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Persuasive strategies in competitive debates: A corpus rhetoric approach

Strategie perswazyjne w debatach konkursowych: perspektywa retoryki korpusowej

Abstract

This paper uses a corpus rhetoric approach to analyze persuasive strategies in competitive debates. The examined strategies are based on inference markers and selected types of systemic means of persuasion. The study is two-fold: the first part is the quantitative and qualitative analyses that characterize competitive debates compared to other persuasive discourses. The second part, the case study, shows the use of particular persuasive strategies related to inference markers and systemic means of persuasion in a specific rhetorical situation. As the quantitative analysis revealed, regardless of the debaters' experience level, competitive debates are highly saturated with analyzed persuasive strategies. The case study depicts the dynamics of the selected debate; moreover, it illustrates the methodological value of linking macro and micro perspectives in the study of competitive debates as a rhetorical genre and educational activity.

Artykuł opisuje strategie perswazyjne w debatach konkursowych, wykorzystując podejście retoryki korpusowej. Badane strategie perswazyjne opierają się na wskaźnikach inferencji oraz wybranych rodzajach systemowych środków perswazji. Badanie składa się z dwóch części: analiz ilościowych i jakościowych, które charakteryzują debaty konkursowe na tle innych dyskursów perswazyjnych, oraz studium przypadku, które przedstawia sposób wykorzystania poszczególnych strategii perswazyjnych, związanych z użyciem wskaźników inferencji i systemowych środków perswazji w kontekście określonej sytuacji retorycznej. Jak wykazała analiza ilościowa, debaty konkursowe, niezależnie od poziomu doświadczenia debatantów, są tekstami wysoce nasyconymi analizowanymi strategiami perswazyjnymi. Studium przypadku przedstawia obraz i dynamikę wybranej debaty, ponadto ilustruje metodologiczną wartość powiązania perspektywy makro i mikro w badaniu debaty konkursowej jako gatunku retorycznego i aktywności edukacyjnej.

Key words

competitive debates, corpus rhetoric, systemic means of persuasion, inference markers, argumentation
debaty konkursowe, retoryka korpusowa, systemowe środki perswazji, wskaźniki inferencji, argumentacja

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Introduction: Persuasion Playground

In the realm of competitive debates, participants engage in a structured simulation of argument, a practice that trains them to recognize and apply various rhetorical strategies. This environment serves as a training ground where debaters refine their communication skills and prepare for real-world discussions. The simulation of debate interactions operating on institutional and social levels provides a unique learning space where the outcome within the simulation holds no real-world consequences (Budzyńska-Daca 2014). Nevertheless, the skills acquired here – e.g., argument invention, giving rebuttals, and speech delivery – are instrumental in equipping individuals with the tools for effective argumentation in real-life communication.

As a genre, the competitive debate requires adherence to several vital conditions to maintain its structured and formal nature (cf. Snider and Schnurer 2006; Baird 1950). These conditions include the presence of equally matched parties, a clear and engaging motion (Snider and Schnurer 2006, 86), and evaluation by a neutral audience based on predefined criteria (Harvey-Smith 2011, 1; Trapp et al. 2005, 6–10). Within this ecosystem (cf. Bawarshi 2001), participants assume the roles defined by the debate format, navigating through internal and external genres. The overarching inspiration for this perspective is to view debates as rhetorical situations with specific audiences and constraints that evoke particular responses from the speakers (Bitzer 1968). We draw the motivation to understand these recurring responses by examining a collection of artifacts (using corpus rhetoric) from the methods of rhetorical criticism and the concept of genre description (Foss 2018).

Despite the simulation aspect, the rhetorical and argumentative phenomena in debates are genuine and provide a fertile ground for scholarly exploration. A comprehensive understanding of these phenomena across various debate types, speakers, and formats necessitates the creation of debate corpora. Such corpora enable empirical analysis, moving beyond manual scrutiny to abstract modeling of rhetorical phenomena, including argumentation types and other linguistic components of persuasive speeches.

The empirical corpus rhetoric approach offers a fresh perspective on competitive debates instead of relying on intuitions or declarations. Historically or pedagogically oriented studies dominate the field, but there needs to be more empirical research on the rhetoric of competitive debates. Our work aims to fill this gap, providing insights into the dense informational content of debate texts and their rhetorical weight. Through a macro-to-micro analysis, from distant to close reading, we filter examples to offer a broad view of the rhetorical landscape in competitive debates.

We designed the structure of this article to guide the reader through a thorough exploration of persuasive strategies in competitive debates. The subsequent sections delve into the methodology used to create and analyze the debate corpora, highlighting the quantitative and qualitative approaches employed that call for the idea of “corpus rhetoric”. The article’s core presents the empirical findings, comparing persuasive strategies across three highly persuasive discourses focusing on competitive debates as a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. Then, a case study offers a micro-level analysis of specific speeches, illustrating the practical application of the identified strategies. The final section discusses some implications of these findings and suggests future research directions.

