

Ahmed Omar. (2016) *Strategic Maneuvering in Supporting the Feasibility of Political Change. A Pragma-Dialectical Analysis of Egyptian Anti-Regime Columns*. University of Amsterdam. Doctoral Dissertation

Reviewed by Anca Gâță

The topic in this PhD (promotor Frans H. van Eemeren, co-promotor A. Francisca Snoeck Henkemans from the University of Amsterdam), addressed from a comprehensive perspective in the framework of the extended pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, deals with texts which “paved the way for political change” (p. 13) during the Arab Spring of Egypt, leading to the end of Mubarak’s regime (1981–2011) in 2011. The dissertation is, as stated by its author, “dedicated to the argumentative aspects of the Egyptian anti-regime columns that aimed at convincing the audience that a political change in Egypt should occur” (p. 13), and the illustrative texts are chosen among the columns published by Alaa Al Aswany in a Cairene representative daily newspaper, *Al Shorouk*. As highlighted by Ahmed Omar, these columns all end with the slogan “Democracy is the solution” (p. 31), making their author appear explicitly as a supporter of the political change. An interesting perspective upon the columnist’s argumentative act is pointed to from the very beginning of the analysis, namely that the people must also be convinced that their participation to political change will indeed lead to the intended change taking place.

Egyptian anti-regime columns published by well-known fiction writer, political activist and columnist Al Aswany from February 2009 to October 2010 are approached mainly with the tools of discourse analysis and pragma-dialectics. The study provides a good perspective on discourse about political change produced in Egypt. The study concentrates, in the fourth and fifth chapters on the analysis of three texts that are not typical editorials, but two narratives and a (“narrative”) fable, which are symbolic and allegorical representations, respectively, of the “path” to democracy. In the analyst’s view, the two narratives and the fable serve as figurative means of recalling the victims’ similar experiences or reports about the injustice of and the atrocities committed by the Egyptian regime. According to the analyst, these texts are equally instrumental, in an implicit way, in raising the awareness of supporters of the undemocratic regime with respect to the following: (1) the public eye is witnessing the atrocities; (2) democracy will be the outcome, with losses on the dictatorial regime side.

The study is preceded by a foreword and an introduction, organized in four main chapters, followed by a conclusion, appendices, a summary and references.

The introduction presents the topic of research, the approach, the aims and research questions, as well as the organization of the study. After a brief outline of the main aspects of the model of critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion developed by Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1984, 2004) and of the further developments of this model by van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser (2006) and van Eemeren (2010), Ahmed Omar thoroughly introduces his research questions dealing mainly with: how a call for democratization can be systematically defended in Egyptian anti-regime columns before 2011, which genres can be implemented in such columns to achieve particular institutional goals, and, consequently, how a narrative perspective can be instrumental in maintaining the balance between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness in approaching the topics of the defeatable police and of the victorious protesters, resulting in strategic maneuvering, as defined in the framework of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation.

The second chapter, "Al Aswany's call for democracy in the *Al Shorouk's* columns", allows the analyst to provide relevant background knowledge on: Al Aswany's columns aimed at supporting the feasibility of political change by pointing to the political situation in Egypt before 2011; Al Aswany's "public stature" justifying interest in his columns as pre-eminent examples of anti-regime political texts; the tradition of the fifteen years of anti-regime writing; the impact of Al Aswany's political novel *The Yacoubian Building* as a revival and as an experience of the social and political reality; a characterization of the newspaper *Al Shorouk's* audience as supporters of an alternative political path, and of Al Aswany's followers as respondents to a second wave of commitment literature. The author of the study identifies in this chapter the rhetorical exigencies Al Aswany is confronted with in addressing the political change feasibility issue, mainly the two topics of the defeatable police and of the victorious protesters.

