

REVIEW

Argumentation in discourse: understanding the communication and the social crises expressed in the way of thinking of opposing groups



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ABSTRACT

This work is dedicated to the review of the conference "*Les gilets jaunes sont-ils 'le peuple'?*" Une question de société au prisme des interactions verbales dans les médias français delivered by Ruth Amossy at the Abralin Live event. In the conference, Amossy analyses, based on the perspective Argumentation in Discourse, a brief extract from the French television show *On n'est pas couché* about the movement Gilets Jaunes, and conversations that address the subject of this extract, in an online discussion forum of RTL. The first analysis highlights a public controversy in which a war of legitimacy between the speech of Gilets Jaunes and that of the government comes into play. The second shows a verbal interaction marked by unregulated confrontation.

RESUMO

Este trabalho dedica-se à recensão da conferência "*Les gilets jaunes sont-ils 'le peuple'?*" Une question de société au prisme des interactions verbales dans les médias français" proferida por Ruth Amossy no evento Abralin ao Vivo. Na conferência, Amossy desenvolve a análise, com base na

perspectiva da Argumentação no Discurso, de um extrato do programa televisivo francês *On n'est pas couché* (Não estamos na cama), cujo assunto é o movimento Gilets Jaunes (Coletes Amarelos), e as conversas que abordam a repercussão desse extrato, em um fórum de discussão online da RTL (uma rádio comercial francesa). A primeira análise evidencia a emergência de uma polêmica pública em que entra em jogo uma guerra de legitimidade entre o discurso dos Coletes Amarelos e o do governo. A segunda mostra uma interação verbal marcada pelo confronto não regrado.

RESUME

Ce travail est consacré à la revue de la conférence Les gilets jaunes sont-ils "le peuple" ? Une question de société au prisme des interactions verbales dans les médias français prononcée par Ruth Amossy lors de l'événement Abralín ao Vivo. Dans la conférence, Amossy analyse, à partir de la perspective Argumentation dans le discours, un bref extrait d'une émission télévisée française (*On n'est pas couché*) sur le mouvement Gilets Jaunes, puis les conversations qui abordent cet extrait dans un forum de discussion en ligne de RTL. La première analyse met en évidence l'émergence d'une polémique publique où se joue une guerre de légitimité entre la parole des Gilets Jaunes et la parole gouvernementale. La seconde montre une interaction verbale marquée par une confrontation non réglée.

KEYWORDS

Argumentation. Discourse. Polemic.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Argumentação. Discurso. Polêmica.

MOTS-CLÉS

Argumentation. Discours. Polémique.

Ruth Amossy is an emeritus professor at Tel Aviv University and a well-known researcher on the discursive aspects of verbal interactions. She has elaborated the perspective known as *Argumentation in Discourse* (AMOSSY, 2000), which combines the so-called *French Discourse Analysis* and the *Argumentation* inspired by Perelman's *New Rhetoric* (AMOSSY and KOREN). As the author points out, it is an empirical approach, a non-normative framework, which privileges immersion in real data, and not in a previous scheme of discourse comprehension. In other words, a *corpus* in context is

taken as the starting point and it is tried to observe, based on the analysis of linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms, what emerges from this *corpus* in relation to the discourse functioning in a given social space, the way a speaker frames his/her own meanings, submits himself/herself to certain reasoning, and to the things in one way or another.

Based upon this perspective, Ruth Amossy has been developing a range of verbal interaction analysis in which she examines rhetoric uses, argumentative objectives and sociopolitical functions (PINHEIRO and AMOSSY, 2018). In this conference, she presents an example of this work. She starts from a brief extract from the French television show *On n'est pas couché* (We're not in bed), and, then, focuses on the conversations that address the subject of this extract, in an *online* discussion forum of RTL (a French commercial radio). In the program of March 9, 2019, Marlene Schiappa, Secretary of State of France, answers a question from Laurent Ruquier, the program's anchor, about the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests), a protest movement of great worldwide repercussion, which started in France in October 2018. In the excerpt in question, the Secretary develops a reasoning about the attribution of the status of "people" to yellow vests.

The first part of the conference is dedicated to the discursive microanalysis of this short verbal interaction. Amossy points out a range of linguistics mechanisms (modal usages, lexical choices), discursive phenomena (previous ethos, presuppositions, media context genres, interdiscourse) and argumentative processes (fallacious reasoning, argumentation by definition) founded in the Marlene Chiampa's speech, based in which can be identified her critical reflection on the relation of yellow vests and democracy.

