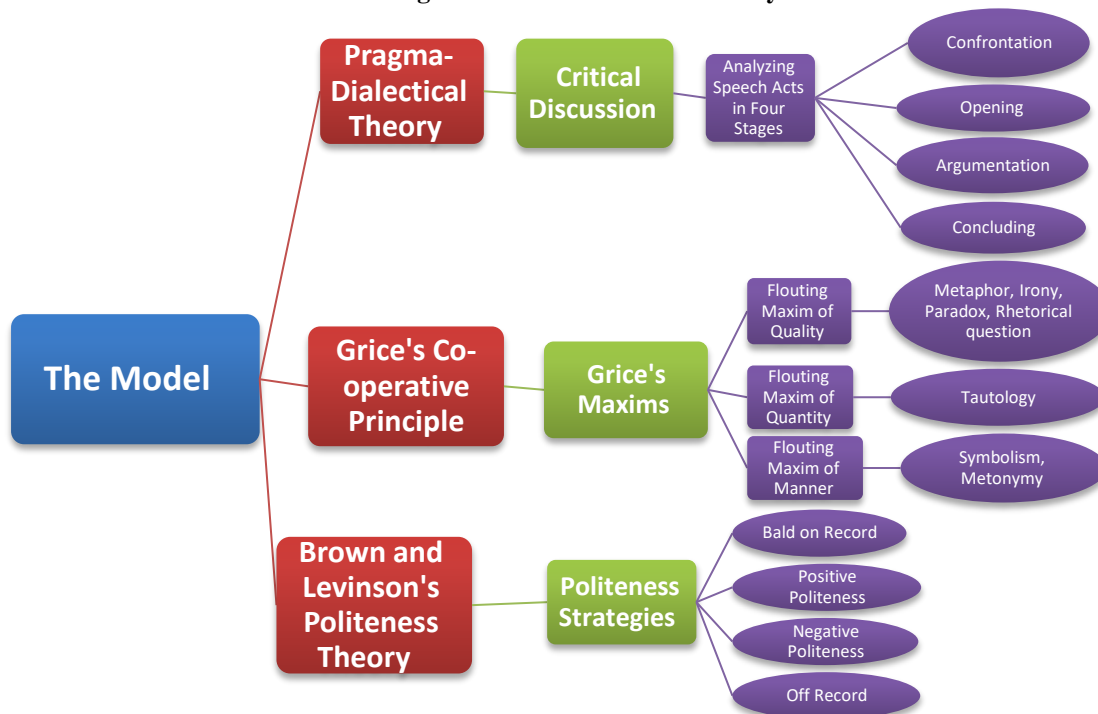
3.1 Data Selection

“Islam Is A Peaceful Religion” collected from Oxford Union Debate on Islam <http://is.gd/OxfordUnion> is the selected data to be analyzed in the present study. It is a public debate that takes place in Oxford Union in 23rd of May 2013 after Woolwich attack in London . The two parties have opposed viewpoints and each party tries to prove his own view point. The debate ends with audience voting in favor of Islam as a peaceful religion.

3.2 The Model

The framework adopted for analyzing the data qualitatively and quantitatively involves an eclectic model designed on the basis of three theories: Eemeren and Grootendorst’s (2018) Argumentation Theory, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Theory of Politeness, and Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle.

Fig.1 The Eclectic Model of Analysis



3.3 Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

The British political journalist, broadcaster, and author Mehdi Hassan works in several fields. He gained notoriety for a debate he participated in at the Oxford Union in which he argued that Islam is a peaceful religion. The debater is well known and lauded for his abilities after skillfully turning the audience's position and persuading them to support the Islamic faith. The main contention of Mehdi Hassan challenges the idea that

Islam is a violent religion and suggests that only a small number of extremists misinterpret Islam's teachings. He begins by referring to himself as the "representative" and the "ambassador" of Islam to highlight how important this issue is to him. Towards the conclusion, he urges the audience to see how calm the majority of Muslims are and emphasizes the idea that 'Islam is a peaceful religion'.

