

'Now is the time to put an end to all this': argumentative discourse theory and 'letters to the editor'



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ABSTRACT. This article applies argumentative discourse theory to 'letters to the editor', specifically letters written into and subsequently printed in the British broadsheet press. The sampled letters were all written in response to prior newspaper articles and reporting, in which Islam and/or Muslims were cited as actors. The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation is applied as a model for explaining and understanding argument, emphasizing the functional, contextual and interactive features of argumentative discourse. The theory rejects the traditionally strict bifurcation of dialectic and rhetorical dimensions of argumentation, uniting them in the model. The article is informed by the presupposition that the power relationships represented in the broadsheet press are both generative and transposable, modifying power relations in other fields (Bourdieu, 1991), and concludes by suggesting that the letters represent an example of a discourse of 'spatial management' – the 'national space' being the space in question, and the 'managers' being the dominant élites, as represented by the broadsheet newspaper readership.

KEY WORDS: *argument, British Muslims, broadsheet newspapers, letters to the editor, pragma-dialectical theory, prejudice*

Introduction

Over the last 20 years but particularly in the last decade or so, the presence of British Muslims in the 'public sphere' has become increasingly conspicuous. The growing Muslim 'ethnic assertiveness' (Modood, 1990, 1997), wherein emphasis is placed on a core 'Muslim' identity, has proven problematic for both the rejectionist and the anti-racist, representing not only a 'challenge to the anti-racist notion of a homogenous Black voice' but also 'a much broader challenge to British society' (Bonnett, 1993: 54). Centred as it initially was around the 'Rushdie affair', the ethnic assertiveness of the British Muslim communities was 'unsettling [for] both liberal complacencies and radical orthodoxies alike' (Cottle,

1991: 46), representing a challenge to orthodox notions of 'Britishness' and what 'being British' means to dominant (white) society. The response of élite broadsheet newspapers to such challenge(s) forms a subject at least as important as the character of challenge itself, since journalistic output is 'simultaneously constitutive of [the] social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief' (Wodak, 1995: 208) of the educated, empowered and economically successful sections of society.

Letters to the editor of broadsheet newspapers, as an example of an élite discourse genre (see Fradgley and Niebauer, 1995; Jucker, 1992; Sparks, 1999), therefore represent an important site for the (re)production and/or resistance of discourse on and around notions of 'We-dom' and 'They-dom' (Hartley, 1992). During one week in 1997 for example, the authors of letters published in the correspondence column of *The Times* included 'a predictable number of peers (six); former cabinet ministers (three); directors of charitable and voluntary bodies; editors; a cardinal; bishops; dons; novelists; business people, and one acting High Commissioner' (Bromley, 1998: 156). *The Guardian* draws correspondence from similarly élite strata of society: a letter from the pressure group 'Voices in the Wilderness', recently printed in their correspondence column, was bylined to 'Benjamin Zephaniah, Caroline Lucas (MEP), Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Wales) and seven others' (*The Guardian*, 3 August 2000: 21).¹

The letters chosen for analysis are all taken from the newspapers' main correspondence columns, excluding letters columns printed elsewhere in specialized sections, for example education or business supplements, which are predominantly used to request advice (Bromley, 1998: 153). These letters conform to their newspapers' style policies, are written in a 'moderate, emotionally controlled language, close to the standard register' and appear to represent an élite "'ideology of consensus'" (Martin-Rojo, 1995: 51). Like Martin-Rojo (1995), I have therefore chosen to examine the 'objective' discourse(s) of the broadsheet press in order to expose 'the more sophisticated and less explicit mechanisms used to control and bias the information given' (Martin-Rojo, 1995: 51). The focus on the argumentative structures of these readers' letters is informed by the desire to analyse how argument is used to support the 'expression of delicate or controversial social opinions' while simultaneously 'protecting the speaker against unwanted [*negative*] inferences about his or her ethnic attitudes' (Van Dijk, 1987: 76).

Theoretical background

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969: 4) have suggested, that 'the object of the theory of argumentation is the study of the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or to increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent'. The structured and directed manner in which texts achieve their persuasive goal(s) – in essence, their dialectic and pragmatic aspects – are of central importance in evaluating the power of argumentative dialogue, made all the more so

when we acknowledge the *discursive* potential of texts to modify power relations in other fields (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, a fully formed critical model of argumentation should take account, not only of the form and content of arguments, but also the functional and interactive aspects of argument within their discursive context, and of their application and effect in the social field.

PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL THEORY OF ARGUMENTATION

The work of Van Eemeren, collaborating with various other theorists (1993, 1996, 1997, 1999) is extremely useful in such a critical analysis of argumentative discourse. Building upon the work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), they propose a theoretical framework which attempts a unification of normative and rhetorical theories of argumentation: pragma-dialectical theory. This theory,

... views argumentative discourse as an exchange of verbal moves ideally intended to resolve a difference of opinion. The dialectical angle of the theory is manifested in the maintenance of critical standards of reasonableness, the pragmatic angle in the definition of all argumentative moves as speech acts functioning in a context of disagreement. (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480)

Thus, although it is acknowledged that the principle function of argumentative discourse is to persuade or convince with 'the aim of securing agreement in views' (Van Eemeren et al., 1997: 208), this is achieved 'according to appropriate procedures of reasonable dialogue' (Walton, 1989: 1). Such appropriate procedures, or 'standards or reasonableness', are manifest structurally (for example, pertinency, turntaking), interactionally (for example, rules of cooperativeness), semantically (for example, avoiding ambiguity, equivocation and prejudicial language) and elsewhere across argumentative discourse.

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser define the dialectic aspect of argumentation in terms of four stages, crucial to 'establishing systematically whether the standpoint advanced by the protagonist of a viewpoint is defensible against doubt or criticism of an antagonist' (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480). These stages of argumentation are, in turn:

... the confrontation stage, where difference of opinion is defined; the opening stage, where the starting point of the discussion is established; the argumentation stage, where arguments and critical reactions are exchanged; and the concluding stage, where the result of the discussion is determined. (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480-1)

At each stage dialectic rules of argumentation are employed – by participants and analyst – the violation of which 'can result in errors, faults and shortcomings of various kinds in argumentation' (Walton, 1989: 16).² These dialectic rules form 'a code of conduct for critical discussion' (Van Eemeren et al., 1996: 283), which in turn provides a set of norms for establishing the extent to which both protagonist and antagonist can be regarded as engaging in reasonable discussion. Essentially, observing these dialectic rules, or the 'Ten Commandments of critical discussion' (see Van Eemeren et al., 1996: 283-6, 298-306), guards

the protagonist and antagonist of the standpoint in question from making fallacious argumentative moves, enabling the participants to resolve their difference of opinion.

The rhetorical dimensions of the theory are defined as strategies 'for influencing the result of a particular dialectical stage to one's own advantage, which manifest themselves in a systematic, co-ordinated and simultaneous exploitation of the opportunities afforded by that stage' (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 485–6). This is accomplished, the theory suggests, through three strategic manoeuvres, exploiting: the *topical potential*, wherein 'speakers or writers may choose the material they find easiest to handle'; adapting to *audience demand* by choosing 'the perspective most agreeable to the audience'; and through *presentational devices* which frame 'their contribution in the most effective wordings' (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 484).

Taking each in turn, first, introducing particular topics simultaneously acts to imply 'their importance and pertinence to the discussion' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 119) and works to define the disagreement space of each dialectic stage to the benefit of the protagonist (Van Eemeren et al., 1993).

