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Peng Wu (2023). *Responding to questions at press conferences: Confrontational maneuvering by Chinese spokespersons* (Argumentation in Context 21). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 

Reviewed by Menno H. Reijven (University of Amsterdam)

Strategic maneuvering by arguers is deeply shaped by the context of the argumentative discourse in which it takes place. How strategic maneuvers are shaped in the context of press conferences held by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is shown in detailed ways by Peng Wu through detailed analyses presented in his book *Responding to Questions at Press Conferences: Strategic Maneuvering by Chinese Spokespersons*, which is based on his dissertation. Building onto conversational, pragmatic and rhetorical work studying the question-answer part of press conferences, he shows the intricate argumentative nature of communication taking place within this institutionalized context while enhancing our understanding of various key modes of strategic maneuvering.

The work presented by Peng Wu is particularly interesting as it connects strategic maneuvering to the context of international relations. As he explains in his book, these press conferences held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are established to address international journalists. This shapes the argumentative situation in important respects. That is, the spokespersons do not aim to convince the journalists, and the journalists themselves engage with the spokespersons through strategies of neutralism (see e.g., Clayman 1992). Consequently, many of the argumentative exchanges are projected. The journalists invoke the voices of other world leaders to set up a disagreement for the spokesperson to address; the spokespersons mostly care about convincing the general international public and thereby swaying the opinion of people abroad. This is a complex communicative situation, but Peng Wu carefully shows how the spokespersons navigate this situation craftily.

Aiming to disseminate the viewpoint of the Chinese government, Peng Wu shows that the spokespersons are pursuing both dialectical and rhetorical goals. He carefully analyzes various ways in which spokespersons maneuver strategically in the confrontation stage (van Eemeren 2010). In Chapter 3, he discusses dissociation, which is defined as splitting up a single term into two unequally valued terms (p. 45), and shows the existence of multiple subtypes. This move has both dialectical and rhetorical relevance: it can provide more precise interpretations, but also enhance effectiveness. This strategy is particularly important

since spokespersons cannot withdraw a standpoint due to the institutional preconditions.

In Chapter 4, the personal attack is investigated, which can be used by the spokesperson to avoid having to engage with the difference of opinion presented by a journalist. Peng Wu identifies various subtypes in addition to the canonical division between direct, indirect and you too attacks. Noticing these different types is shown to be essential as each variant has different soundness conditions and helps to better understand the spokespersons' strategic maneuvering during the press conferences. Next, Chapter 5 looks into declaring a standpoint unallowed or indisputable. Standpoints can be seen as being inappropriate within a particular context or beyond any doubt. In the former situation, the standpoint has an "overriding 'negative nature'" (p.87), while in the latter case, there is an "overriding 'positive nature'" (p.87). According to Peng Wu there are different types of rationales which can be used in the empirical counterpart of a critical discussion to declare a standpoint in a reasonable way unallowed or indisputable as it can be shown how the move relates to the institutional preconditions. Chapter 6 shows that changing the topic of the discussion and putting pressure on the other party are also relevant modes of strategic maneuvering. While it may seem that a certain change of topic is a straw man fallacy, Peng Wu notes that as the real difference of opinion is with an imaginary public, without fixed standpoints, by changing the topic the spokesperson can still reasonably take away the public's doubts. In this chapter putting pressure on the other party is also discussed. Often, a rationale is given for the pressure, enabling the spokesperson to show how this move is reasonable within this institutionalized context.

At the end of Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7, Peng Wu shows the complexities of this type of argumentative discourse. The various modes of strategic maneuvering are often combined. He notes that a combination of moves is often meant to strengthen the function of "the predominant mode of confrontational maneuvering" or "reaching a more convincing effect" (p.138). He shows that there are confrontational strategies like "silencing the other party" (p.142), "distracting the other party" (p.143) and "pressurizing the other party" (p.144) when the various strategic maneuvers are aligned. These larger observations regarding the discourse are continued in Chapter 7, where the argumentative style of spokespersons is discussed. Peng Wu describes this style as an uncompromisingly detached confrontational argumentative style. The spokespersons define the issue at hand on their own terms and maintain a distance to the issue at hand. Institutionally, the spokespersons do not have to agree with the journalists, but manage the disagreement to appeal to the general public. It is thus not a problem to redefine these sensitive and complicated issues in a way beneficial to China. This style,

according to Peng Wu, also displays the confidence China nowadays wants to show on the international stage.

This work has accomplished several important insights for scholars working in the field of argumentation. First, it has analyzed an important setting which is understudied from the perspective of argumentation theory. While press conferences have received plenty of attention from the perspective of conversation analysis and pragmatics generally, the recognition that participants in this context engage in an argumentative exchange was largely lacking. Peng Wu's study shows craftily how the analysis of argumentation helps to understand many intricacies in the discourse. This book is therefore a call to study more contexts which are typically not seen as argumentative and ensure that they are analyzed as argumentative exchanges. In many communicative interactions, there is some influence of potential anticipated disagreements which have to be taken into account by the speakers.

Second, it shows the deepened understanding acquired by studying manuals provided to the participants in the institutional setting. By thoroughly studying the instructions given to spokespersons, their discursive choices can be explained in great detail. It shows the opportunities gained by studying external materials to better understand discourse. This engages with discourse and communication as a thoroughly social and situated phenomenon, as a part of designed practices.

Third, this study has contributed to distinguish a large number of essential modes of strategic maneuvering such that these concepts can be more fruitfully used in the analysis of argumentation in other contexts. The granularity offered regarding strategies of dissociation, personal attacks, declaring a standpoint unallowed/indisputable, changing the topic and putting pressure on the other party are highly helpful to further improve understanding the intricacies of argumentative discourse across various domains. This book clearly shows that each of these modes has subtypes with distinct conditions to assess the reasonableness of their use. It shows the importance of giving careful attention to the local uses of specific discursive moves.

Fourth, this study offers more general insights for pragma-dialecticians too. Rather than studying two parties who are directly in interaction, the spokespersons address a primary audience, and the disagreement raised is grounded in the question of the journalist who cites third parties to ensure they can continue to present themselves as neutral. This shows a complex argumentative situation where personal attacks can be created towards non-present others, or where the journalists can be easily (and reasonably) bypassed. It is a case in which a complex situation is carefully dissected through this theoretical framework.


In sum, this book is a valuable addition to the argumentation literature and relevant for a large number of scholars, ranging from rhetoricians, discourse

analysts and argumentation theorists. The book shows how rhetorical decisions can realize both the goals of the communicative situation while not transgressing the bounds of reasonableness. Hence, the book enables us to explain many distinct linguistic choices made by the spokespersons and enhance our understanding of communication in press conferences.

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