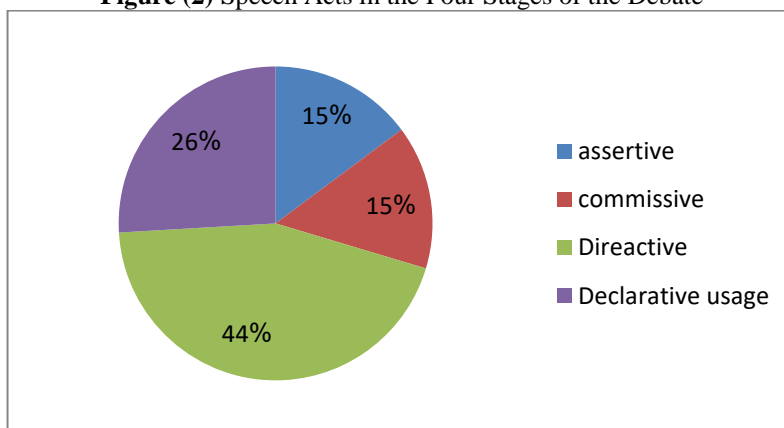
3.3.1 Stages and Speech Acts

The debater in the selected sample uses several speech acts throughout the four stages of the critical discussion. He uses directives as a sort that includes requesting, inviting, convincing, recommending, pressing, ordering, asking, ordering, encouraging, begging, challenging, and offering on cue speech acts. Directives, on the one hand, have recorded the highest level of use counted as (12) with the percentage (44%); they come next to that of declaratives counted as (7) with the percentage (26%). On the other hand, assertives and commissives were the lowest in use with equal frequencies counted as (4) for each and with the percentage (15%). Table (1) and Figure (2) show the frequencies and percentages of using these speech acts in the four stages.

Table (1) Speech Acts in the Four Stages of the Debate

No.	Stages Speech Acts	Confrontation	Opening	Argumentation	Concluding	Total	Per.
		Freq.	Freq.	Freq.	Freq.		
1	Assertives	2	0	1	1	4	15%
2	Commissives	1	1	2	0	4	15%
3	Directives	2	1	7	2	12	44%
4	Declaratives	1	1	4	1	7	26%
Total		6	3	14	4	27	100

Figure (2) Speech Acts in the Four Stages of the Debate



3.3.2 Politeness Strategies

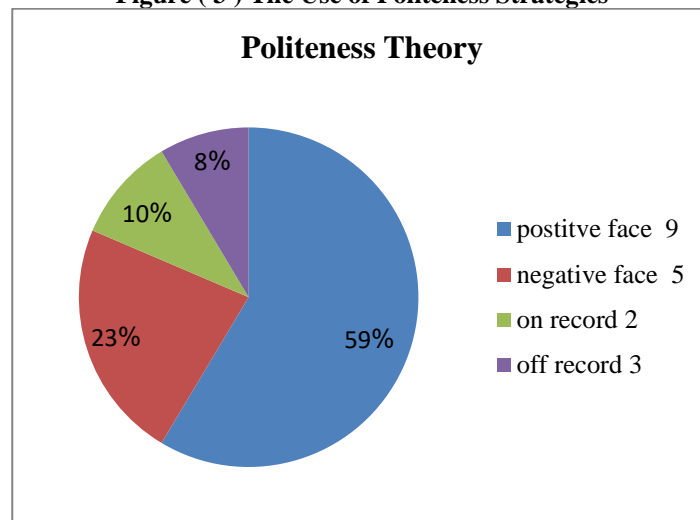
It can be noticed that politeness strategies play a significant role in affecting people in public debates. Hence the debater skillfully employs these strategies to serve his aim of convincing.

Positive politeness has been the most prominently used method in Hassan's speech. The traits of this strategy include expressing concerns, interest, optimism, promises, guarantees, offers, reasons, solidarity, compliments, jokes, sympathy, or approval. They have been detected as the highest pragmatic strategies among the others in the debate with a frequency of (9) and a percentage of (59%); they are followed by negative politeness strategies counted as (5) with the percentage (23%). Yet, off record and on record politeness strategies have taken the lowest frequency employed in the context of the debate in number counted as (3) and (2) with percentages of 10% and 8% respectively. Table (2) and Figure (3) show the frequencies and the percentages of using the politeness strategies.