Regarding audience demand, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) state that 'since argumentation aims at securing the adherence of those to whom it is addressed, it is, in its entirety, relative to the audience to be influenced' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 19). Rhetorical argumentation attempts to create empathy or 'communion' with an audience (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 485), through appeal to the audience's beliefs or preferences. One manifestation of this, is the recourse to the 'common sense' of an audience, either through implicit or explicit assumption, since common sense is founded on 'the existence of unquestioned and unquestionable truths' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 57). Taking a more explicitly linguistic approach, Fowler (1996) offers a conception of *ideology* to the discussion, corresponding very closely to the definition of 'common sense' given above. Fowler suggests that ideology delimits, or *contains*, thought and expression, since the boundaries of 'the ideological' include nothing less than:

. . . a society's implicit theory of what types of object exist in their world (categorisation); of the way the world works (causation); and of the values to be assigned to objects and processes (general propositions or paradigms). These implicit beliefs constitute 'common sense' which provides a normative base to discourse. (Fowler, 1996: 10–11)

Note, however, the use of the indefinite article – 'a society' – in the first line of the definition, suggesting the possibility of multifarious ideologies (common senses) specific to societies, which are available for the protagonist of an argument to draw upon.

Lastly, presentational devices, such as loaded definitions, figures of speech and rhetorical argumentative structures (for example, analogy), should be employed in rhetorical argument in order that 'the phrasing of the words . . . be

systematically attuned to their discursive and stylistic effectiveness' (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 485). Since rhetorical figures of speech are one such presentational device, strategically employed as '... a way of describing things which makes them present to our mind' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 167), their persuasive character in argumentation cannot be denied. Further, since rhetorical figures are non-obligatory structures in both argument and in text in general, their inclusion must be regarded pragmatically, showing 'how and in what respects the use of particular figures is explained by the requirements of argumentation' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 168). The pragma-dialectical model reflects such a concern for argumentation, analysing figures of speech 'as part of the sequential environment to which they are tied, and ... [paying] attention to their contribution to the local and global coherence of the text' (Ferrara, 1985: 140).

Reader's letters

The bigoted representation of 'racial' minorities, racial and cultural rejectionism, or what has recently been labelled 'negative-othering' (Riggins, 1997) has a long and well developed lineage in Britain. Bonnett (1993) for example, discussing the prejudice of white youths' representations of the 1958 London 'race riots', notes that they 'structured their rejectionist ideas around two moral dualisms which they used to divide "us" from "them": morality/immorality and order/disruption' (Bonnett, 1993: 19). Islam has not fared particularly well in this allocation of negative stereotypical characteristics: *The Economist* has stated for example that 'Islam is per se fundamentalist' (*The Economist*, 4 April 1992: 63, cited in Leug, 1995: 12); the *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported a French survey, which found that three out of four people questioned thought that the word 'fanatical' best applied to Islam (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 7 December 1992, cited in Leug, 1995: 16); and Kamalipour (1998), also using word association tests, found that American students often 'admitted that they could not really think of anything positive' to say about Muslims (Kamalipour, 1998: 2).

The work of social psychologist G.W. Allport (1954) on 'the nature of prejudice' is useful in developing a more 'practice centred' theory of racism, highlighting behaviour such as verbal rejection, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack and extermination in order to stress the functional features of racism. What such work does not illustrate however, is the link between 'thought' and 'action', or how believing in (for example) a hierarchy of 'races' or 'cultures' translates into racist acts of derogation or violence against visible ethnic communities. Following Hage (1998), I argue that these acts and others like them, are best conceived

... as nationalist practices: practices which assume, first, an image of a national space; secondly, an image of the nationalist himself or herself as master of this national space and, thirdly, an image of the 'ethnic/racial other' as a mere object within this space. (Hage, 1998: 28)

In essence, they are based on a 'White fantasy' (Hage, 1998: 28) regarding the rights and abilities of mainstream 'white' society to regulate the parameters of British society – to tolerate or proscribe, to include or exclude, both physically and verbally – and are as noticeable in 'liberal' newspapers as they are in 'conservative' ones. These rejectionist strategies should be understood as 'classification(s) subordinate to a practical function' (Bourdieu 1991: 220), as part of a 'management paradigm' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998), or 'practices of managing space' (Hage, 1998: 38) – the 'space' in question being the 'national' space, and the managers being dominant whites, as represented by the *élite* discourse of broadsheet newspapers.

Media discourse, and perhaps particularly journalistic discourse, are important sites in the (re)production of prejudiced and rejectionist argumentative strategies, since '[s]peakers routinely refer to television or the newspaper as their sources (and authority) of knowledge or opinions about ethnic minorities' (Van Dijk, 1999: 11; also see Hartmann and Husband, 1974). Social theories are (re)produced in the social world by the news media, influencing audience attitudes, values and beliefs, principally through their reinforcement (Daniels, 1997; Deacon et al., 1999; Philo, 1999). Wilson and Gutierrez (1995: 45) for example show that 'negative, one-sided or stereotypical media portrayals and news coverage do reinforce racist attitudes in those members of the audience who do have them and can channel mass actions against the group that is stereotypically portrayed'.

Letters to the editor are an indication of broadsheet newspapers' differential perceptions of 'the ideological boundaries of *legitimate* or *fair* comment' (Allan, 1999: 93), and historically have been used, particularly in the case of broadsheet newspapers, as 'a means of conferring prestige' (Tunstall, 1977: 211, cited in Bromley, 1998: 152). As such, readers' letters are a particularly rich source of data in establishing the perceptions which broadsheet newspapers have of themselves and their audience(s), and also of those individuals and/or groups excluded from the position 'We'. Letters to the editor represent the intersection of 'everyday talk' and 'mediated discourse': the individual, personal and often anecdotal insights of a newspaper's readership on contemporary events are edited by the newspaper, often changing the order of sentences and paragraphs, and are purposefully placed in relationship to and with other readers' letters. In doing so, the newspaper not only constructs debates within and between letters, but also contiguously signals the pertinence to the 'debate' of the included letters, thereby legitimating their contents: publication has, after all, 'always been subject to editorial discretion . . . and genuine contributions tend to be selected and edited for publication in accordance with editorial policy, or with an eye to political and commercial interests' (Bromley, 1998: 150). The inclusion of prejudice, rejectionist strategies and 'everyday racism' in such 'debates', therefore stands as an indication of the extent to which such racist practices have 'become part of what is seen as "normal" by the dominant group' (Essed, 1991: 288).

The sample

The sample of letters used is taken from a larger corpus of data, collected as part of a research project analysing the representation of Islam and Muslims in British broadsheet newspapers. Over a period of four months (October 1997–January 1998), 2540 articles (news stories, editorials, features, columns, cartoons, reviews and letters) were collected which featured Islam or Muslim actors in prominent positions.³ Of these, 86 were letters from readers.

Also coded during sampling were a number of variables which aimed at recording *how* Islam was (re)presented in the argument of the text. These optional binaried positions were suggested by the Runnymede Trust (1997) as characteristic features of 'closed' and 'open' representations of Islam, the ratios of which are shown in Table 1.

