

UNBLOCK ARGUMENTS IN MALAYSIAN SOPOBLOGS

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-Abstract-

Weblogs are gaining popularity across the global digital community. They provide opportunities for individuals to engage in argumentation and express views as well as disseminate information or discuss issues. This research investigates the linguistic features of argumentation in selected Malaysian social-political weblogs based on the discourse analysis of six weblog posts written by two Malaysian social-political (sopo) bloggers on social themes. This comparative analysis was facilitated by a comprehensive pragma-dialectic model of argumentation as well as a critical discussion of the impact of socio-cultural factors on argumentation contained in the selected Malaysian blogs. The study also offers useful insights into the ways in which standpoints are expressed in argumentations in different cultural contexts. Awareness of the salient features of cultural argumentation would enable blogs to be better understood by a wider audience from other cultures, and ultimately reaching a more global readership.

Key Words: *standpoints, argumentation, blog post*

JEL Classification: Z, Z0

1. INTRODUCTION

Weblogs have empowered individuals of every culture to present arguments with ease to a wide range of readers. Putting up a good argument in a blog is a useful skill to have in view of the effect blogs generally have today on the reading public. Through the use of persuasive language and logical reasoning, readers can be swayed or even misguided into changing their standpoints although arguments

presented are not necessarily correct or fair. As logical systems vary across cultures so will argumentations and, the more convincing the arguments the closer it is to the culture bound logic systems that readers can relate to. Advances in digital technology have opened up opportunities to anyone to post arguments online that can generate discussion especially on social and political issues. This research therefore takes a closer look at the Malaysian argumentation in blogs that could enhance cross-communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Recent Research on Argumentation

An argument, be it verbal or written, presented by someone from an eastern culture will be different from that presented by a westerner. Mercier (2009) identified the main cross-cultural difference in their argument as their attitude towards contradictions. It is normal for an eastern person not to contradict others especially at the early stage of the argument as all attention will focus on 'saving face' and conflicts are commonly handled through indirect and informal mediation (Asma & Pedersen, 2009:217). Western arguments, on the other hand, are full of confrontations and are perceived as a way of solving problems (Mercier, 2009). In most eastern cultures, confronting others is considered rude or offensive especially when stating one's opinions. Hence, what is unsaid is sometimes more important than what is said and a show of respect must be demonstrated in all forms of communication (Asma & Pedersen, 2009:168). This mismatch in style inevitably means Malaysian bloggers may present their arguments differently which could cause misunderstandings leading ultimately to a breakdown in communication. The blogger's voice is then reduced to only the relevant culture.

Argumentation is an act of effective reasoning (Zarefsky, 2005:5) where opinions or ideas are given using a logic system that is culture bound and where cultural values determine how we argue. A person understands an argument using a reasoning pattern which is normally used in his/her culture but which may not unravel an argument organized using another culture's logic system. Nisbett and Masuda (2003) asserted that this mismatch is the outcome of different thought patterns found in East Asians and Westerners.

Besides that, contextual cues and background knowledge also contribute to making meaning (Gumperz, 1982). Contextual cues are easily understood within a particular culture but its function in making meaning becomes challenging when taken out of its cultural context. This form of miscommunication which is commonly identified as sociolinguistic transfer can be explained when rules that

one brings from one's culture or speech community in order to communicate are not applicable outside its natural context. A mismatch in the sociolinguistic transfer as in the mismatch in the structure of argumentation will then cause a misinterpretation. The concept of culture that brings intense effects on communication including argumentation can also be seen in Hall's (1976) theory of high-context and low-context culture. Hall (1976) asserts that high-context cultures tend to employ indirectness as a strategy whereas low-context cultures values openness and directness instead. In the high-context Malaysian culture indirectness means the focus of communication is on how something is said not on what is said (Asma & Pedersen, 2009:14). This is the opposite of a low-context communication where what is said is what is meant and these differences would therefore be reflected in the way views and arguments are structured. Interestingly, blog writing is a form of communication that resembles written as well-spoken forms (Crystal, 2011). Therefore, writing argumentation in blogs may reflect features of both these forms.