The third chapter, "An argumentative characterization of Egyptian political columns", introduces the reader, through the analyst's lenses, to a classification of the opinions advanced in Egyptian printed newspapers, and to the pragma-dialectical approach to the contextualization of argumentative practices as a basis for the analysis. Aiming at conventionalization of political columns published in newspapers in a pragma-dialectical perspective, Ahmed Omar determines that these columns come into being in the domain of political communication, by contributing "to establishing a well-informed and critical public opinion" and by having "a powerful impact on the political elites and policy makers", being thus able to "affect public actions like voting and protesting" (p. 69). In this same line of inquiry, the analyst frames the institutional point of the columns as both informational and

deliberative, distinguishing between direct and indirect deliberation, and placing the type of argumentative activity dealt with in the category of indirect deliberation, since the confrontation stage of the critical discussion is not actual. Political columns can be regarded as an argumentative activity type obeying to some constraints since, for instance, “the textual surface” may not always “contain indicators of putting forward points of view or advancing arguments” (p. 72). Accordingly, the analyst explains that a “political column is an implicit discussion in which an antagonist does not manifestly – through verbal communication – put forward doubt or reject the protagonist’s standpoint” (p. 75), so the difference of opinion may be considered as non-mixed or mixed. The author of the study also points to the fact that a columnist may re-advance his/her standpoint along more than one text, or column, which can be justified, from an argumentative perspective by the columnists’ wish to enhance the acceptability of their views or by their perception that their audience may see a change in the starting points of the critical discussion (p. 79). The study goes on by establishing which the procedural and the material starting points could be in the framework of such an analysis, and how means of argumentation, criticisms and possible outcomes reveal themselves.

Chapters four and five proceed with the analysis of three texts by showing how strategic maneuvering is achieved by Al Aswany by means of a narrative perspective and by means of an allegorical fable. The three columns under analysis are presented in the appendices in the analyst’s translation in English. The argumentative analysis reveals for the first two texts the author’s standpoint as being *State officers in Egypt realize they are guilty*, and for the third text, *State police will be defeated*.

Two columns by Al Aswany are analyzed in the fourth chapter, “Strategic maneuvering by means of a narrative perspective: the ‘defeatable police’ proposition”. These columns are written as narratives, with the titles ‘An Unfortunate Incident Befalling a State Security Officer’ and ‘Why was the General Screaming’. The author of the study gives first a brief introduction to what he sees as “the public image of the Egyptian police before 2011”, continuing by exposing “the argumentative functions of a narrative perspective” and analyzing the two columns as exemplary cases of the use of the narrative perspective and mood in political columns as strategic maneuvering. The analyst pays particular attention to these texts since he considers that Al Aswany’s intention is to convince the audience that “Mubarak’s extraordinary ability to use repression has its limits” (p. 93), so he concentrates on how Al Aswany “maneuvers strategically that the Egyptian police can be defeated” (p. 93). Following the analysis of the two columns, A. Omar concludes that the specific narrative perspective chosen by Al Aswany is a strategic maneuver in the discussion of the “defeatable police” topic, based on the idea that the “fictionalized scenarios” the audience is presented with “the norms, evaluations, and prejudices constituting the ideological stance can be viewed as topical choices strategically

selected in adaptation to the audience's demand", while "the author's status and his contact with the audience, if well-established can increase the acceptability of the argumentation expressed by means of a narrative text" (pp. 124–125).

The fifth chapter presents the reader with another exemplary case of "Strategic maneuvering by means of an allegorical fable: the 'victorious protesters' topic". The only column illustrating this topic is found to be among Al Aswany's columns 'A Story for Children and Adults'. The analyst reminds about the literary virtues of the beast fable, of the allegory, and of the combination between the two, the allegorical beast fable, in order to approach the column under study from the speech act theory perspective and discuss the conceptual aspects of an allegorical beast fable. This allows the author of the study to reconstruct the allegorical beast fable as a critical discussion in order to deal with it in the pragma-dialectical framework. The analyst points to the fact that, in this context, the audience's frame of reference is not favourable to Al Aswany's approach to the fictionalized scenario since people's massive protests were not a tradition for Egyptians, especially those leading to a regime change. A. Omar concludes that arguing by the allegorical beast fable "disguises the fallaciousness of some argumentative moves by exploiting the overlap between the narrative lines and the real lines", which allows him to "present a simplified version of a complicated reality as incontestable" (p. 159).

The material for analysis is duly selected, organised, presented, and analyzed. The three main texts analysed are made to appear as part of a context which may be defined as an institutional context, and the inclusion of the full texts in the appendices is valuable for the understanding of the analysis. The study may have an impact on the field of argumentation studies by the attention it gives to describing the setting of the argumentation instances it approaches as an object of study and by applying the most recent additions and developments to the pragma-dialectic theory. It may also serve as a departure point for students in Cross Cultural Communication and Argumentation Analysis. It may open new areas of research and it proves the pragma-dialectical framework of scientific investigation is adaptable and useful when rigorously applied.