Ultimately, this article aims to elucidate the persuasive strategies in competitive debates through a corpus rhetoric approach, providing a foundation for further exploration and understanding of this dynamic and educational genre. Our investigations can serve as proof of concept for innovative corpus rhetoric methods, leaving room for further iterative refinement.

Rhetoric Meets Corpora

A corpus of debates paves the way for using what we would call corpus rhetoric – a fusion of corpus linguistics and rhetoric. Corpus linguistics methodology uses computer tools to study large collections of digitized texts, enabling the identification of patterns, as well as detailed analysis of linguistic phenomena in texts. It adheres to two fundamental assumptions: the observer must not interfere with what is being observed, and recurring events are significant (Stubbs 2004, 111). These assumptions determine the corpus linguistics methodology’s empirical and

inductive (or quantitative) nature and guide our approach, providing a foundation for our corpus analysis.

As Łucja Biel notices (2015), the strength of corpus linguistics methodology lies in its ability to effectively examine the immediate context of words, their collocations, and lexical combinations. They are best suited for analyzing the frequency and distribution of language units. However, this methodology also has limitations that are relevant to our study. It hardly copes well with pragmatic and discursive aspects of texts, especially if the corpus is not enriched with a custom annotation layer (Biel 2015, 20). We will address these issues in the following sections.

We decided to introduce the term “corpus rhetoric” to emphasize the twofold nature of our research. On the one hand, it employs a general approach and specific methods of corpus linguistics and natural language processing, which we have characterized above. On the other hand, its motivation and goal belong to the field of rhetoric, as it attempts to grasp and understand a variety of phenomena associated with competitive debates, such as persuasive strategies adopted by different types of debaters in various debate formats. The use of these methods seems particularly valuable due to their aforementioned empirical and inductive nature. They enable us to study the empirical manifestation of competitive debate formats and genres, which is particularly relevant for studies on competitive debates, which are prone to relying on sheer declarations rather than objective and methodical insights into data.

Several works adopt a similar approach, methods, and assumptions. The point of reference for us is the research applying the inference anchoring theory (Konat, Koszowy, and Budzyńska 2016; Visser et al. 2020), as well as the work done in related fields, e.g., corpus pragmatics (Weisser 2018; Arnaud 2019). These works undoubtedly represent the state of the art in constructing corpora oriented to the study of pragmatic phenomena, specifically argumentation. Still, neither the findings of these studies nor their methodological approaches cannot be directly applied to our case due to two main factors. First, our debate corpus is in Polish. Second, competitive debate speeches are a specific type of discourse due to their spoken and partly improvised character, being conveyed at a very high pace. Moreover, they are interrupted by other speeches (questions, cross-examination, and points of information [POI]), which makes it essential to use a unique annotation scheme. The argumentation presented in debates tends to be complex, including dynamic interactions between participants: speeches contain many references to one another. These factors make it hard and maybe not very useful to adapt the abovementioned approaches to our case.

Inference Markers and Systemic Means of Persuasion

The limitations of the corpus linguistics methodology regarding pragmatic phenomena and the need for custom annotated corpora also affect our study. It could be natural to expect that research on competitive debates should focus on reconstructing argumentation and other rhetorical devices. Indeed, in a previous study we aimed to reconstruct argumentation in competitive debates (cf. Rogowska and Będkowski 2023). Still, it proved tedious, especially when grasping enthymematic premises and including all interactions between debaters. The severity of the enthymematicity of argumentation and the number of references between speeches makes it hardly feasible to deal with phenomena on a larger scale, even if we support the whole process with artificial intelligence techniques.

We did not abandon the adopted approach but took a step back to utilize what corpus linguistics methodology has to offer. We focused on lexical elements accompanying or marking pragmatic phenomena such as providing argumentation, inference, or aiming at making assertions more acceptable to an audience, i.e., we focused on inference markers (also known as argument (premise and conclusion) indicators or discourse markers; hereafter: IM) and so-called systemic means of persuasion (hereafter: SMP). Let us briefly characterize both classes of expressions and discuss the adopted approach and its advantages and drawbacks.

IM (premise and conclusion indicators or discourse markers) – i.e., words such as “because,” “so,” “hence,” “thus,” and “therefore” – are often treated as markers of argumentation (Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin 2010, 51). They can be used to express other kinds of reasoning, such as inference and explanation or abduction (Van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Snoeck Henkemans 2007, 164). Although they can be understood as clear indicators of argumentation, they constitute a persuasive strategy of directly deriving one proposition (conclusion) from the other (premises).

SMP is a category introduced by Aleksy Awdiejew. Generally speaking, it is a class of metaoperators that frame the content of an utterance, making it more acceptable to an audience. The subclasses of the general category of SMP are operators blocking verification, modal operators, operators changing the hierarchy of the informational configuration, and emotive-evaluating operators (Awdiejew 2004, 2007). Independently, a similar conception was formulated by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Robert Fogelin, who distinguished four groups of the so-called regress stoppers: assuring, guarding, discounting, and evaluating phrases. In their view, these four classes primarily can halt the infinite regress of justification, i.e., they neutralize an expectation to justify a claim by framing it appropriately (Sinnott-Armstrong, Fogelin 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong 2018; Awdiejew 2007).

