

Marcus Lantz: “We know what to do when we feel the consequences.” Decisive argumentation: Appeals to emotion in uncertain decision-making

Based on rhetorical argumentation theory and the role of emotions in decision-making, this article examines appeals to emotion and their role in convincing decision-makers on political questions that relate to uncertain future outcome. Specifically, it investigates how humans persuade decision-makers by the use of arguments, and it focuses on the use of examples and their emotive appeals. It also explores the interplay and application of such examples relating to the past, present and future that the decisions inevitably help shape.

The article explores the concept of “decisive argumentation” from two directions, a rhetorical and a psychological with an emphasis on emotions. From a rhetorical theoretical perspective, it draws on Aristotle’s classical definition of appeals to emotion and deliberative rhetoric, on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) in how to establish a conclusion through a particular case, and on Kock’s (2009) discussion of choice as being neither true nor false. From a psychological perspective, it draws on research by Lerner et al (2015) to help explain how appeals to specific emotions influence decision-making; especially on uncertain matters such as political choices where rhetorical deliberation unfolds. Particularly, it explores the roles that appraisals of confidence and certainty can have on decisions, and how examples can affect dimensions of certainty.

Finally, the article revisits Miller’s “The Rhetoric of Decision Science” (1989), and discusses how the continuing influence of behavioral decision-making (cf. Simon 1959; Kahneman 2003) affects the role of rhetoric in human deliberation and ultimately decisions that can pave the road towards peace or escalate conflict.