As we can see, in each variable there were texts which did not choose either binaried position: only six letters included 'Criticisms of the West by Islamic sources' (four rejecting such criticisms and two considering them) while 68 letters chose to argue that Islam was either 'Inferior' or 'Equal'. In the majority of

TABLE 1. *Argumentative representations of Islam and Muslims in letters to the editor*

		<i>Is Islam cited as a factor?</i>				<i>Total</i>	
		<i>Yes</i>		<i>No</i>			
		<i>Count</i>	<i>Col %</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Col %</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Col %</i>
Represented as:	Separate	36	73.5	2	28.6	38	67.9
separate/interacting	Interacting	13	26.5	5	71.4	18	32.1
Total		49	100.0	7	100.0	56	100.0
Represented as:	Inferior	31	54.4	2	18.2	33	48.5
inferior/equal	Equal	26	45.6	9	81.8	35	51.5
Total		57	100.0	11	100.0	68	100.0
Represented as:	Enemy	20	62.5	4	57.1	24	61.5
enemy/partner	Partner	12	37.5	3	42.9	15	38.5
Total		32	100.0	7	100.0	39	100.0
Criticism of the	Rejected	4	80.0			4	66.7
west by Islamic	Considered	1	20.0	1	100.0	2	33.3
sources: rejected							
or considered							
Total		5	100.0	1	100.0	6	100.0
Islamophobia:	Defended	14	50.0			14	45.2
defended/criticized	Criticized	14	50.0	3	100.0	17	54.8
Total		28	100.0	3	100.0	31	100.0
Islam vs the west:	Natural	38	69.1			38	60.3
natural/problematic	Problematic	17	30.9	8	100.0	25	39.7
Total		55	100.0	8	100.0	63	100.0

these variables, regardless of the frequency of their appearance, negative other-representations are dominant. In letters which expressed a position, 'only' 48.5 percent ($n=33$) of the sample argued that Islam and Muslims are 'Inferior', and 45.2 percent ($n=14$) of the sampled letters 'defended' Islamophobia. On the other hand, 61.5 percent ($n=24$) represented Islam and Muslims as as 'enemy'; 60.3 percent ($n=38$) argued that there is something innate in the erroneous enmity between 'Islam' and 'the West'; and 67.9 percent ($n=36$) of the sampled letters argued that Islam and Muslims are 'Separate' from, or 'Other' in relation to 'the West'.

These percentages increase still further in letters in which 'Islam' is perceived and/or cited as an influential factor in explaining Muslim social action ($n=66$).⁴ These letters show particularly marked prejudice, illustrating that anti-Muslim prejudice increases when the 'Islamic-ness' of Muslims is accentuated and/or perceived to have a direct bearing on (Muslim) social action. In these letters, the alleged 'Islamic-ness' of represented Muslims appears to be employed rhetorically as an argumentative resource in their derogation.

The variables above show, albeit in a rather disembodied way, the frequency of argumentation in this sample of readers letters which takes a 'closed' view of Islam. What this does not show however, is *how* the rhetorical resources and dialectic structures of argumentation are employed by protagonists in presenting an argument. For this a more detailed textual analysis is required.

Results

The presentation of results will first introduce the thematic form, content and function of the sampled letters to the editor, discussing how argumentation is realized through the letter's pragmatic structures and rhetorical features. The analysis will then move on to a far more developed analysis of one (particularly notorious) example of prejudiced argumentation, showing how an application of pragma-dialectical theory provides a fuller understanding of the (directed, functional and interactive) argumentative strategies which it applies.

ASSUMED DIFFERENCE

The assumed incompatibility between 'Islam' and 'the West' – occasionally represented metonymically as 'Democracy' and even 'Modernity' – is a well represented theme whenever newspapers 'cover' Islam, and this same assumption runs through a great many of these readers' letters. When argumentation opposes 'Islam' with 'Democracy' or 'Modernity', the antithesis simultaneously excludes and debases Islam and Muslims, reducing 'It' and 'Them' to a '*sub-*', or perhaps '*pre-Western*' position:

Example 1

No legislation will do for the UK Muslim community what it must do for itself. By steadfastly refusing to publicly condemn the actions of Muslim states that

contravene basic British values, it has – by default – become identified with them. (Tony Freeman, *Independent*, 25 October 1997)

Example 2

. . . as a Muslim I find it ironical that Islam (which means peace and submission) has become so politicised and in places like Afghanistan and Algeria so barbaric. (Dr Mohammed Iqbal, *Independent*, 8 December 1997)

Example 3

There is no reason for an Islamically inspired government to be xenophobic like that of Iran, nor medieval like that of Afghanistan. Islam is a great and varied religion. . . . There is even a basis for democracy. (P.J. Stewart, *Independent*, 15 January 1998)

The three examples above illustrate both stereotypical thematic concerns: difference, barbarism, xenophobia and democracy; and stereotypical 'settings', applied as rhetorical 'subjects' in themselves (Hallin, 1986, cited in Allan, 1999: 91–2): 'foreign', 'medieval' and 'barbaric' societies. In addition, these examples illustrate the imagined intimate connection between Islam and 'undemocratic' civil society, through the protagonists' positioning of argumentation in contrast to arguments in which negative claims are presupposed: in (3) Iran is presupposed to be 'xenophobic'; in (3) Afghanistan is presupposed to be 'medieval', and in (2) is 'barbaric' like Algeria. In (3), the scalar implicature present in the support 'There is *even* a basis for democracy' (employed to support the conclusion 'Islam is a great and *varied* religion') exposes this presupposed mutually exclusive division of 'Islam' and 'the West'. By contrast, 'Muslim states' contravening 'basic British [read: *good*] values' demands public condemnation from *British Muslims*, which when found lacking can be used, as by Tony Freeman in (1), to exclude British Muslims from a position in the British community and hence from a position in 'the debate'.

The presupposed incompatibility between 'Islam' and 'the West' in these readers' letters is principally played out in three stereotypical *topoi*: Muslim 'terrorist' violence; freedom of speech; and the poor treatment of women, each of which will now be discussed:

MUSLIM VIOLENCE

Referring to acts of violence carried out by individuals calling themselves Muslims, in order to derogate Islam and exclude Muslims, is the most frequently used argumentative strategy in these readers letters:

Example 4

[Re Egyptian Coptic Christians] Scores of Copts have been murdered by Muslim militants and may have lost their properties in attacks. . . . If the freedoms and human rights of this persecuted Christian minority are violated it will never be secure for anyone from the West to visit Egypt. (Dr Imad Boles, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1997)

Example 5

. . . I shall save my rejoicing over the recent announcement about state funding of two Islamic schools in Britain until I hear that a stronghold of Islam – Saudi Arabia – has put

an end to its unashamed persecution of Christians. (Pastor Graham Horsnell, *The Times*, 19 January 1998)

Example 6

[Re Tourist killings at Luxor] Is it not time for religious leaders of Islam to speak out and not only condemn these atrocities, but make clear that the perpetrators do not represent the teachings of the Prophet? Or are they to remain silent, like the Christian hierarchy who failed to condemn the Nazis? (Neil Macmillan, *Independent*, 21 November 1997)