Strategy	Forms	Examples
Assuring	We are indicating that there are backup reasons even though we are not giving them fully now. 1) Citing authorities, 2) Commenting on the strength of our own belief, 3) Abusing the audience, 4) Giving assurances that something is false.	1) Doctors agree... 2) I am certain that... 3) Everyone with any sense agrees that... 4) It is wholly implausible to suppose that...
Guarding	We are weakening our claims so they are less subject to attack. 1) Weakening the extent of what has been said, 2) Introducing probability phrases, 3) Reducing our level of commitment.	1) Some... 2) It is likely that... 3) I suspect that...
Discounting	We are anticipating criticisms and dismissing them. 1) Citing a possible criticism to reject it or counter it.	1) The ring is beautiful but expensive.
Evaluating	We are invoking the relevant standards in a given context and indicating that something adequately satisfies these standards. 1) Evaluating can be performed by: a. general evaluating words, b. evaluative-descriptive words, c. words with positive or negative connotations (being activated in a particular context).	1a. He is a good/bad person. 1b. It is a beautiful/ugly flower. 1c. It is a French wine.

Table 1. Four main categories of regress stoppers: assuring, guarding, discounting, and evaluating with examples (Będkowski, Rogowska 2024, 52–53; based on Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin 2010, 62–72; Sinnott-Armstrong 2018, 120–136).

We must note some points regarding the categories above (cf. Będkowski, Rogowska 2024). First, SMP can be employed with honest intentions to inform or influence based on genuine beliefs and justified claims. However, they can also be used manipulatively to intimidate or coerce acceptance of a claim without proper justification, exploiting their persuasive power to mislead the interlocutors or the audience. Second, although the primary function of the distinguished expressions is to halt the infinite regress of justification (or, to put it simply, to increase the degree of acceptability of certain judgments), their effectiveness is strongly dependent on the context. Third, SMP share similarities with indirect speech acts, as their interpretation heavily relies on the context. For instance, phrases like “I think” or “we believe” can function as guarding in some contexts (e.g., parliamentary speeches) or assuring in others (e.g., competitive debates). Fourth, specific phrases are inherently ambiguous and can serve multiple functions simultaneously. Lastly, SMP are crucial indicators of various persuasive strategies within argumentative discourse. These linguistic devices are essential

for understanding different argumentative styles and strategies and are especially useful in the context of highly saturated argumentative discourses such as debates and sermons. While crucial, these observations are not exhaustive; however, they suffice for the purposes of this article, which is to show IM and SMP in a specific context.

The Three Corpora

To comprehensively capture the persuasive phenomena in competitive debates, we compared them with other corpora, such as parliamentary speeches and sermons.¹

Our corpus of parliamentary speeches is a subcorpus of the Polish Parliamentary Corpus (Ogrodniczuk 2018; Ogrodniczuk, Nitoń 2020). It includes approximately 35,600 parliamentary speeches from the ninth term of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland (12 November 2019 to 12 November 2023), totaling around 9,770,000 tokens. This corpus, the largest among the ones considered in our study, is a valuable reference point. Parliamentary debates share significant similarities with competitive debates, our primary focus. Both genres are spoken, time-constrained, and highly persuasive. This parallelism makes the parliamentary debates corpus an excellent comparative benchmark.

Parliamentary speeches from the ninth term of the Sejm	Number of speeches	Number of tokens	Average speech length
	35,577	9,773,513	274

Table 2. The corpus of parliamentary speeches in numbers.

The corpus of sermons by Polish priest Piotr Pawlukiewicz (regarded as an outstanding preacher and recognized for his distinct homiletic style) consists of approximately 310 sermons, totaling around 1,750,000 tokens. Similar to competitive debates, these sermons are spoken and persuasive, although they are not necessarily time-constrained (at least not so strictly). It encompasses sermons published online² and transcribed automatically.³ The sermons span a lengthy period from 2007 to 2016, providing a rich dataset for comparative analysis with competitive debates. This corpus also serves as a valuable benchmark, allowing us to contextualize competitive debates against other rhetorical phenomena for which we have ample examples.

1. All the corpora are originally in Polish, any examples and excerpts were translated to English by the authors of this article, while trying to stay as close to the original source as possible. Although in some cases the original Polish wording may be loaded with additional meaning that the translation does not capture, due to the restriction of the character count we have decided to stay with the translated version. Since the development of the competitive debates corpus is still in progress, we are not ready to make it publicly accessible. However, it is something we plan to do in the coming months.
2. <http://www.kazaniaksiedzapiotra.pl/>, access: 30 June 2024.
3. <https://github.com/openai/whisper>, access: 30 June 2024.