The study is also inviting to further reflection along the lines suggested by the analyst. For instance, A. Omar mentions the columns are analyzed "as a collection of texts that together aim to convince readers of the necessity of political change" (p. 31). On several occasions along the study, the audience addressed by Al Aswany's argumentation in his columns is identified as being formed of two categories: "all possible readers of *Al Shorouk*", which are called "*Al Shorouk* audience", and "Al Aswany's followers", among which one could identify a smaller group of "fans" (p. 45ff.). The audience of these columns would have been mainly made up of the masses, people who endured atrocities, injustice, ill treatment. In the narrative column 'An Unfortunate Incident ...' Al Aswany is, according to the

analyst's interpretation, the protagonist of the standpoint *Mubarak's police can be defeated*. In this interpretation, the virtual antagonist is the exponent of a very large audience, the masses, who are expected by the columnist to react to the regime – as he also predicts it. It would be perhaps necessary, for analytical purposes, to take into account in the former category, that of “*Al Shorouk* audience”, a smaller group, namely the representatives of the regime (generals, police officers, people close to the regime). These could also be readers of the analyzed columns, no matter their reasons. Then the writer's standpoint as reconstructed for the respective stories of the unfortunate incident and of the screaming general, more or less “Defeating the police is feasible”, is to be reconstructed perhaps from a different perspective, since supporters of the regime may not wish to accept this reconstruction and only view a fictional text in the column. Or else, the two narratives may be also meant for this category of readers, and the corresponding reconstructed standpoint may be something like “you, State officers, should be part of the change (or else you will have blood on your hands)”. In this view, the narratives can be evoking these regime officials' most cherished values (which are also universal) in order to introduce an emotional appeal doubled by a type of *ad baculum* to make such people contribute to the political change too. Moreover, by making reference, in both stories, to the (fictional or imagined) “daughter” of the main character, the officer and the general, respectively, may also address the prototypical State officer, whose children should be free of the burden of the acts of their father. It may be not accidental that the main character, in both cases, is presented as the father of a *girl*, who suggests and symbolizes innocence or the impossibility to react at all, much more than a boy. It might thus be interesting to look at the role of the narrative for such an audience of regime officials, and reconsider the reconstruction of the standpoint, of the argumentative schemes, and of the kind of strategic maneuvering taking place there. The State officer's resignation can also be read as a metaphor of the Police Officers' giving up ill treatment practices, resignation, and anti-regime attitude projected into the future, hoped and wished for.

On the other hand, the analysis undertaken could be extended to take into consideration several other argumentative and discourse analysis issues. The author concludes (146–147) that political columns are a “hybrid communicative activity type” (p. 87), implementing two different genres: information dissemination and (indirect) deliberation. Further analysis could also reveal how this is achieved in “prototypical” columns and those written in the “fictional mood”, since the study shows that the selection of a narratorial or a figural perspective can be analyzed as a strategic choice.

And another direction of reflection would concern, in line with the previous comments, the emotional implications of “fiction reading”. One could wonder what kind of effects the writer is aiming at when not meeting the expectations

of the newspaper reader about the usual aspect and content of a column, the latter being confronted with a fictional or fable piece of writing. Most Al Aswany's readers are aware that he is a fiction writer and columnist. Thus, they may be well aware that in some of his texts both auctorial authorities are present, or at least in the three texts under analysis. It can then be presumed that the reader either turns into a fiction reader doubled by a seeker of arguments or tends to become more emotionally involved, wishing to be more like the hero, or, at least, assist the hero, and not like the anti hero, whom he would steadily fight. In this latter case, the argumentative force would be enhanced by the appeal to the reader's emotions, habits and style of reading. Which may also mean that the reader – belonging to any category of readers, even supporters or employees of the regime – could be willing to act as a, or the, Hero.

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Reviewer's address

Anca Găță
 Department of French, Faculty of Letters
 "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați
 Str. Domnească nr. 47
 800 008 Galați
 Romania