The examples above epitomize readers' letters of this type and, corresponding closely with the 'news values' of British newspapers, almost all are written in response to the deaths, or in (5) the 'unashamed persecution', of either Westerners, whites or Christians in other ('*Muslim*') countries.⁵ The argumentation above is, among other aspects, characterized by: fallacies of composition, arguing from part (Muslims) to whole (Islam); demands for retribution, recompense or the condemnation of such actions by British Muslims; and the rhetorical use of hyperbole. In the case of (5), the granting of voluntary aided status to two British Muslim schools is used as a cover to enable the author to insert a rather incoherent pseudo-analogous argument regarding the treatment of Christians in Saudi Arabia. As letters to the editor are ostensibly restricted to responding to the reporting of contemporary events – either contesting, elaborating or congratulating their arguments and/or conclusions – this strategy marks an errant innovation in readers' letters, and illustrates the lengths to which the author is willing to go in order to argue for continuing anti-Muslim discrimination.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

To allege an association between Islam and curtailment of free speech is a argumentative strategy which these readers' letters frequently used in the derogation of Islam:

Example 7

[Re The Satanic Verses] There is no law in life or nature that says that by claiming the title of religion, irrational beliefs and practices acquire an absolute right to protection against criticism or satire. (Derek Fane, *The Guardian*, 21 November 1997)

Example 8

. . . writers, journalists and intellectuals in and from Iran, Algeria, Turkey and elsewhere, who are battling against Islamism, and for a secularised society; in short for freedom from the oppression of Great World Religions. (Salman Rushdie, *The Guardian*, 22 November 1997)

In the examples above, both dialectical and rhetorical devices are employed in order to conclude that 'Islam is incompatible with free speech'. The *opening* stage of argumentation in both examples introduces topics which are both manageable and functional to this argumentative goal: essentially focusing the debate on 'rights' as opposed to 'responsibilities'. In (7) the argument is rhetorically

manoeuvred further, implying that Muslims are arguing for 'an *absolute* right to protection', as opposed to responsible 'recognition of the rights and freedoms of others' (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 29[2]). Rhetorically labelling 'The Satanic Verses' as 'criticism and satire' implies over-sensitivity and that somehow Muslims 'didn't get the joke', while Islam is represented as a religion characterized by 'irrational beliefs and practices' in order to further undermine Muslim claims of prejudicial treatment.

In (8), after the argument is again given the rhetorical weight of 'setting' – this time Iran, Algeria and Turkey – the rhetorical presentational device *antithesis* is used in order that these somewhat erroneously labelled 'Islamist' nations, are made as unattractive as possible to the predominantly left-liberal audience of the British *Guardian* newspaper: 'writers, journalists and intellectuals' versus 'Islamism'; the 'freedom' of 'secularised society' versus 'the oppression of Great World Religions'. In the second of these antitheses, Rushdie shows due recognition of the dialectic criteria of 'reasonableness' via his euphemistic avoidance of 'Islam' as the agent of oppression. If Rushdie had included 'Islam' here as the (passivized) 'oppressor' – i.e. 'freedom from the oppression of Islam' – antagonists would have been provided with a productive opening for opposing argumentation.

Argumentation of this sort both assumes and concludes that Islam and 'free speech' are somehow incompatible, in turn implying – through the centrality of 'freedom of speech' to 'democracy' and therefore to 'the West' – an incompatibility between 'Islam' and 'the West', Muslim and Briton. This acts as an obvious exclusion strategy, demarcating 'Us' and 'Our public sphere' from 'Them' and 'Theirs'.

MULTICULTURALISM AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

When 'free speech' argumentation is combined with arguments presenting 'intolerant or violent Muslim action', the argumentation moves beyond concluding the 'Islam is *incompatible* with free speech', to that concluding 'Islam is *detrimental* to free speech': specifically, that Muslims are acting on 'Their' intolerant attitudes and curtailing 'Our' free speech. The 'Rushdie affair' provides the principle topic from which such arguments are drawn, with the word *fatwa* now defined as 'death sentence' in both otherwise critical and informative theoretical texts (see Gabriel, 1994: 23), as well as in contemporary 'how to be a journalist' textbooks (see Hicks, 1998: 90). Other examples are also employed in such argumentation:

Example 9

Had UK Muslims criticised extremist behaviour such as the absurd *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie their acceptance into the community would not have been in question. (Tony Freeman, *Independent*, 25 October 1997)

Example 10

[Re an 'opinion' column] How refreshing to see challenged in print the taboo which seems to protect anybody peddling sexist, homophobic, unreasonable or unlikely views cloaked in the language of religion. (Steve Harris, *Independent*, 27 October 1997)

Example 11

[Re the cancelled publication of a book] . . . the feared 'serious risks' from Islamic fundamentalists were cited as the main reason for cancellation [after the publisher had] asked four academic experts in Islam, fervent apologists, to vet my text. (Paul Fregosi, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1997)

In the examples above, the authors of the letters clearly feel that they, or individuals sharing their beliefs, are being restricted from speaking and writing in a manner in which they feel *entitled* to, by the presence of Islam and Muslims: in (10) this is rhetorically labelled a 'taboo', while in (11) Mr Fregosi appears to be suggesting that a conspiracy of 'fervent apologists' are keeping his book out of print. In (9), Mr Freeman suggests a test, perhaps one of several, which British Muslims need to meet in order to be 'accepted' into a community which the majority of Muslims living in Britain belong to as a birthright. The rhetorical presentational devices – '*extremist* behaviour', '*absurd* fatwa' – and more specifically his presupposition that British Muslims *should* distance themselves from the actions of Muslims in other countries, suggest that these are criteria which Mr Freeman agrees with.

WOMEN

The subjugation and abuse of women at the hands of the (male) 'ethnic-other' is a frequently visible topic in prejudiced discourse (Van Dijk, 1987: 55) and is an argumentative strategy employed extensively in excluding and derogating Islam and Muslims in this sample of reader's letters:

Example 12

. . . a few years ago, I stood behind a Muslim couple at Johannesburg airport customs control. The husband steadfastly refused to allow his wife to show her face until a female customs officer was produced. (Mrs Molly Marsden-Smith, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1997)

Example 13

[Re granddaughter's recent 'rescue' from Pakistan] . . . she has taken a degree and is now doing a teacher training course. That would not have been possible in Pakistan – at 16 she would have been forced into an arranged marriage with a much older man – a terrible waste of talent. Thank God for England. (Mrs Eve Seaton, *Daily Telegraph*, 27 November 1997)

Example 14

. . . in December 1981 a nine year old girl was stoned to death by a mob in Iran, on the orders of a religious court, because she appeared in public without a veil. Does Mr Le Carré think that this girl asked for what she got because, as he says of Rushdie, she 'insulted a great world religion'? (Prof. D.A. Turner, *The Guardian*, 22 November 1997)

The examples above clearly problematize Islam and the expression of 'Muslim' values in the 'public sphere', and are premised by the presupposed belief: 'Islam is what Muslim men do to Muslim women'. Thus, in (12) the husband is referred to as controlling his wife's actions: 'refused to allow *his wife* to *show* her face'; as opposed to stopping a male customs officer seeing his wife's face: 'refused to allow

customs to see his wife's face'. Similarly in (13), Pakistan, a country whose 'Islamic credentials' were referred to earlier in the letter, 'would have . . . *forced*' Mrs Eve Seaton's granddaughter 'into an arranged marriage with a much older man', a practice which the letter implies is especially Islamic. The views of Muslim women are, for the most part (see example 16 below) conspicuously absent from the 'discussion' in these reader's letters on 'Islamic public morality' – indeed whether such 'a' thing can be said to exist in an uncontextualized form is a matter of debate in itself (see Rodinson, 1979).