Pawlukiewicz's sermons preached at St. Anne's Church in Warsaw (2007–2016)	Number of sermons	Tokens	Average sermon length
	311	1,757,627	5651

Table 3. The corpus of Pawlukiewicz's sermons in numbers.

For this and other studies, a series of workshops and debates was organized to build a corpus of competitive debates (cf. Rogowska, Będkowski 2023; Będkowski, Rogowska 2024). The debates were recorded, transcribed, and annotated.

The competitive debate corpus comprises four formats: British Parliamentary debate (BP), Lincoln-Douglas debate (LD), Karl Popper debate (KP), and Oxford debate (DOx).⁴ These formats vary in several aspects, including the number of teams and participants, the duration of speeches, the preparation time for developing arguments, and the rules for questioning opponents. Each format adheres to specific rules of conduct, as detailed in various manuals, handbooks, and evaluation sheets used in debate tournaments (cf. Johnson 2009; Pollard and Prentice 1981; Prager 2007; Trapp et al. 2005; Rogowska, Kosman, Łukowska 2024, and others). These guidelines cover the technical execution of debates and the construction of persuasive speeches, emphasizing the proper design of arguments.

The corpus includes contributions from two distinct groups of participants: novices (N), who are inexperienced speakers, typically students with some workshop training but little or no competitive debating experience, and advanced participants (A), who are seasoned debaters, often members of school or university debate clubs, and sometimes also serve as debate organizers and judges. The table below summarizes basic information about the corpus volume.

Debaters level	Debate format	Number of debates	Number of speeches	Number of tokens	Average speech length
Advanced	BP	4	32	45,829	1 389
	LD	4	20	21,120	875
	KP	1	6	6,866	814
	DOx	8	64	66,085	926
	Total (A)	17	122	139,900	
Novice	BP	4	32	24,958	716
	LD	4	20	13,368	509
	KP	4	24	21,108	634
	DOx	4	32	17,740	499
	Total (N)	16	108	77,174	
	Total	33	230	217,074	

Table 4. The corpus of competitive debates in numbers.

4. The Oxford debate mentioned here is a Polish debate format created in the late 1990s, based on debates held at the Oxford University. It is a 4 vs. 4 format of debating, where all speakers have 4–5 minutes for their speech during which the opponents can ask questions. The debaters know the motion a week prior, but their side (for or against) is drafted 15 minutes before the debate starts.

In the following sections, we provide insights into the persuasive strategies employed in competitive debates and other discourses, contributing to a deeper understanding of persuasive practices in these debates.

The Case of Persuasiveness: The Macro Picture

In this section, we would like to discuss the distribution of IM and SMP across different corpora. As mentioned above, the corpora of parliamentary speeches and sermons provide a valuable background for analyzing the corpus of competitive debates. The following diagram presents the results of the automated analysis of the corpora prepared using a fine-tuned HerBERT model for the task of IM and SMP recognition (Mroczkowski et al. 2021)⁵:

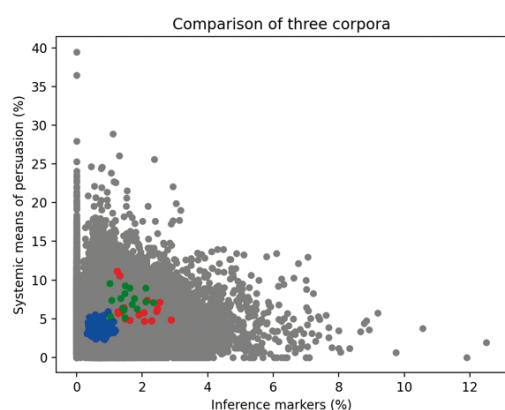


Figure 1. Comparison of the three corpora: IM and SMP. Grey dots represent parliamentary speeches, blue – Pawlukiewicz's sermons, green – debates of novice debaters, and red – debates of advanced ones.

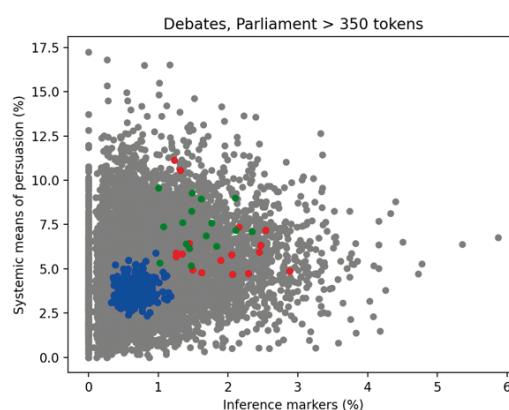


Figure 2. Comparison of the three corpora without speeches shorter than 350 tokens: IM and SMP.

As we can see, parliamentary speeches are very diverse regarding the density of both IM and SMP. Parliamentary speakers adopt both strategies, in some cases achieving extreme values. Averaged results for competitive debates are greater than those obtained for sermons, which, of course, make extensive use of both persuasive strategies, even if the results are relatively smaller than those obtained for other corpora.

