

Argumentative Indicators in SopoBlogs

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ABSTRACT

There is a new form of communication: blogging and microblogging. One reason blogs are accepted widely is because they allow opinions to be expressed freely, issues to be discussed as well as to be argued convincingly. It satisfies the public's need to voice out their opinions. Yet, some of these opinions have limitations in terms of being expressed because of the absence of indicators. The present study is a discourse analysis of the structure of argumentation of selected SopoBlogs (social-political blogs). Its objective is to analyse the linguistic aspects of the blog, in particular, the use of indicators in the presentation of each stage of argumentation. The analysis is facilitated by the use of pragma-dialectical theory. The study reveals that bloggers do not find it imperative to use argumentative indicators in their blogs. Thus, affecting the flow of argumentations which in turn impact effectiveness.

Keywords: Argumentative indicators, blog post, SopoBlogs, standpoints

INTRODUCTION

Weblogs are a tool of communication across borders as well as cultures. Blogging requires the blogger to be knowledgeable in the subject matter with a good grasp of

the language and have excellent productive skills (Nowson, 2006; Crystal, 2011; Mustapha & Su Wei, 2009). Arguments need to be presented clearly in this challenging and pervasive platform. This is because standpoints that are not clearly presented, reflecting cultural logic system, may be misunderstood by cultural outsiders.

According to Jones (2012), language is ambiguous and reflective of the diverse social group, in this case, the borderless social group that bloggers belong to. Thus, to avoid ambiguity, indicators as suggested by (Van Eemeren, Houtlessler, Snoeck,

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& Henkemans, 2010) serve to fulfil this need for bloggers to present a clearly constructed argument. As standpoints serve as keystones in argument, they should be used strategically. A well-structured argumentation laced with indicators at every stage, be it face-to-face, written or computer-mediated, should help the audience or readers understand the argument with ease. Writing an argument in a blog that reaches a global readership empowers bloggers to voice opinions or assert beliefs. Constructing a critical and clear argument is good and can achieve greater impact in persuading the public on a particular issue. This is because the public may be persuaded to believe or even be misguided through the use of a well-structured argumentation that is persuasive and logical.

Argumentation is the art of expressing opinions with the intention to convince or persuade listeners or readers to accept the particular viewpoint. One recommended strategy is to use indicators in presenting the argument. Words or expression such as '*In my opinion, I believe*' are simple indicators that are needed as underpinnings to an argument. The use of these indicators helps to provide signposts for every stage of the argumentation. According to Van Eemeren et al. (2010), argumentative indicators reinforce the standpoint of an argument, serving as pointers to claims in an argument and help express those claims more precisely (Grovier, 2005; Van Eemeren et al., 2010). In addition, Zarefsky (2005) claimed that argumentative indicators

are strategic resource that should be used effectively.

Constructing an argument is an art that can be learned and improved in order to ensure opinions are expressed without any misunderstanding or misinterpretation on the part of the readers. Van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Henkemans (2002) suggested four stages of argumentation. The first is *confrontation stage* where standpoints or claims are lodged. This is followed by an *opening stage* where discussions are initiated while the next stage is the *argumentation stage* where justifications are presented. The final stage is the *conclusion* where results of the discussion are established or reinforced. Indicators help to bridge the gap between a claim and a standpoint. Some of the indicators as suggested by Van Eemeren et al. (2010) are shown in Table 1.

Malaysia has many blog directories where blogs are classified into different categories. The blogs discussed in the present study were taken from the Malaysian Blogger Directory which encompasses business, computer, and entertainment themes. Socio-political (SopoBlog) blogs, which was one of the categories in the directory was selected as it provided a platform to discuss political as well as social issues. The discussions in such blogs are mostly news-driven which allow bloggers to make personal remarks or comments that are of interest which can be political, personal and monetary (Syed Abdullah Iddid & Khaizuran, 2010).

Blogs as a source of critical news were only taken seriously after September

Table 1
Sample of indicators

Indicators of Confrontation	Indicators of Opening	Indicators of Argumentation	Indicators of Conclusion
Weak assertive <i>I believe that</i> <i>I find that</i> Strong assertive <i>I am sure/ certain that</i> <i>I am convinced that</i> Semi assertive <i>I know that</i>	Any Indicators of starting point of discussion (movement)	Clues for analogy argumentation <i>Y is true of X, because Y is true of Z</i> <i>And Z is comparable to X, X can be compared to Z</i> Rule of justice <i>X must be treated like Z</i> Indicators of symptomatic relationship <i>is in the nature (arg)</i> <i>is by nature (arg)</i> <i>as well as the fact that,</i> <i>in addition to the fact that, on top of that</i>	<i>so, thus, hence, therefore, consequently, in short</i> <i>I stand by my opinion / standpoint/ point of view that</i> <i>I stick to my opinion/ standpoint/point of view that</i> <i>I contend that, I still think that, I'm still right that, I still insist/ maintain that</i>

