

The Fairy Tale of Justice

An argumentative profile of discrimination in digital culture

In the context of The Bonn Science Night on “Digital Society – How does the digital society influence our lives?”, which took place on 22 – 23 May 2014 at Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-University of Bonn, my staff and I presented the so-called “Fairy Tale Triangle”. This model serves as a pragma-dialectical tool for the analysis of discriminatory discourse in online forums, blogs and social networks in French and Italian. It (re-) constructs an interdependent triangular model between the archetypical roles of VICTIM, PERSECUTOR and RESCUER. Interestingly, the discriminating speakers represent themselves as the VICTIM or at least as their advocate. The role of the PERSECUTOR is associated with, e.g. foreigners, homosexuals or people of another religious faith by whom the speaker feels ostensibly threatened, which allows him to present himself as the VICTIM. The position of the RESCUER often remains vague.

The presentation caused a lot of interest among the numerous visitors and the unfolding dedicated conversations stimulated new ideas and new perspectives towards the model. In fact, the model represents one of the most consolidated mental models of our (unconscious) thought in Western culture: In 1968 psychotherapist Stephen Karpman was the first to relate the three roles in a triangular model borrowed from fairy tales (“drama triangle”) (cf. *ibid.*: 39-43). According to Karpman, the drama triangle forms the basis of a variety of human interactions (and regulates interpersonal relationships in essential areas such as family, work and politics by offering patterns of action: ”Fairy tales help inculcate the norms of society into young minds consciously, but subconsciously may provide an attractive stereotyped number of roles, locations, and timetables for an errant life script“ (*ibid.*: 39; emphasis added DP)).

At the end of February 2015 the magazine “forsch”¹ (University of Bonn) published an interview conducted earlier with myself, entitled “The Fairy Tale Triangle reveals the real persecutors. Romance philologist investigates discriminatory online texts” (cf. *forsch 1*, 2015: 15).

There has been considerable response to the Fairy Tale Triangle in discriminatory discourse of digital culture. This reaffirms my intention to expand my investigations, which I already

¹ Cf. <http://www3.uni-bonn.de/die-universitaet/publikationen/forsch/forsch-1-februar-2015>, accessed 09/03/2015.

started back in October 2012 and which have been accompanied and supported by lectures, seminars as well as bachelor and master theses at the University of Bonn ever since, and to embed them in a much broader and versatile framework.

The theoretical basis for the planned conference “The Fairy Tale of Justice” generally goes back to the following particular observation: In digital discourse, as it is encountered in blogs and forums, speakers by their own discriminatory remarks against a particular nationality, religion or culture to a certain extent “tell fairy tales” in order to represent their attitude as an appeal to justice. The key point here is that their argumentation uses two classical forms of the fairy tale which are meant to legitimise their discriminatory attitude: these are the stories of *self-defence* and that of *rescue* (cf. Lakoff 1996; Lakoff/Wehling 2014). The method of analysis used here goes back to pragma-dialectics, which describes *critical discussions* as follows:

The procedure for a critical discussion is thus composed of various types of speech acts used by arguers in daily verbal communication: advancing a standpoint, accepting or not accepting a standpoint (*confrontation stage*), challenging the protagonist to defend a standpoint, agreeing on some starting points (*opening stage*), arguing, casting doubt on arguments, counter-arguing (*argumentation stage*) (Lewiński 2010: 50; vgl. hierzu auch van Eemeren/Grootendorst 1984; van Eemeren/Houtlosser/Henkemans 2008; van Eemeren/Grootendorst 2011).

The comparison of individual speech acts in the various stages shall precisely describe and identify “dialectical profiles and indicators of argumentative moves” (van Eemeren et al. 2008). Moreover, the pragma-dialectical approach offers the opportunity to demonstrate how these moves of argumentative actions differ from one communicative area to another. I am especially interested in the question of which of those *moves* are present in my text samples: During the investigation, about 2,000 online contributions in French and Italian were evaluated, which all include the key word sequence „je ne suis pas raciste, mais“ in French and, accordingly, „non sono razzista ma“ in Italian (both can be translated as “I am not a racist, but”). The analysis results in a huge number of occurrences of expressive and assertive speech acts, which can mainly be classified as the typical speech acts of the VICTIM in classic fairy tales (i.e. complain, blame, fear). The compilation of the argumentative profile and the related *moves* are very similar in both data sets (French and Italian). They show an unusual structure as they consist of two *opening stages* and two *argumentative stages*. During the first *opening stage*, the speaker *asserts*, for example, to not be racist and underlines his statement by claiming that he has friends, a partner or relatives with a foreign background