Figure 1 reveals a vital feature of competitive debates: despite their educational and simulative nature, they are rich in various persuasive strategies. Let us notice that parliamentary speeches reach extreme values of IM and SMP when they are relatively short. Figure 2 presents the results obtained by filtering out short speeches, i.e., ones shorter than 350 tokens.

5. Here, we will not delve into the model training details. Let us just mention that the model achieves F1 score of approximately 75% on the test set, with performance exceeding 90% for some labels (e.g., inference markers and discounting phrases).

These initial observations supported our efforts to annotate competitive debates, enabling us to reconstruct the debaters' entire speeches.⁶ If we take into account the reconstructed speeches (not the entire debates), the results are as follows:

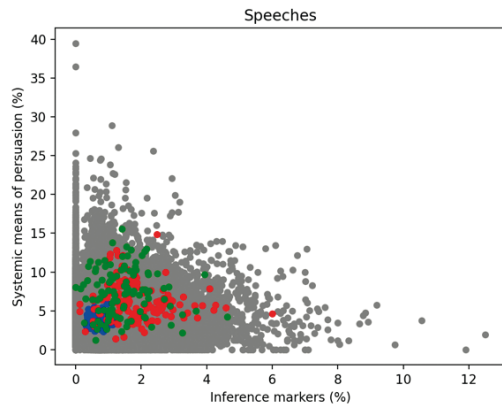


Figure 3. Comparison of the three corpora: IM and SMP. Grey dots represent parliamentary speeches, blue – Pawlukiewicz's sermons, green – speeches of novice debaters, and red – the speeches of advanced ones.

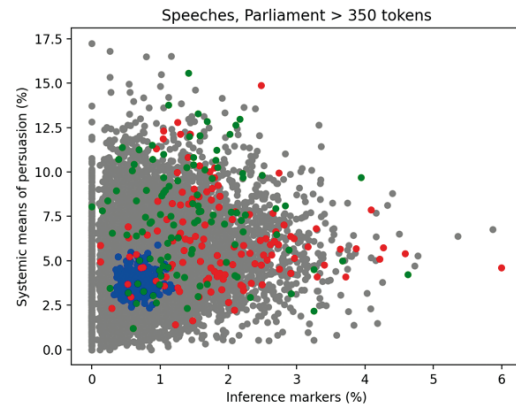


Figure 4. Comparison of the three corpora without speeches shorter than 350 tokens: IM and SMP.

Speeches of advanced speakers tend to make more extensive use of IM than SMP. While this is not a rule for every speaker, we can observe a general tendency; however, it can be confirmed by more meticulous analysis:

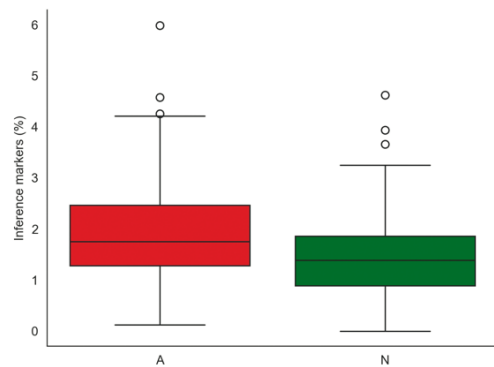


Figure 5. Box plots visualizing the distribution of IM in speeches of advanced (A, red) and novice (N, green) debaters.⁷

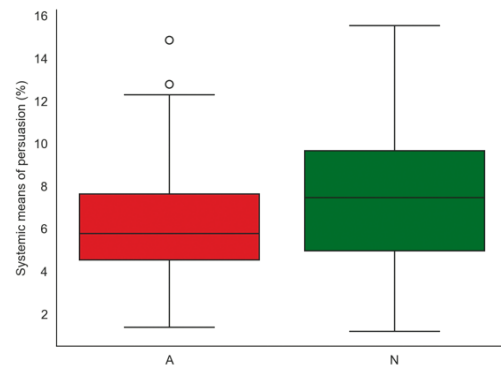


Figure 6. Box plots visualizing the distribution of SMP in speeches of advanced (A, red) and novice (N, green) debaters.

6. Since the debaters' speeches can be interrupted by questions and comments coming from the opposing side, we have adopted an annotation scheme for the debates that allows the reconstruction of the speeches, understood as merging identified parts of the speeches into a single text.

7. The line splitting the box in two represents the median value for each category (50% of the data lies above the median value, and 50% lies below it). The lower edge of the box represents the lower quartile (it shows the value at which the first 25% of the data falls). The upper edge of the box shows the upper quartile (it shows that 25% of the data lies above the upper quartile value and 75% below the upper quartile value). The values at which the vertical lines stop are the values of the upper and lower values of the data. The single points on the diagram show the outliers, i.e., data points (speeches) that differ significantly from other observations (speeches).