2.3.2 Face-to-face and written forms of argumentation

Face-to-face argumentation has also been an area of interest of many scholarly studies. Ellis and Moaz (2002), in their study of argumentation structure of Palestinians and Israel-Jews, revealed that Palestinian teens were more aggressive while the Israel-Jews were more submissive, accommodating and hesitant. Joiner and Jones (2004) in their study of the effects of different medium of communication on argumentation found that the quality of argument is significantly higher in face-to-face group communication than online discussions. Another form argumentation often studied by many is the written form of argumentation. Suzuki (2010) compared written argumentation between Japanese and American respondents and found that the Japanese are inclined to adopt an indirect and less elaborate argumentation in their writings. This study provides evidence to support Gudykunst and Ting Toomey's (1988), emphasis on the relationship between culture and the two dimensions of communication styles which are direct-indirect and elaborate-succinct. Another study on written argumentation conducted by Jensen (2005) revealed that culture influences the strength of claim and argument structures in research articles written by Chinese, Ukrainians and United States chemistry texts. The Chinese articles are found to present an inward circuitous form of argumentation whereas the most linear form of the three refers to the articles written by the Americans. This form of differences in argumentation was also examined in an empirical research by Xue and Meng (2007), Liu (2009) and Wang (1992). They described the Chinese writing to be generally indirect, holistic and either deductive or inductive while

the American writing to be analytical, logical and deductive. This provides the empirical evidence to support Kaplan’s cultural thought patterns (1966: 2001) of the inward turning spiral of the ‘oriental patterns’ that can be explained as indirectness. Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012:93) assert that the argumentative structure commonly used by the Chinese whether in speech or writing in English is inductive or commonly identified as the topic-comment order where an amount of background has to be established before any argument is made. However, this is hardly the preference of English speakers from the United Kingdom or United States. To these speakers the standpoint of suggested action of a particular proposition is given prior to the background or reasons.

A standpoint as defined by Merriam Webster’s dictionary is a position in a proposition. Standpoints can establish essential groundings to the construction and understanding of the argumentation. Therefore, the objective of an argument is to defend a standpoint and the standpoint should be clearly constructed with clear indicators. In a case where the structure of argumentation is more circuitous, the standpoint can be embedded. So, this may result in misinterpretation or miscommunication. With standpoints, the complexity of an argument decreases and in advancing the standpoints of the arguments, one should indicate clear assertiveness.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

3.1. Methodology

This research is based on the discourse analysis of 6 blog posts written by two Malaysian social-political (sopo) bloggers. The selection of two Malaysian socio-political blogs was done thematically. The discourse analysis of the blogposts (refer table below) was facilitated by the pragma-dialectical approach of Van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans (2007). The findings are presented along three main components: analysis of standpoints, force modifying expressions and structure of argumentation.

Analysis 1: Standpoints

Description of standpoints	Blogger 1		Blogger 2	
	References	Blogpost	References	Blogpost
Indicators of standpoint	6	3	2	1
Negative standpoint	8	3	3	2
Positive standpoint	1	1	4	2
Neutral standpoint	0	0	0	0
Total standpoint	9		7	

Table 1: Description of the standpoints

The findings in table 1 reveals that both bloggers were able to realise the effectiveness of presenting standpoints in arguments. They were able to take a stand in their arguments since there were no neutral standpoints in all blogposts. However, the indicators used by blogger 2 were limited to only '**I think**' and '**I don't think**'. These phrases are described by Van Eemeren et.al (2007) as weak *proposition attitude indicators*. As the phrases do not indicate a strong conviction of the arguments and therefore should be avoided.

