Chapter 4
Ad Hominem in Argumentation: A Case of the Namibian Parliamentary Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Emotional arguments (ad hominem) are messages directed to attacking a person, sidestepping the logical argument. In parliament, members of Parliament (MPs) use emotional arguments and language to influence their opponent or audience attitudes and behavior. While it may be argued that ad hominem attacks are effective in argumentation, it is also observed that they might have a bad effect on either the speaker or the audience. This chapter demonstrates how some MPs used stylistic devices such as anti-thesis, sarcasm, provocation, rhetorical questions and invectives to appeal to the recipients’ emotions. Relying on MPs’ speeches found in the Hansard of the Namibian Parliament, the authors show that although ad hominem in parliamentary debates brought some bad feelings to the recipients, they were generally intended for positive effects of winning arguments. These findings are essential in distinguishing the positive and negative influences that stylistic devices have on the audiences of parliament through different forms of ad hominem.

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INTRODUCTION

Namibia was previously known as South West Africa, both under the German colonial rule and the South African apartheid rule. From 1884 to 1990 when Namibia gained her independence from South Africa, the laws that governed the country were imposed on Namibians first by Germany and then by South Africa. The current ruling party, the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), led the liberation struggle that culminated in Namibia’s independence under the auspices of United Nations’ Resolution 435. March 21, 1990 marked the independence of the Republic of Namibia under a new Constitution that proffered democratic spaces for all Namibians. It is obvious that the majority of the population had no representatives during the colonial periods. The democratic Constitution of 1990 opened up debate by people who had been elected as Members of Parliament (MPs), representing their various constituencies.

Since 1990, a sizeable amount of parliamentary discourse has been produced in Namibia, but it has not been subjected to rhetorical enquiry. This justifies the current study which examines how MPs in the chosen parliamentary discourse employed stylistic devices of anti-thesis, sarcasm, provocation, rhetorical questions and invectives, in their attack (ad hominem) speeches and utterances.

In order for MPs to convey meaningful messages to their audiences, they do it through language. Stylistic devices or rhetorical devices are used to make meaningful expressions. De Wet (2017) emphasises that “appropriately formulated language is needed in order to convey those facts and ideas, so that they appear important in very specific ways to recipients” (p.1). Although the Namibian parliament is not rowdy and dramatic in any specific way, these elements are common in some parliaments around the world in terms of speech acts and verbal exchanges. During parliamentary debates, MPs use different strategies of expressing themselves in attempts to win debates and persuade their audiences. Parliamentary debates are important as the audience gets an opportunity to deliberate on who to support. Related to that, Benoit (2007) states that “political debates allow voters to compare and assess the leading candidates and their issue positions simultaneously as they appear side-by-side” (p. 1).

Some of these strategies appeal to the pathos of the audience, some to the ethos and logos of the speaker. According to Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric, pathos is persuading an audience through emotional appeal; ethos is persuading an audience by showing credibility; and logos is convincing an audience by reasoning clearly. In a setting of an argument, it can be deduced that pathos stimulates annoyance. Depending on how these strategies are used, the emotions are triggered either positively or negatively.