These box plots illustrate a general asymmetry between advanced and novice debaters. The difference in median values is noticeable (1.76% vs. 1.39%), but we can report more than that. What is even more interesting is that the median value of IM density in advanced debaters' speeches (1.76%) is almost equal to the upper edge of the box of novice debaters' speeches (1.86%); on the other hand, the median value of SMP density in novice debaters' speeches (7.49%) is almost equal to the upper edge of the box of advanced debaters' speeches (7.66%). Advanced debaters prefer persuasive strategies based on IM, and novice ones prefer SMP strategies. Due to the limitations of the number of samples, we cannot speak of the statistical significance of the results; however, we can notice general trends.

Let us also extend this comparison to other corpora:

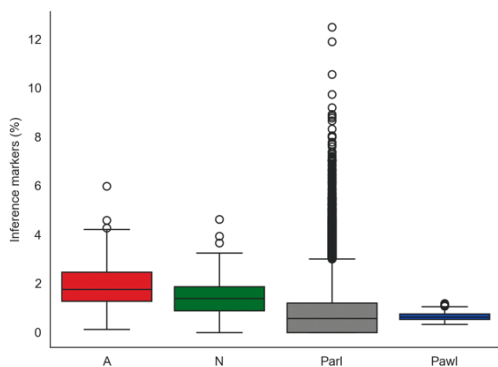


Figure 7. Box plots visualizing the distribution of IM in speeches of advanced (A, red) debaters, novice (N, green) debaters, parliamentary speeches (Parl, grey), and Pawlukiewicz's sermons (Pawl, blue).

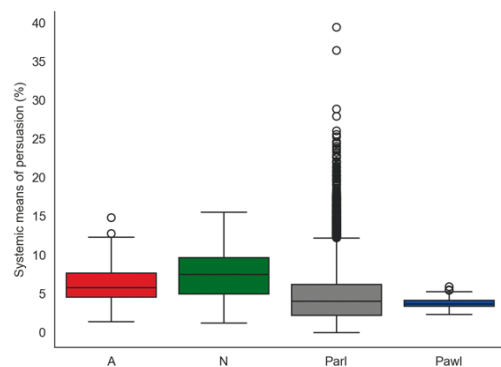


Figure 8. Box plots visualizing the distribution of SMP in speeches of advanced (A, red) debaters, novice (N, green) debaters, parliamentary speeches (Parl, grey), and Pawlukiewicz's sermons (Pawl, blue).

Pawlukiewicz's sermons constitute a relatively homogeneous group of texts. The corpus of parliamentary speeches is much more varied and has more extreme values in both diagrams (as well as a high presence of outliers: 1195 and 637 for IM and SMP respectively). Still, it has lower median values than the groups of advanced and novice debaters' speeches. The main conclusion from these comparisons is that competitive debates, even when conducted by inexperienced debaters, employ basic persuasive strategies more effectively and with higher intensity than parliamentary speeches and sermons.

This finding is both understandable and surprising. Competitive debaters exhibit apparent persuasive pressure, aiming to increase the acceptability of their judgments by grounding them in other beliefs (derivation, IM) or protecting them from verification (framing, SMP). As a rhetorical situation (Bitzer 1968), a competitive debate imposes certain behaviors on participants, increasing the texts' persuasive density. Participants must engage in competition, triggering

“fight or flight” responses, and fulfill specific roles and patterns characteristic of competitive debating. Continuous evaluation by team members, opposing teams, judges, and the audience further intensifies the pressure for precise and convincing argumentation. Apart from the debate format itself, the participants’ competencies serve as significant constraints, with the difference between advanced debaters and novices affecting the dynamics and effectiveness of the debate. Meta-awareness of the current and everchanging situation is crucial for reaching the highest point of contribution in the debate and fulfilling all parties’ expectations.

The Case of Persuasiveness: The Micro Picture

Here, we would like to zoom in from the macro perspective to the micro one. We analyze and discuss particular examples from the showcase Oxford debate organized during the Rhetoric Congress “Rhetoric – Innovation – Education” held in Warsaw on April 18th, 2024. The motion of this debate is: *The widespread use of generative artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, brings more harm than benefits to students*. In Table 5, we can see the distribution of SMP and IM in the debate we analyzed.

Speaker	Side	Tokens	IM (%)	SMP (%)	E (%)	A (%)	G (%)	D (%)
P1	Pro	966	1.35	5.59	1.14	1.14	2.59	0.72
O1	Contra	833	1.92	3.96	2.04	0.48	0.96	0.48
P2	Pro	980	1.84	5.31	2.04	1.43	1.12	0.71
O2	Contra	1037	1.25	3.47	0.68	1.25	1.25	0.29
P3	Pro	798	1.87	4.89	1.25	1.50	1.63	0.50
O3	Contra	1040	2.69	6.63	2.02	2.02	1.54	1.06
P4	Pro	1098	1.73	10.02	1.82	3.28	3.28	1.64
O4	Contra	1218	3.28	6.81	0.66	3.37	2.38	0.41

Table 5. The analyzed debate in numbers.