In (14), perhaps the most emotive of the letters so far included in this discussion, an argument from analogy is cited – the killing of a young Iranian girl – in order to both support the conclusion that the reaction of Imam Khomeini far outweighed the 'action' of Rushdie's book and counter a previous letter from the writer John Le Carré doubting Rushdie's integrity. Aside from the argument's claim to truth, the analogy is intended to prove the conclusion above, through substituting elements into an already existing argumentative structure: in other words, a comparison is drawn between the assumedly innocuous actions of the Iranian girl and Rushdie's book:

INNOCUOUS ACT OF IRANIAN GIRL :: ISLAMIC RULING :: VIOLENCE
[INNOCUOUS] ACT OF RUSHDIE :: ISLAMIC RULING :: [THREAT OF] VIOLENCE

The letter's argument ends on a (rhetorical) question which is both complex and leading, whose success depends on the acceptance of the analogy. As Walton (1989) states: 'Arguments from analogy are often extremely powerful forms of persuasion *to a particular audience* because they compare an issue to something the audience is very familiar with or has very positive [or in this case *negative*] feelings about. Arguments based on analogies are a form of plausible reasoning' (1989: 256; emphasis added), which, when argumentative 'supports' are successfully attuned to an audience's ideological commitment(s), will result in an audience 'no less strongly committed to the conclusion' (Walton, 1989: 15). Letter (4), which represents the combined force of the three argumentative strategies introduced and discussed above – violence, free speech and the repression of women – and is framed within rhetorical features specifically foregrounding the violence of the event – 'a *nine year old girl was stoned to death by a mob* in Iran' – therefore illustrates the author's perception of the audience's ideological commitment.

DEMANDS FOR CULTURAL ASSIMILATION

When these letters to the editor are viewed collectively, the entailment of the argumentation presented – Muslim 'terrorist' violence, curtailment of free speech, control/repression of women – appears to be the 'superiority of Western culture and values'. From here, the implication that 'Muslims should adapt to our ways in public life' becomes accessible:

Example 15

[Re Muslim schools] It may sound reasonable for Muslims to want to maintain their

culture and religious differences just as xenophobic whites do. It does not however help the integration of communities that is essential if we are to reduce future trouble. (M. Jones, *Independent*, 13 January 1998)

In (15), by equating 'Muslims' with 'xenophobic whites' the author appears to be suggesting either: Muslims are *per se* 'xenophobic' and as such nominal determiners ('xenophobic Muslims') can be dispensed with; or alternatively, the desire of Muslims to 'maintain their culture and religious differences' is comparable, in degree or kind, to the corresponding desire of 'xenophobic whites'. To suggest that the desire of British Muslims to retain their 'Islamic-ness' 'sounds reasonable' on the basis of either analogy suggests that the argument was chosen 'not by selection of premises the audience is likely to accept, but by selection of premises the audience is almost sure to reject' (Van Eemeren et al., 1997: 226). This is shown in the second sentence of (15) where, in the *concluding* stage of argumentation, the author associates British Muslims' abandonment of 'cultural and religious differences' with 'integration', while the(ir) sustaining or affirming of differences (cultural and religious pluralism by any other name) is associated with 'future trouble'.

The *conclusion* that the lives of British Muslims should conform to criteria set by white society is implied in many reader's letters, but is *entailed* in others. Two such letters were written in response to a news-story printed in the *Daily Telegraph* (3 December 1997) describing an event in which a British Muslim woman was asked to remove her veil by the driver of a bus, revealing her face in order to establish whether it matched that on her bus pass. When the woman refused, the driver stopped her from travelling on the bus, and hence from getting to work. In the first of these letters, it is the personal religious beliefs and actions of the Muslim woman which are represented as being the problematic aspect of the interaction, as opposed to the demands of the bus driver:

Example 16

As a Muslim woman I am surprised by the refusal of the woman teacher on a bus to lift her veil at the driver's request. . . . There is nothing in Islam which insists that women should cover their faces; all that is required is that they should dress modestly, not expose their bodies to unrelated men and not wear makeup or jewellery to a degree that would attract unnecessary attention. (Dr Bushra Hamid, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 1997)

Here, the declaration of the author being 'a Muslim woman' acts as both a support and a warrant (Toulmin, 1958) to the letter's implied argumentative *conclusion* that since (as a second support suggests) 'there is nothing in Islam which insists that women should cover their faces', the affected Muslim woman in the news-story should have capitulated and exposed her face to the bus driver. Dr Hamid appears totally convinced that this course of action would have been acceptable, despite her accompanying point that Muslim women should 'not expose their bodies to unrelated men'. The possibility that the affected Muslim woman in the news-story thought of her face in such a way – as part of 'her body'

– and therefore should not be compelled to expose it, is conspicuously absent from discussion.

Van Dijk (1992: 101) has argued that in the case of 'delicate subjects, such as discrimination, prejudice and racism, minority representatives . . . are very seldom heard in a credible or authoritative way' in the press. This suggests that (16), containing credible and authoritative argumentation – 'Dr Hamid'; 'a Muslim woman' – is included in order to deny the affected Muslim woman any recourse to 'Islam' as an argumentative resource with which to justify her actions. From this the implication that there is nothing stopping 'her', or indeed 'Muslims' as a whole from assimilating with the dominant (white) values of the 'public sphere', becomes very easily attainable.

A similar argument is forwarded in the second letter, albeit in a far more prejudicial and derogatory manner:

Example 17

If immigrants will not adapt to our ways in public life – as Christians readily do in Muslim countries – the future looks grim. And if veils become commonplace in Britain, villains could resort to them instead of the less concealing stocking mask. Add a loose robe and you would never know the wearer's sex. (Mona McNee, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 1997)

Contained in the first sentence alone are examples of five of the most frequently occurring prejudicial argumentative stratagem (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 484) applied in representing ethnic minorities. First, the presupposition that the individuals represented are 'immigrants', and thus 'foreign' as opposed to 'British'. Second, that these 'immigrants' can be referred to as a single group, without recourse to further nominal determiners ('Black Immigrants'; 'Asian'; 'Muslim', etc.). Third, that this group have 'different ways' to us, should have to adapt to 'our ways', and moreover, that they are *not* doing so. Fourth, the presupposition that Christians 'readily adapt' to different ways while in Muslim countries, with the attendant implication of 'our accommodating nature' regarding difference. This, of course, acts as an implicit denial of the extensive history of Western prejudice and repression in both the domestic and colonial domains. And fifth, that the future, and specifically the effect which these 'immigrants' will have upon 'us', looks 'grim' – a strategy with a long and enduring past of course.

Appearing as a *concluding* stage in this 'discussion' of the original news-story, this second letter appears to re-frame the argument of the first into much more of a *demand* that Muslims assimilate in the 'public sphere': Thus, in the second sentence the Muslim veil is cited and connected explicitly with 'criminality', enabling the writer to draw upon a discourse of threat and hence characterize Islam – metonymically represented as 'the veil' – as a deviant and 'harmful presence that affects [our] own well-being' (Hage, 1998: 37). Through this structuring of the 'debate', the *Telegraph* represents British Muslims as threatening, 'based on a distancing and confrontational view of "us" versus the "other", captured in . . . terms of "normality" versus "abnormality"' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998: 21).

Such a representation is highly functional to the letter's demands for a unidirectional process of cultural adaptation and assimilation.