Source: (Van Eemeren et al., 2010)

11th which prompted the emergence of warblogs as well as poliblogs (Hewitt, 2006). Blogs have also gained immense popularity and influence, and are rapidly taking over traditional journalism. Soon, netizens may regard them as mainstream media. According to Myers (2011), there are many evidences for this: Contents of blogs are often captured in conventional newspapers as political contributions while some popular blogs have been converted and published as books such as *Blogging to Unblock: che det.com* by Tun Mahathir Mohamad. In addition, according to Ferrell and Drezner (2005), journalists have also started blogging to express their viewpoints professionally. Locally, many politicians, including Prime Minister Dato Seri Najib Razak, have exploited blogs to communicate to their constituents.

METHODS

Central to this research is the study of discourse. The term ‘discourse’ is often used in spoken or written form in a social setting (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse can be both spoken and written while others use the term ‘discourse’ interchangeably. Crystal (2011) defines the discourse as an extension of a sentence that is stretched continuously with various applications found within.

Many of the blogs in the selected directory listed under SopoBlog were written in bilingual. For the purpose of the study, randomly selected blogs were examined based on their clear argument of issues and points. This discourse analysis was carried out on posts written by five selected bloggers. These blogs were chosen because they were not written by anonymous

writers. The five selected blogs were: *A Little Taffer’s Room (ALTR)*, *Just My Thoughts (JMT)*, *Kosong Café (KC)*, *The Rebirth of the Liberated Mind (TRLM)* and *TunkuAishah (TA)*. After careful and meticulous considerations, 11 blogposts were chosen, namely three posts from ALTR, two posts from JMT, two from KC, two from TRLM and two posts from TA.

The discourse analysis of the blogs carried out was facilitated by the model designed by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) and the argumentative indicators advocated by Van Eemeren et al. (2010). The findings are then presented based on four stages of argumentation: confrontation, opening, argumentative and conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2
Analysis of indicators of confrontation and opening stage

Stages of argument		ALTR 1	ALTR 2	ALTR 3	JMT 1	JMT 2	KC 1	KC 2	TRLM 1	TRLM 2	TA 1	TA 2
Confrontation	Indicators	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Placement of standpoint	X 2ND	X 2ND	X 1ST	X 3RD	X 1ST	X 1ST	X 1ST	X UNEXPRESSED	X 7TH	X 1ST	X UNEXPRESSED
Opening	Challenge to defend a standpoint	/	/	/	X	X	/	X	/	X	/	X
		/	/	/	X	X	/	X	/	X	/	X
	No opening indicators	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2 presents the overall analysis of the 11 blogs in terms of the stages of argumentation and their characteristics. As mentioned earlier, Van Eemeren et al. (2002) suggested four stages of argumentation. The first stage is the confrontation stage, where a claim or standpoint is revealed to readers and some background information is provided. However, as can be seen here,

six out of 11 blogposts revealed their standpoints too early in their blogposts, which was right at the very beginning. The second stage is the *opening stage* where discussions are initiated. The next stage is the *argumentation stage* where justifications are presented while the final stage is the *concluding stage* where results of the discussion are established or reinforced.

ALTR 3, JMT2, KC1, KC2 and TA1 expressed their standpoints in the first sentence of their blogpost while ALTR1 and ALTR2 expressed theirs in the second sentence. Therefore, no background information was given prior to the standpoint. One blogger expressed his standpoint in the third sentence while another in the seventh sentence. Here, some effort in providing contextual information can be seen. The last two blogs, however, had unexpressed standpoints. A sample of unexpressed standpoint can be seen in Extract 1.

Extract 1: A sample of an unexpressed standpoint

I would want to have a brief stop on talking political related subjects a little while and go back to what some people have said about in secondary level. Just recently someone has brought out an interesting subject about Moral studies and the nightmare that every student has to do in that subject: memory recall.

In extract 1 (which was taken from TRLM 1), the standpoint is unexpressed and there are no clear indicators either to guide the readers. Without indicators, readers may not be able to grasp the standpoint or they may even be disheartened to continue reading as it can be challenging. In the same extract, the blogger expressed his/ her concern on moral studies which have become a subject only for memory. This can be expressed clearly with the use of strong assertive indicators such as '*I strongly believe*'.

Extract 2: Suggested revised standpoints for extract 1

- i. *I strongly believe* that moral studies are only about memory recall.
- ii. *I strongly disagree* that moral studies should be all about memory recall.