We present several examples of persuasive strategies in competitive debate speeches following the natural order of the debate. We selected several passages that make noteworthy use of IM and subcategories of SMP. We selected speeches and their excerpts based on the percentage content of specific persuasive phenomena to highlight their textual realizations, their consequences for the progression of the debate, and the persuasive value of its particular stages.

Guarding

In her opening speech, P1 mainly characterizes the average student and the generative artificial intelligence. It is worth noting that the opposing team accepts

the presented description of the student as focused, e.g., on short-term success. The speaker does not justify the student's description she makes – she avoids the burden of proof associated with the truthfulness of this description, making extensive use of guarding phrases:

P1: What is our student like? The [average]_G student we will talk about is a young person, a teenager attending school. This is a person who remains under the care of an adult and is [somewhat]_G dependent on being guided in life, making [good]_E decisions, getting a [good]_E education, acquiring new skills, and so on. In today's world, this young person already faces many challenges, [including]_G the very rapid and extensive development of technology. One of these technologies is [of course]_A artificial intelligence, which we will talk about more, [but]_D I will refer to it [somewhat]_G later. This young student learns not only within the family and from their parents but primarily at school. They are [largely]_G dependent on the education system, which is supposed to prepare them for adult life, providing them with essential competencies, [because]_{IM} [not always]_G can every student get everything they need for life from home. [...]. Such an [average]_G student knows how to use the internet, and [probably]_G can find the basic information they need online. They will also be able to use artificial intelligence [to some extent]_G. Here, [it is worth noting that]_A the use of artificial intelligence depends on their processing skills, meaning: this is not a person who is practically or systematically prepared to use artificial intelligence. This person is [somewhat]_G on their own, [because]_{IM} the education system they function in, the families they function in, [usually]_G lack the resources to provide them with important information about how to use artificial intelligence, what the risks are, and what the opportunities are. [And this is because]_{IM} artificial intelligence is still a [somewhat]_G new invention. [...]. [So]_{IM} [it is worth noting that]_E this is a new technology that is developing very quickly, changing very quickly, and posing threats that the system or their parents cannot prepare for this student. I invite you to ask questions.⁸

Guarding is often – also here – used strategically to achieve specific communicative goals. However, there are instances where guarding occurs unintentionally and involuntarily, manifesting as compulsive linguistic behavior. In these cases, speakers might not be consciously aware of their guarding techniques, yet they employ them out of habit or as a reflexive response to specific conversational triggers. This dual nature of guarding highlights its complexity as both a deliberate rhetorical tool and an automatic, sometimes uncontrollable, aspect of language use (cf. Będkowski, Rogowska 2024, 197).

In the example below, you can see yet another function of guarding:

O3, Q: Esteemed Marshall, a question. In the case of traditional media and traditional forms of communication, is the student prepared and taught about the opportunities and risks?

P1: Here, I will [perhaps]_G refer to this – in response to this question, thank you for it – I will refer to how this education system functions in general. [Because]_{IM} [indeed]_A the education system cannot prepare us for everything, we cannot learn to use all tools, [but]_D [to some basic extent]_G we have already become accustomed to [some]_G tools, [because]_{IM} they have been with us [a bit]_G longer. Artificial intelligence is [exceptional]_E here [because]_{IM} it has been with us for a very short

8. In the debate quotes, we adopted the convention of marking IM and SMP. The expression is enclosed in square brackets, followed by the designation of the strategy: IM stands for inference marker, G for guarding, A for assuring, E for evaluating, and D for discounting.

time [...]. [So]_{IM} yes, this education system is [somewhat]_G [flawed]_E, it leaves our student as a self-taught user of artificial intelligence and does not teach us these basic competencies [...].

After O3's objection, P1 acknowledges it by assuring agreement but then transitions into a more detailed position through pure discounting. This response heavily employs guarding. It illustrates an interesting and relatively common dynamic in responding to questions: an initial agreement ("yes"), followed by an additional message ("but") wrapped in a layer of guarding.⁹

Evaluating

Here, we will present four passages illustrating different aspects of evaluating as a strategy. Let us start with an example also implying the strategy "yes, but...":

O3, ad vocem: [We agree that]_A the system is [flawed]_E, [we agree that]_A it would like to teach long-term competencies, [we agree that]_A these competencies are [essential]_E, [but]_D the problem is precisely that even if we assume the [best]_E scenario from the proposition side, where we have [excellent]_E teachers who want to, and are competent to, impart knowledge and these skills, they are merely [cogs]_E in a [system of grades, points, and standardized tests]_E.

It also makes use of a rephrase of words uttered by P1: "flawed," "long-term competencies," and "essential competencies" (Konat, Budzyńska, and Saint-Dizier 2016). Finally, it offers a negatively evaluating phrase describing the school system and teachers.

The battle of evaluation phrases continues, but speakers offer a more and more nuanced evaluation of debate points:

P2: [We agree that]_A grades, points, and so on are [harmful]_E to students, [however]_D the process by which they achieve these points, grades, and tests is [crucial]_E in developing the competencies I will be talking about shortly. So now, the first question or the first issue. The first issue here is that the Polish education system is [flawed]_E not only in terms of assessing students but also in terms of adapting to the modern world. Suddenly, a new world has appeared to us, a new tool has suddenly appeared, and this new tool is [incomprehensible]_E not only to students but also to teachers, who cannot properly teach students how to use this tool.