Table (2) The Use of Politeness Strategies

No.	Elements of Analysis	Frequency	Percentage
1	Positive Face	9	59%
2	Negative Face	5	23%
3	On Record	2	8%
4	Off Record	3	10%
Total		19	100%

Figure (3) The Use of Politeness Strategies



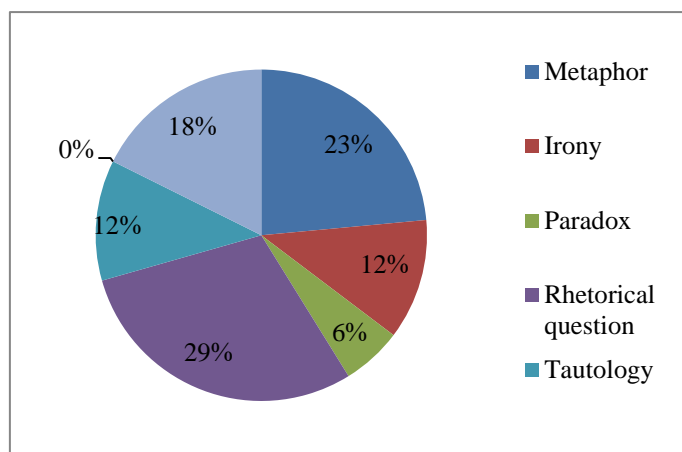
3.3.3 Figures of Speech

A number of figures of speech has been resulted from flouting Grice’s maxims of the co-operative principle in the debate under investigation. The debater flouts the maxims of quality, quantity and manner by introducing the different figures of speech throughout his debate. Rhetorical questions and metaphor are among the highest level of frequent use by which he flouts the maxim of quality with frequencies of (5) and (4) and percentages of 29% and 23%, respectively. Flouting the maxim of manner resulting from symbolism comes next with a frequency of (3) and a percentage of (18%). After that, flouting the maxims of quality and quantity resulted from the use of the figures of speech of both irony and tautology are equal frequency. They both counted as (2) with a percentage of 12%. Lastly, paradox which is resulted from flouting the maxim of quality gets the lowest level of figurative use of language with a frequency of (2) and a percentage of 6%. Table (3) and Figure (4) show the frequencies and percentages of the use of the figures of speech.

Table (3) The use of Figures of Speech

No.	Figures of Speech	Frequency	Percentage
1	Metaphor	4	23%
2	Irony	2	12%
3	Paradox	1	6%
4	Rhetorical question	5	29%
5	Tautology	2	12%
6	Metonymy	0	0%
7	Symbol	3	18%
Total		17	100%

Figure(4)The Use of Figures of Speech



3.4 Discussion of the Results

The speech of Hassan affects the audience's thoughts, attitudes and feelings. He follows many persuasive strategies as well as the significant role of linguistics aspects and figures of speech. Therefore, the use of directive and declarative speech acts, positive face, metaphor and rhetorical questions are the most significant aspects of his speech.

For the speech of Hassan to affect the audience's thoughts, attitudes and feelings, he uses directive speech acts as a sort of speech acts that include speech requesting, inviting, convincing, recommending, pressing, ordering, asking, ordering, encouraging, begging, challenging, and offering on cue. A directive speech act is also known as an imposition positive speech act, see Figure 2. Positive politeness was Hassan's method that was most prominently used for the sake of expressing concerns, interest, optimism, promises, guarantees, offers, reasons, solidarity, compliments, jokes, sympathy, or approval, see Figure 3. Besides, to achieve his aims in persuasion, Hassan uses rhetorical questions as an effective device typically given to communicate directly with the reader. Because there is no one present to respond to such questions, they give the reader a chance to stop and consider the query, see Figure 4.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the religious debate and the findings of the analysis, a set of conclusions has been arrived at as follows:

1. Persuasion in religious debates has great significant due to the fact that it comes to reveal the truth of an issue as well as to convince people to think reasonably and change their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.
2. Persuasion as a process can be achieved by using different types of strategies that all serve the same purpose.
3. These strategies can be pragmatically realized throughout the speech acts that are distributed according to the four stages of the critical discussion.
4. Positive politeness strategies used by the debater play a significant role in persuading the audience and win the argument or debate.
5. Certain types of figures of speech can be used to flout the maxims and help the debater convey his message of persuasion skillfully.
6. The use of directive and declarative speech acts, positive face, metaphor and rhetorical questions are among the most significant aspects that debaters use to win the debate.

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