Standpoints can be positive, negative or neutral. According to Van Eemeren et.al (2007:28), 'A positive standpoint expresses positive judgement concerning a proposition and a negative standpoint a negative judgement'. Extract 1 is a positive standpoint taken from a blogpost by blogger 2. It expresses a positive judgement on the academic performance of Malaysian students in the public examinations and this is noted in extract 1 below. Meanwhile, extract 2 is an example of a negative standpoint as it presents a negative judgement on the excellent high school graduates performing at a workplace.

Extract 1: *I think* *Malaysia is already at the top of the league in the entire world for having so many tens of thousands of students who score straight As in all subjects in public examinations like the PMR and SPM every year.*

Extract 2: *I don't think* *despite the thousands of straight As and the fantastically high number of passes, the reality is a large number of our high school graduates cannot fit easily in the workplace.*

The analysis of the blogposts by blogger 2 also revealed that out of 9 standpoints, 8 were negative. This could be a personal preference and cannot be concluded as a general preference. Table 1 also indicates the number of standpoints which exceeded the number of blogposts for both bloggers which indicates the presence of multiple arguments. Ideally, there should only be one standpoint to an argument as this would generate a more focussed discussion of the argument. However, it is not such a case for the blogposts.

The sample of the negative standpoint can be seen in extract 3 and 4 below. The table also disclosed that bloggers often constructed their argument with a clear stand on the proposition. This was evident as there were no neutral positions taken in the blogposts. In fact, blogger 1 was quite drawn to negative standpoints. In the following extracts, the words '*complicated*' and '*cannot*' were chosen to reflect the negative view of how confused the statistics were presented to a layman.

Extract 3: *We can't* *continue pouring money to help undeserving people. They will just ask for more and more.*

Extract 4: *This year's SPM results are said to be the best ever. 559 out of 468,808 students scored straight A+ in all subjects. Congratulations to all these kids. However the statistics are becoming more **complicated** and **cannot** be understood by the layman.*

The presence of positive standpoints can also be discovered in most of the blogposts. In the following extracts, positive standpoints can be seen not only with the used of positive connotations but also in the choice of words to depict meaning. For example the word ‘*important*’ in extract 6 below conveys a positive connotation of something significant. While in extract 7, the phrase ‘*working very well*’ is a positive expression and ‘*no need*’ customarily ascertains a negative meaning but in the context of sentence, it is used with a positive intention. Nevertheless, there was an absence of assertiveness in standpoints constructed by blogger 2 as can be seen that only weak assertive indicators were used in the standpoints. This is observed in extract 6 below.

Extract 6: *Education is so **important**.*

Extract 7: *This must mean that the PPSMI is **working very well**. 10,803 straight A students in the SPM. Last year 38,000 students scored straight As in the PMR. So there is **no need** to abolish the PPSMI (the teaching of Maths and Science in English).*

Analysis 2: Types of Indicators

Description	Blogger 1		Blogger 2	
Force Modifying Expressions (FME)				
	References	blogpost	References	Blogpost
Weak Assertive	2	1	0	0
Semi Assertive	0	0	0	0
Strong Assertive	3	2	0	0
Description	Blogger 1		Blogger 2	
Proposition Attitude Indicator (PAI)				
Weak Assertive	2	1	2	1
Semi Assertive	0	0	0	0
Strong Assertive	1	1	0	0

Table 2: Description of the force modifying expressions used in the standpoints

The presentation of indicators can be categorized as propositional attitude indicators and force modifying expressions (Van Eemeren et.al, 2007:28). These indicators describe the force of assertion and signal the assurance of the stand in the argument or the estimation of the situation. Therefore, it is important to use the indicators for explanation, assertiveness and assurance in advancing the

standpoint of arguments. It can be concluded from table 2 that there are some major differences between the two bloggers. Firstly, there were a range of indicators used by blogger 1 as compared to blogger 2. There was an indication of weak as well as strong assertiveness in the blog posts by blogger 1 while the indicators by blogger 2 are confined to only weak assertiveness.