The revised standpoints in extract 2 clearly state the disapproval of the blogger in relation to = moral studies which was not relayed clearly in extract 1. The two revised sentences with indicators have expressed clear standpoints. At the same point, they also indicate the degree of disapproval of the blogger in this matter which may appeal to more readers.

The following analysis is on the opening stage. The opening stage is needed for the onset of an argument. This is an important stage as it sets the platform for argumentation to take place. An *opening stage* of argumentation allows a blogger to defend their standpoint in the preparation to advance argument and also dispel any arising disputes. Though it is labelled as '*opening*', it is not the first stage in the argumentation. It is preceded by confrontation stage where a standpoint is made explicit. As can be seen from Table 2, five blogposts or 45.4% of the blogposts do not have any opening in their argumentation; the bloggers dive straight into the argument stage. This means that the standpoints were not defended.

What can be deduced from the above analysis is the absence of indicators in both stages of argumentation. The standpoints

were made but personal conviction as well as assertiveness were not evident there. This takes away the impact the standpoint can potentially have on the readers. The same analysis was carried out for the argument and concluding stages. Table 3 shows

the analysis of argument and concluding stages of the selected blogposts. As seen in this table, all bloggers are able to provide justifications for their arguments. However, there is a clear absence of indicators in doing so.

Table 3
Analysis of indicators of argumentation and concluding stages

Stages of argument		ALTR 1	ALTR 2	ALTR 3	JMT 1	JMT 2	KC 1	KC 2	TRLM 1	TRLM 2	TA 1	TA 2
Argument	Provide a justification	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Indicators	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Concluding	No conclusion					/		/				
	Reinforcement of idea								/			
	Establish result											
	No indicators	/	/	/	/				/	/	/	/
	Irrelevant conclusion						/					
	Weak conclusion	/	/	/	/					/		
Call for an action									/	/		

Another interesting observation is the concluding stage. This is the last stage of argumentation and its aims are to reinforce the main idea of the argument, to establish results or to call for an action to be taken up as a result of the argument. The conclusion is therefore, important as the blogger leaves a lingering impact in the minds of the readers. From Table 3, two blogs do not have any conclusion and the posts end abruptly while one blogpost ends with an irrelevant conclusion. The remaining eight (72.7%), has no indicators to prepare readers for a conclusion. Five (62.5%) of the eight conclusions are considered weak as these

conclusions show very poor connections to the arguments as they are written in just one or two sentences. However, three (37.5%) out of the eight (100%) conclusions achieve their purposes: one blogpost ends with a reinforcement of the idea while two calls for actions.

CONCLUSION

Styles of writing vary from one blogger to another based on the category of blogs or choice of words. Elements of spoken discourse that can be traced in blogs project the blogpost to be informal in nature. Bloggers may keep their tone formal or

informal, as long as the intended message comes across clearly for wider readership. In socio-political blogs, bloggers have to be assertive in presenting their standpoints and at the same time ensure their views are not misunderstood. One effective strategy is to use indicators which has not been exploited by bloggers. As can be seen, for each stage of the argumentation, none of the bloggers use indicators in providing landmarks. Van Eemeren et al. (2010) suggested a comprehensive list of indicators that could be used at each stage. However, none could be traced here. These indicators are signposts for readers to stay on track and follow the argument. In some cases, the use of indicators provide coherence in thoughts and organisation of the argument, thus, making it an easy read. Often, in the heat of an argument, one can get distracted, lose focus or get lost in the elaboration. Clear indicators help to bring the focus back into the argument.

The results of the study have implications in professional communication and negotiation skills. In any form of communication, may it be negotiation or persuasion, it is pertinent to express clear and well formulated opinions. According to Grovier (2005), an opinion is a belief often expressed with low degree of confidence and in the context where it cannot be fully supported by evidence or reasons. Some may assume that indicators are insignificant, but the truth of the matter is they are essential signposts in expressing opinions. Indicators help to create direction as well as a sense of assertiveness that is greatly respected in

the midst of 'freedom of expression'. From the perspective of education, the teaching of argumentation has to be more structured and explicit. Educators could provide a more linear and structured argumentation with indicators to sharpen the skills of argumentation so that students may present their arguments more convincingly.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study has limitations. First, only 11 blogposts were analysed and therefore, the results of the analysis cannot be generalised. Perhaps, further research could be carried out over a longer period of time, with many more blogposts to be analysed, for a better representation for *blog nation* (Lum, 2005) or *blogistan* as termed by Cohen and Krishnamurthy (2006). Second, the blogposts were taken from blogs with profiles provided by the bloggers. The above findings may vary with anonymous bloggers as they may feel unconstrained to express their arguments. Future researchers who are interested in the linguistic analysis of blogs may carry out a longitudinal study to look into different styles of blog writing.

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