By adopting and discussing, for example, the expressions *le peuple c'est nous* (the people are us), *le peuple c'est moi* (the people is me), and *le peuple c'est moi aussi* (the people is me too) Schiappa performs a game with reported speeches, promotes a semantic sliding of the term *peuple* (people) (people as nation, people as a population part opposite to elite), and offers an argumentative definition of people: *le peuple c'est aussi les Gilets Jaunes mais ce n'est pas que les Gilets Jaunes* (the people is also the yellow vests, but not only). From then on, a number of argumentative procedures are used. Amossy calls one of these denouncing procedures of fallacious reasoning. Schiappa denounces fallacious reasoning in relation to Yellow Vests (the speech of the people is sacred; the voice of the Yellow Vests is the voice of the people, so this voice is sacred). This and other argumentative procedures serve to mark a position of delegitimization of yellow vests, even accusing them of denying the contradictory debate, which is the essence of democracy. Amossy concludes this microanalysis highlighting the fact that the Secretary of State is embroiled in a public controversy in which a war of legitimacy between the speech of the Yellow Vests and that of the government comes into play.

The second part of the conference is dedicated to the analysis of the reception and the repercussion of this Marlene Schiappa's position in the public space, with the purpose of observing how the polemic subjects approached by a government representative are publically discussed, and what are the ways of thinking within a time of social crisis. From there on, the analyzed data are the participants' posts of the RTL *online* discussion forum. Then, the analysis goes from a short interaction, characterized by dialogue in an interview, to a longer interaction, characterized by polylogue.

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One of the first findings about this interaction is the fact that the posts do not constitute a regulated discussion, and are organized around two groups of opposite opinions: that of those who defend the speech of the Secretary of State and that of those who attack it. In this case, it is developed a controversial discussion in which a series of rejoinders are added, reinforced or contradicted. Amossy then begins to present some discursive phenomena and the main argumentative procedures founded in this controversial discussion.

One of the discursive phenomena is the refutation of a position through direct attack or through verbal violence that attempts to silence the other. One of the netizens, for example, attacks Schiappa's position, resorting to the accusation that she assumes a position of superiority, of contempt, instead of assuming a position of equality with her interlocutors. He says: *un monde d'instruits voulant donner des leçons de bon sens aux Français ignares qui ne comprennent rien* (a world of educated who want to give common sense lessons to ignorant Frenches who know nothing). Other netizens verbally attack the Secretary: *elle commence à nous fatiguer, le gamine aux dents longues...et personne pour lui faire fermer son claper!* (she begins to tire us, the long-toothed kid, and no one to shut her mouth up).

An example of the argumentative procedures used by netizens is the argumentation by definition, i.e., the same language term receives different definitions. These definitions intensify the polemic around important topics, as is the case under analysis: are Yellow Vests the people? One of the netizens, for example, takes up a formula used by the Secretary, who substitutes *peuple* (people) by *foule* (crowd) and presents a hyperbolized definition: *les gilets jaunes, ce n'est pas le peuple, c'est la populace* (yellow vests are not the people, they are a flock). According to Amossy, the definition that uses the term pejorative *populace* (which we translate here as "flock") is an argument against the thesis according to which the demands of the movement should be given importance. Another netizen replaces the general term *peuple* (people) by designation of classes with more precise status, such as police officers, military, wage earners, and farmers. This definition mobilizes a reflection on the meaning of people in relation to the meaning of nation, elite and government.

The different argumentative procedures intensify the polemic around this particular topic, but also lead the discussion to other dichotomies, such as representative/represented, majority/minority, and reach more distant topics, such as the legitimacy of President Emmanuel Macron. The discussion, then, focuses on other topics such as the contestation of the representativeness of elected persons, representative democracy as a system, and political and legal meaning of representation.

Amossy, ultimately, points out the characteristics of the operation of the polemic in an online discussion group. It is a verbal interaction marked by unregulated confrontation. The participants (proponents and opponents) affirm and justify a position for or against a theme/question without developing a common reflection, a dialogue in which the arguments of the other are taken into account. The proponents and opponents rejoinders are developed in a parallel way, in the form of

spontaneous reflection in which each one tries to reinforce his/her own vision without analyzing the reasons of the other.

In this scenario, the socio-political essential problems are not approached according to the formal rules of argumentation, but, not even for that, there is no longer a genuine argumentation. For Amossy, there is where an everyday argumentation is developed, which also needs to be studied. Understanding the functioning of this argumentation allows us to understand not only the rupture of communication between opposing groups, but also the deep social crises expressed in the participants' way of thinking.

At the conference conclusion, Amossy points out two consequences of socioargumentative analysis as she has applied: a) a small episode linked to a subject's speech can reveal the antagonistic logic of two groups in a given social space, b) a microanalysis, centered on texts, is necessary, in a time when only a quantitative analysis based on large *corpora* receives the stamp of scientificity.

With this conference, Ruth Amossy offers discourse scholars, briefly and very clearly, a systematization of the theoretical principles and methodological steps of Argumentation in discourse. It is undoubtedly a perspective that contributes a lot theoretically to the conception of discourse, and, consequently, to the analysis of discourse. This discourse analysis presents, in a very particular way, great social relevance for this moment in which we witness great political and social crises from which we need to take distance for an exercise of self-reflection.

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