Meanwhile, a sample of strong assertiveness can be seen in extract 8. In presenting his view, ‘**will definitely**’ was used to persuade readers to agree with his view as the phrase evokes a sense of confidence and strong sense of commitment to the proposition to remove non-Chinese speaking teachers from Chinese schools as a severe mistake. Since the argument projects a negative judgement on the proposition therefore, this example qualifies as a negative standpoint. Example of weak assertiveness such as ‘I think’ and ‘I don’t think’ can be observed in extracts 1 and 2 presented above.

Extract 8: *Racist demands such as pressuring the government to immediately remove all non-Chinese speaking teachers from the schools **will definitely** backfires.*

Analysis 3- Argument structures

Description of Argument Structures	Blogger 1		Blogger 2	
	References	Sources	References	Sources
Coordinative Argument	0	0	0	0
Multiple Arguments	4	3	3	1
Single Argument	1	1	6	2
Subordinative Argument	3	2	0	0

Table 3: Description of argument structures

Van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Henkemans (2002) classify the complexity of arguments into 4 main structures. As seen in table 3, the presence of a variety of argumentative structures can be noted in the blog posts by both bloggers. The first identified structure is coordinative argument which is not a choice between the bloggers. A coordinative argument as defined by Van Eemeren et.al (2002:65) as a combination of arguments in a single attempt at defending the standpoint. As can be seen in table 3, blogger 1 chose multiple and subordinative arguments while blogger2 preferred single arguments.

Multiple arguments are presentation of argument one after another as alternative defences of the same standpoint. While subordinative arguments are quite complex as it involves presenting arguments for arguments and the defense of the standpoint is made layer after layer (Van Eemeren et.al, 2002:65). Examples of

the structure of the arguments taken from the blogposts can be noted in extract 9 below. The standpoint is quite clear that Malays are 'shameless'. The alternative defenses do not depend on each other but sufficient to support the standpoint thus, extract 9 can be classified as multiple arguments.

Extract 9: *They are just incapable of thinking responsibly and will always believe that everyone else needs to give them everything that they want. These are the shameless Malays.*

The simplest form of arguments is the single arguments and preferred by blogger 2 in his posts. In extract 10, the blogger inserted a single argument in his conclusion of the blogpost. In this single argument, the premise is that the teaching of fairy tales to kids is a waste of time. The structure of argument in this extract is simple and it concludes without further justification.

Extract 10: *There is no point teaching them imaginary fairy tales that no one knows if they even really happened. (they refer to children)*

An example of subordinative argument can be observed in extracts 11 and 12. There is a presence of an argument given for an argument that the 'money indeed belongs to all Malaysian and therefore should not be taken or demanded by 'them'. The argument to support that is to provide characteristics of 'them' as lack of maruah (pride) and since they would take things easily they have become unreliable to pay back. In this example, subordinative argument can be perceived as a chain of reasoning why the money should not be given to 'them'.

Extract 11: *Don't they realise that the money they demand be given to them actually belongs to all Malaysians including the poor who pay the taxes in one form or another? Yes, that includes the Petronas money. That one is also duit rakyat, ok?*

Extract 12: *Don't they have any maruah(pride) claiming that they can't be paying back that money once they graduated and have a good job? Don't they realise that they already have it easy?*

4. CONCLUSION

As determined by Van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Henkemans (2007), argumentative indicators such as the indicators of standpoints are keystones in argumentation. These indicators help the audience to be able to follow the

argumentative moves in the discourse. Often, one can get lost in what is said in the arguments. This can be an apparent problem especially if the blogger is a cultural outsider or belongs to the 'circuitous' culture region where the message is presented in around about way. For the audience or the readers of the bloggers to be able to grasp the message by the bloggers, the readers have to be aware of the different patterns of argumentation that bloggers bring with them and try to get accustomed to the style. Since argumentation is a skill that can be learnt, bloggers have also to be aware of how issues in the argumentative discourse can be better presented for universal readers. In many cases of written argumentation, the writer has to use a number of expressions to introduce or connect argumentation. This is to provide movements in the argument however, most of the time these expressions or indicators are taken for granted and used sparingly as can be seen in the analysis of the blog posts.

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