who are ‘good people’ at the same time. During the second opening stage, immediately following the first, however, he asserts to be a VICTIM of foreigners himself and claims to have experienced serious violence; he accuses foreigners of rape, drug trafficking and of working at ridiculously low wages, etc.; he claims that he is afraid of being deprived of his rights and human dignity; then he notes that they “have to go away,” that it was necessary to rebel and that “someone absolutely has to do something” against these PERSECUTORS as the current situation was intolerable. This argumentative profile, in which the first opening stage (“I’m not a racist but”) contradicts the final stage (“it is time for them to go back to where they came from”), forces the arguing subject to violate the logical principle of non-contradiction: Thus, the statement of the subject contradicting itself would be “I am not a racist, but I am a racist” (cf. for example, in Oliver Welke’s words at the Heute-Show 28 November 2014: “I do not disapprove of foreigners, but ... I do!”)².

However, the arguing subject does not admit this *contradictio in adiecto* in the digital communication situation. Arguments such as “They scare me” or “Have you ever experienced what it means to live with the Roma?” help to make the apparent contradiction tolerable and allow for statements such as “Am I thus a racist?”.

There are significant differences in the compilation of the argumentative profile based on the fact that, in French as well as in Italian, two different (above mentioned) strategies are used to legitimize the demand of “justice”: The *strategy of self-defence* and the *strategy of rescue*. *Self-defence*, which in terms of quantity simply occurs more often, differs from the structure of the speech act of *rescue* as the (speaking) VICTIM identifies with the RESCUER and thus claims two roles at the same time: „Je ne suis pas raciste, je défends les Français“ Marine le Pen states³. In the case of *rescue*, however, “the victim is a third person,” which means that only one role is taken: that of the VICTIM (cf. Lakoff/Wehling 2014: 136).

The argumentation, which is to justify self-defence, usually proceeds on the basis of a logical argumentative pattern, which does not allow for disagreement: *If one becomes a victim one has the right to defend oneself*⁴. The victim establishes a causal relationship between the behaviour of the “evil person” and their own situation. This allows for the claim that their own painful situation is caused by the actions of “evil”. As opposed to “evil”, the victim holds

² Compare also, for example, the statement of solidarity that first arose after the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo “Je suis Charlie” which is increasingly countered by “Je ne suis pas Charlie”-Memes and utterances.

³ Cf. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2014/05/11/97001-20140511FILWWW00161-marine-le-pen-je-suis-prete-a-gouverner.php>, published 11/05/2014 à 18:27, accessed 20/02/2015.

⁴ Section 32 German Criminal Code: (2) Self-defence means any defensive action that is necessary to avert an imminent unlawful attack on oneself or another.

a position of (moral) superiority. The argumentation is used to invoke a form of “justice”, whose main principle is that man has the right to protect and defend himself against his own status as a victim. “And only the victory of good over evil can restore justice in the world by compensating the injustice that is to be restored for the victim” (Lakoff/Wehling 2014: 136). The argumentation, which is to justify the rescue, on the other hand, proceeds on the basis of the logical argumentative pattern stating that *if somebody is the victim of an evil persecutor the victim must be rescued*. The victim compares his own behaviour, which has always been impeccable, to that of the persecutor, which has always been destructive, in order to present his own behaviour as morally superior (“We work hard, save money, and they take it away from us”). The *locus comparationis* between the nature of good and the nature of evil justifies the call for a rescuer to overcome the situation and to rescue the victim, who is too weak to rescue himself. The argumentation is used to establish a form of “justice”, whose main principle is that man has the duty of helping the weak and thus to take action against the persecutor in order to rescue the victim.

Based on these observations, the conference aims at gathering, comparing and linking the knowledge of scientists from different disciplines – linguists, literary scholars, sociologists, political scientists, theologians and psychologists – who are occupied with the treated subject of discrimination, on the one hand. On the other hand, the relevant aspects of the “Fairy Tale Triangle” shall be related to the methodological reflection and the theoretical research of the respective disciplines. However, the focus will not only be on the language material that is part of the “Fairy Tale Triangle” and thus lays the foundation for application in various disciplines. In particular this investigation aims at clarifying if and how domain-specific features can be identified in the “Fairy Tale Triangle” (PERSECUTOR – VICTIM – RESCUER), which can provide information about the role and the status of a cultural mental model that clearly promotes racism and discrimination, because “the limits of our models are the limit of our world” (PN Johnson-Laird 1989: 470 pp.).

Please send your abstracts (max. 500 words, *.doc-format, deadline: june 15 2015) as well as your academic curriculum to daniela.pirazzini@uni-bonn.de

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