'MUSLIMS SHOULD CHANGE RADICALLY': RACISM IN ARGUMENT

There now follows a much more detailed analysis of both the dialectic and pragmatic argumentative features of one particular letter, published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 1997. The letter was chosen for two reasons: first because the writer, Ray Honeyford, has gained a level of prominence – even authority – as a critic of anti-racism, whose letters appear to have become a regular feature of the *Telegraph's* correspondence page. The prejudiced argumentation of this letter (see below), which is not untypical of his usual style and content, demands a critical response. Second, the detail and length of the letter results in a particularly productive application of pragma-dialectical argumentative theory.

The letter was written in response to a news-story published in the *Daily Telegraph* covering the publication of the Runnymede Trust's (1997) research on 'Islamophobia'. It becomes clear however, that the letter is not intended as either a contestation, correction or congratulation of the news-story, as are the frequent approaches of readers' letters, but rather is written in opposition to the findings and implications of the Runnymede report itself. The letter, numbered for ease of reference, is followed by one possible argumentative analysis, focusing on the rhetorical manoeuvres adopted in each of the argument's dialectical stages.

1. Muslims should change radically
2. Sir – One wonders why
3. that well known anti-racist pressure group The Runnymede Trust
4. bothered to undertake a survey into British Islam (report Oct. 23).
5. A survey presupposes an attempt to gather information
6. on which informed conclusions could be based.
7. But the trust had made up its mind about the subject
8. before the survey was carried out.
9. This is made clear in a consultation paper issued in February
10. entitled *Islamophobia – its features and dangers*.
11. This paper is highly critical of British public opinion
12. and represents British Muslims as an oppressed and persecuted group
13. – views which the survey obligingly confirms.
14. If these allegations are correct, one wonders why
15. so many Muslims reject life in their Islamic homeland,
16. and choose to settle in a country
17. whose history and institutions are fundamentally Christian and Judaic,
18. and which owe little to Muslim influence.
19. One can only assume that this country,
20. with all its faults,
21. offers them a better life
22. than their countries of origin.
23. If one compares the fate of Christians in many Muslim countries
24. with the life of Muslims in this country,
25. it is not difficult to see why British Islam gets a mixed press.

26. The truth is that
27. British Muslims' problems are not rooted in something called Islamophobia
28. – an invented and offensive term –
29. and race relations.
30. Their difficulties are a function of the faith they profess
31. operating in a culture they find irksome.
32. There is a basic incompatibility between
33. orthodox Islam's demands and objectives
34. and certain aspects of Western, secular, free and democratic societies.
35. If Muslims in Britain are to enjoy
36. the peace of mind and public respect they crave,
37. then they need to engage in a radical transformation,
38. so as to adapt Muslim theology
39. to the demands of the country they have freely chosen to live in.
40. On the other hand,
41. if that's not possible,
42. they have an obvious choice to make.
43. RAY HONEYFORD, Bury, Lancs

Daily Telegraph, 25 October 1997

CONFRONTATION STAGE

As mentioned, the letter functions as a refutation of the Runnymede Trust's report on Islamophobia. There are two sites of this confrontation contained in the text: the factual basis of the survey; and Islamophobia in concept and reality. How does Honeyford exploit the rhetorical opportunities offered by this first dialectic stage of argument? First, the topical potential available is structured in such a way as to be of benefit to the arguments which he presents. The issues raised, through which the arguments pass, act to restrict the 'disagreement space' of the argument in favour of Honeyford. Thus, the presuppositions which the Runnymede Trust were alleged to have had about the field of research are mentioned, while the extent to which their findings resemble or reflect the realities of the British Muslim communities is ignored; immigration is used in order to falsely demarcate the British Muslim communities as 'foreign' and 'Other', ignoring the communities' history as British citizens. The use of these particular topics is doubly functional. First, Honeyford finds them manageable, and second, they are recognizable to the audience, forming discursive 'stock subjects' for the negative representation of Others, especially in newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph*. Since the topics chosen – the ideological bias of Others; immigration of Others; the cultural 'difference' of Others – have a schematic usage in newspapers in general, and in right-wing newspapers in particular, Honeyford can presume a political orientation from the readership without recourse to further contextualization.

Also present are implicit assumptions regarding the actors identified as the site of contestation: the British Muslim community (*sic*). The text presumes that 'They' are immigrants (line 15), that 'They' have chosen to settle here (line 16), and that 'They' have a problem (27). Including assumptions such as these in this

first dialectic stage of argument exposes the extent to which Honeyford regards them as 'given' – as 'common sense' – and as such, is illustrative of his ideological position.

OPENING STAGE

As stated, this stage functions to establish the starting point of the argument (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 480), which involves the summary of the two contending argumentative positions, in relation to the issues presented. Regarding the 'scientific method' of the survey, the Runnymede Trust is represented as employing faulty procedure and contravening the central basis of a survey (lines 5–8), whereas Honeyford's opinions are clear (line 9), inevitable and straightforward (line 25), and 'the truth' (line 26). As mentioned above, because immigration is introduced as a topic with the attendant implicit assumption that 'Muslims are immigrants', the Runnymede Trust's position that '*the British Muslim communities are British*' – which should have appeared here – is excluded. The Trust is also represented as having 'invented' the 'offensive' term Islamophobia (lines 27–8), the 'truth' being that such things do not exist (lines 26–7).

The audience is manipulated with regard to these argumentative topics. The Runnymede Trust is referred to as being 'highly critical of British public opinion' (line 11), and as such 'against' the British public. Such a tactic makes it harder for the readership – as part of the British public – to act as a neutral adjudicator of the argument, since it includes them *within* Honeyford's position through asserting a *communio* of stake or interest in refuting the report's allocation of blame. Presentational devices – for example the syntactic structuring of expression through extensive use of the pronoun 'They', and the concomitant use of 'Christian' vs. 'Muslim' (lines 23–4), and 'Western' vs. 'Islam' (line 33–4) – encourage the readership to 'side' with the Honeyford position. Such bifurcated positions are then rhetorically presented to the readership through the use of antitheses such as 'the **fate** of Christians in many Muslim countries' (line 23) vs. 'the **life** of Muslims in this country' (line 24); and 'Islam's **demands and objectives**' (line 33) vs. 'Western, **secular, free and democratic**' (line 34).

The rhetoric of this letter draws upon highly negative *topoi*, endowing the Muslim-Other (Karim, 1997) with the ignoble traits of intolerance, threat and an implacable opposition to modernity, which in turn acts to exclude British Muslims from the dominant (white) communities.

ARGUMENTATION STAGE

The argumentation of the Honeyford letter is very interesting since it has a highly coherent argumentative structure. The argument scheme, illustrated below, is based on a distinction between micro and macro argument, wherein 'partial argumentations . . . are incorporated within a functionally integrating global argumentation' (Kopperschmidt, 1985: 161). This is particularly apparent in 'real' arguments (as opposed to theoretical/logical arguments), which are 'often

macrostructures made of many smaller arguments or sub-arguments' (Walton, 1989: 108). Laying out the argumentative scheme in the way below exposes both 'the facts [Honeyford] appeal[s] to as a foundation of the claim' (Toulmin, 1958: 97) and the 'warrant' of the claim, employed as proof that '... taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim or conclusion is an appropriate and legitimate one' (Toulmin, 1958: 98).

The letter is essentially split into two main arguments: the *denial* of Islamophobia ('Counter argumentation'), the conclusion located in lines 26–9; and the *reversal of blame* ('Contra argumentation'), problematizing Islam and British Muslims, concluded in lines 35–42. The argumentative structure of Honeyford's letter should be thought of pragmatically, employing argumentation performing these two macro-speech acts.

What Honeyford does in order to counter the claims of the Runnymede Trust, is import a version of a *Straw Man* argument – a misrepresentation of an argument by either misquotation, exaggeration or distortion – into lines 5 to 13. Even if we accept the definition of a 'survey' offered (lines 5–6), and regard the two

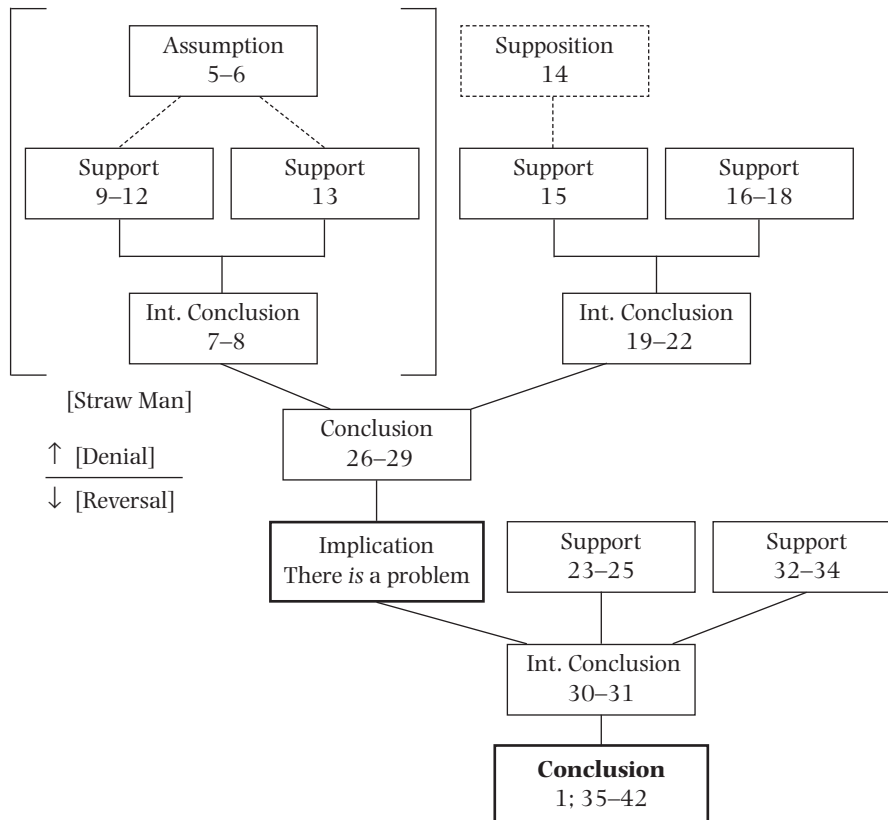


FIGURE 1: Argument scheme

joint supports (lines 9–12, line 13) of the argument to be true – and these are themselves dubious assumptions – we *still* cannot fully validate his intermediate conclusion. It is only with the introduction of rhetorical devices that the intermediate conclusion offered – ‘the trust had made up its mind about the subject before the survey was carried out’ (lines 7–8) – becomes plausible. First, the Runnymede Trust are labelled as a ‘well known anti-racist pressure group’ (line 3), suggesting an ideological stake in achieving certain results (Edwards and Potter, 1992); and second, the report is cited as *obligingly* confirming their preconceived ideas (line 13), implying further corruption of the research process. Even if it were true that the report confirmed the opinions of the consultation paper (and, I hasten to add, this is not really true), it does not mean that the Trust had ‘made up its mind about the subject before the survey was carried out’ as Honeyford suggests (lines 7–8), merely that consultation paper and survey produced the same results – results which could be true.

In order to dispense with the possibility that the Runnymede Trust have valid findings despite their ‘ideological commitment’, Honeyford employs the second element of the counter argument (lines 14–22), drawing upon both the *immigration* and the *cultural superiority* strategies, selected in order to be immediately recognizable to the readership of the *Daily Telegraph*. In the two supports, British Muslims are erroneously labelled as ‘immigrants’ (lines 16–18), who have rejected life in ‘their Islamic homeland’ (line 15). This micro-argument functions as a double strategy frequently contained in argumentative denials of racism, and contains a ‘positive self-presentation, on the one hand, and a strategy of expressing a subtle, indirect . . . form of negative other-presentation on the other hand’ (Van Dijk, 1992: 89). Both of these supports are inherently contestable however, thus the intermediate conclusion that ‘this country with all its faults offers them a better life’ (lines 19–22) falters.

When the conclusion of the counter argument – ‘British Muslims’ problems are not rooted in something called Islamophobia’ (line 27) – is stripped of validated supports, it simply becomes untenable. Indeed, even if the intermediate conclusion (lines 19–22) were accepted, it still would not be able to act as a valid support for the main conclusion (line 27), as this represents a false extension. The comparative betterment of their ‘new life here’ – even if this is shown to be true – has absolutely no bearing on a principal conclusion of the Runnymede report: that the British Muslim communities enjoy a lower standard of living than that experienced by the majority white population, due to the discrimination they endure (Runnymede Trust, 1997). This finding of the Runnymede report is in no way affected by the truth of the intermediate conclusion in lines 19–22: It is very possible that ‘this country, with all its faults [could] offer them a *better* life’, and *still* only offer them a life subjected to religious and racial discrimination.

The double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is also central in organizing the structure of the remaining half of the letter, the contra argument, in which the ‘real’ problem is located, or rather *reversed*, blaming British Muslims for ‘their difficulties’ (lines 30–1). The two

supports employed as the bases for this intermediate conclusion have almost identical rhetorical structures: the topical potential is adapted to audience demand through the identification of 'the West' with positive characteristics; and the presentational device *antithesis* is used in order to make the argument more apparent to the audience.

As shown above, the alleged poor treatment of (minority) Christian communities in Muslim countries is a topic frequently cited in the British broadsheet press,⁶ and this assumed difference between the way 'We' treat minorities and the way 'They' treat minorities is exploited in lines 23–5 for rhetorical effect: the loaded noun phrase 'the **fate** of Christians in Muslim countries' contrasted with its antithesis, 'the **life** of Muslims in this country'. In the second support, an antithesis is established between 'Islam's **demands and objectives**' and 'certain aspects of Western, **secular, free** and **democratic** societies' (lines 33–4). The exact nature of 'Islam's demands and objectives' remains unstated and therefore closed to argument, but since they are cited as being 'incompatible', in the timeless eternal tense (Said, 1995: 72), with 'aspects of Western, secular, free and democratic societies', these demands and objectives are, quite simply, *not* Western, or secular, or free, or democratic. It is their 'lack' of these characteristics which, Honeyford suggests, is the cause of 'British Muslims' problems'.

The conclusion of the reversal argument is also interesting, quoted again here for ease of reference:

35. If Muslims in Britain are to enjoy
36. the peace of mind and public respect they crave,
37. then they need to engage in a radical transformation,
38. so as to adapt Muslim theology
39. to the demands of the country they have freely chosen to live in

What this conclusion does is to present a neat summary of the pragmatodialectical strategies previously engaged with: British Muslims as immigrants (line 39); the immigrants' preference (therefore the superiority) of the 'Christian–Judaic' country over the 'Muslim' country (line 39); the implied superiority of 'the West', since 'They' are the ones who Honeyford suggests ought to change (line 37); the assumed wide divergence between 'the West' and 'Islam' suggested in the need for '**radical** transformation' (line 37); and the deterministic influence of 'Muslim theology' over Muslims' lives (line 38). Such strategies are premised by an obvious commitment to an anti-anti-racist ideology and a barely concealed antipathy directed towards British Muslims.

CONCLUDING STAGE

Honeyford closes the argument with a concluding remark which, despite being ambiguous, is labelled as 'an obvious choice to make' (line 42). Although unstated, one can only assume that coming immediately after the main conclusion of the argument – that Muslims need to adapt themselves to this country – the 'obvious choice' Honeyford is suggesting is that the *whole* British Muslim

community needs to decide whether to 'stay here' or to leave. In this way, the letter functions as an argumentative summary of the right-wing maxim: 'Britain: Love it or leave it'. Such a conclusion is only possible with: the achievement of the previous micro-arguments wherein the British Muslim communities are homogenized and both presented, and thought of, as being 'not British'; and Honeyford's 'White fantasy', in which his ability to regulate British society – specifically the non-white sections of British society – is presupposed.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Honeyford letter in this article has shown that the pragmatodialectical theory of argumentation can be suitably applied to the argumentative discourse genre of reader's letters. The letter in question was taken from a larger sample of newspaper text(s), which displayed a predominantly anti-Muslim rhetorical stance and focused on three stereotypical themes, or *topoi*: Muslim violence, freedom of speech and the repression of women. The negative othering of Islam and Muslims increased further in letters which cited 'Islam' as an important or influential factor in explaining and/or understanding the represented social action, suggesting that 'Islamicness' is used by these letters as an argumentative resource in the derogation of Muslims and 'Muslim social action'. Such negative othering is always 'socially' located, in this case in the British national space, arguing that the presence of Muslims *here*, upon or (in some cases) *in* the public sphere, represents an unwarranted infringement of 'Our' values and is therefore harmful to the well-being of the nation.

The Honeyford letter should be viewed pragmatically as argumentation subordinate to the very practical function of removing British Muslims from an empowered position in and upon the 'public sphere', through demanding either cultural assimilation or expulsion. Such argumentation is an example of a 'discourse of spatial management' (Hage, 1998), or an ethnic 'management paradigm' (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998), presupposed by the 'white fantasy' that Honeyford has the ability – both physically and morally – to 'manage' the white, or more euphemistically the 'Judeo-Christian' national space. Honeyford attempts this by criticizing the Runnymede Trust's report into Islamophobia in Britain, thereby undermining the report's principal recommendations: laws protecting against religious discrimination; and the granting of voluntary aided status to (successful) Muslim schools.

The main strategy used by Honeyford in the *confrontation* stage is a limiting of the topical potential available in such a way as to offer opportunities for dismissing the research findings of the Runnymede Trust as flawed without actually discussing their research findings. The 'characteristics' of British Muslims are also introduced, with a view to relocating the focus of the argument to 'Their' alleged shortcomings as opposed to 'Ours'. These are, respectively, denial and reversal strategies, designed to benefit the arguments which Honeyford presents. The *opening* stage is characterized by a rhetorical elevation of Honeyford's position:

elevated both in relation to the antagonist position of the Runnymede Trust and also in the eyes of the imagined audience. Thus, the Runnymede Trust is characterized as being against British public opinion and as having invented offensive terms which suit their (ideological) agenda, while Honeyford's position is 'common sense': clear, straightforward, 'the truth'. This sows the seed of communion with the audience, cultivates Honeyford's attempt to ally the audience to his forthcoming arguments, and as such, reaps a conventional strategy of this dialectic stage (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999: 493).

The *argumentation* stage is particularly interesting, with the content of the argument being wholly subsumed by the argument scheme. Each clause in the letter forms part of a micro-argument which, in turn, supports the main conclusions in each of the letters two macro-arguments: the denial of Islamophobia; and the reversal of blame. This strategy relies upon attempting to maintain the appearance of a valid argumentative structure, but is actually based on racist pre-suppositions, questionable claims to truth, and hence, inherently refutable logic. That such racist rejectionism was printed in the highest circulating British broadsheet newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, is a particular cause of concern, indicating the extent to which such ideas are regarded as legitimate by the newspaper.

After such a 'watertight' hierarchical argumentative structure, geared towards the support of a main conclusion, the *concluding* stage simply states that the 'choice' open to British Muslims is 'obvious': if they don't like it, they should 'go home'. As shown above, the only thing 'obvious' about this choice, is that it is only made possible with the implicit assumption that British Muslims are non-British.

The implicit assumptions of Honeyford's argument would be made manifest by any rigorous theory of argumentation however, since they are explicit in both the choice(s) of support and the moves from support(s) to conclusion(s). Where the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation excels is in illustrating: the successive dialectic stages of argument; the concerns, and thus what is at stake, in each of these dialectical stages of argument; and the rhetoric resources of the argumentative participants, deployed in order to swing each stage to their own advantage. It is only when the dialectic and pragmatic aspects of argument are united in theory and analysis, that the *structured*, *interactive* and *functional* concerns of argument can be fully appreciated and exposed to critique.

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NOTES

1. These 'seven other' authors, whose names were obtained by contacting 'Voices in the Wilderness', were: Jean Dreze, Harold Pinter, Andy de la Tour, Geoff Simons, Nabil Shaban, Jeremy Hardy and Bruce Kent.
2. Examples of such violations are the *fallacies*, a particularly strong criticism, suggesting that an argument contains 'systematically deceptive strategies of argumentation, based on an underlying, systematic error of reasoned dialogue' (Walton, 1989: 16). Classically fallacious arguments involve *post hoc ergo propter hoc* errors, involving an unwarranted move from a relation of correlation to a relation of causality.
3. Articles were recorded which featured Islam or Muslim actors in either the headline, the first paragraph of the text, or in articles which dedicated a whole paragraph to them, thus excluding passing references.
4. Although the criteria of recording an article was, as mentioned, that Islam and/or Muslim actors were cited in prominent positions, it was found that 'Islam' was not always referenced as a causal or explanatory factor in the text. This was found to be significant, and will be covered in later work. The rolling story on the 'UNSCOM weapons inspection stand-off' is a prime example of this, where Islam is only mentioned in the later stages of the sample, after President Saddam Hussein had started employing (broadly) Islamic rhetoric in order to justify his actions.
5. The only exception to this rule were letters arguing for military intervention in Iraq, using the deaths of Iraqi children as an argumentative resource – deaths which were, of course, the fault of President Saddam Hussein's intransigence and/or malignancy rather than the injurious effect of the United Nation's sanctions regime. Only one letter (from 13) cited the UN as an agent in infant mortality, and then this agency was passivized.
6. For an example of such a story see 'Carey urges tolerance for converts', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 1997: 9. This news-story details a speech given by Carey during a visit to Pakistan, wherein he 'stepped up his evangelical campaign yesterday by urging Muslims to accept and support Christian conversions in their community'. The headline is premised on the assumption that tolerance is not a sentiment currently being extended to converts in Pakistan. Moreover, the use of the verb 'urge' suggests that such tolerance is something which is not forthcoming, backed up in the quotation above wherein the verbs 'accept' and 'support' are used in their infinitive forms. These assumptions lack any further support in the body of the text.

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