The proposition team claims the Polish school system is flawed, but can teach students new competencies. Chat GPT is incomprehensible and poses a threat as it enables students to solve problems intended to strengthen key competencies mechanically. The opposition team also claims that the Polish school system is flawed, but they see Chat GPT as a tool that enables students to overcome these inherent defects. The debate seeks to weigh the pros and cons of the various

9. P1 implements the strategy „yes, but...” which will be employed also in the next example we are going to analyze. It is a common strategy in competitive debates and its opposite is a quite rare strong assertive refutation of the opponent's words. Bo Seo – a two world debating champion – mentions the latter as “calling bullshit” (Seo 2022, 83). In the showcase debate we analyze it can be found in O4's response to the POI voiced by P2. O4 reacts abruptly: “[And I say that]A [this isn't the case]A. [I don't hear the reason why I should believe what the proposition team claims]A”.

elements of the educational process. This debate's way of motion phrasing means it is a value debate¹⁰, which revolves around evaluating. This fact influences how arguments are created and can affect the use of SMP.

Our following example is a comment offered by O4 as a reply to P2's statement quoted above.

O4, POI: In school, it is literally only about getting grades, not acquiring competencies, [so]_{IM} what you are presenting is [utter nonsense]_{AE}; at no stage does the school give us any competencies.

Here, the phrase "utter nonsense" is both an assuring and evaluating phrase. It states that what P2 says is false and worthless. It is one of the moments when the debate gets heated. Such a strong assertion by O4 needs proper pushback. P2 rises to the occasion, saying:

P2: Let us spit on this shell and descend into the depths. The whole depth is the essence of the existence of the Polish and global education systems. This system exists [so that we]_{IM} obtain the necessary competencies, and the fact that it is wrapped in grades and these grades are [harmful]_E to students is [irrelevant]_E in this debate. The process is what matters.

The first sentence is a quote from "Dziady" – a poetic drama by Adam Mickiewicz, one of the greatest Polish poets. It is a witty, metaphorical response from which P2 moves toward presenting his position and offering a counterclaim about what is and is not relevant to the debate.

Discounting

We have already presented an example of discounting. Still, we would like to show another exemplification: discounting opponents' arguments and their worldview constructed during the debate and highlighting our point of view. Let us recall the beginning of P4's speech:

P4: Ladies and gentlemen, let's start with a few key issues that I will need to delve into during this fourth speech so that we [properly]_E understand it and [properly]_E understand the essence of this debate – first, the image of school, what school is. I do not want to argue now about the Finnish, Polish, or other systems, [but]_D [let's be honest]_A, you have to be [indeed]_A [incredible]_E to create a system that doesn't teach any competencies, as one of your speakers said, [so]_{IM} it certainly is not that [bad]_E. Even if we take an average, in the education system, we always learn certain competencies, asking questions, [because]_{IM} we have to respond to reactions, we do learn to talk to each other, [because]_{IM} there are breaks, [because]_{IM} there are various situations. [So]_{IM} this system [may]_G not be [perfect]_E, [but]_D it is not that [bad]_E, and whether it's the Polish system, it certainly isn't that [bad]_E, [although]_D we all have some criticisms of it. [However]_D, that is different from the subject of this debate.

10. Following the distinction made by Robert Branham (1991, 34–38), debate motions can be of three types: fact (rhetorically: *genus iudiciale*), value (*genus demonstrativum*), and policy (*genus deliberativum*).

According to his role, P4 argues that the Polish school system cannot be as bad as the antagonist claims. He offers several reasons and rebuttals to what the opponents said concerning the scope of the debate. He uses discounting phrases three times: to avoid the possibility of criticism that his team did not consider other school systems, to admit that critical points are undermining his claims, and to set some points of disagreement outside the scope of the debate.

Assuring

O4's speech is the one that makes the most significant use of assuring phrases and... inference markers. Let us look at the beginning of his speech:

O4: [It can't be denied that]_A I'm [a bit]_G nervous about this speech [because]_{IM} the proposition team has [indeed]_A made me feel [a particular]_G fear. They have [indeed]_A shown us a [beautiful]_E adventure. We literally flew to the Moon, [but]_D allow me to bring us back to Earth. [First of all]_G, ladies and gentlemen, let's talk about how we can determine which side is right in this debate, [so]_{IM} I will [somewhat]_G take on the role of the fifth speaker, standing between you, us, and the judges. [That is]_{IM} I will [indeed]_A try to list [some]_G gains and [some]_G losses that will ultimately determine which side is more right, or at least stands slightly higher than the other. [Given that]_{IM}, what points have emerged in this debate? We talked [a bit]_G about Chat GPT and [generally]_G about generative artificial intelligence as a sort of vast library that we can enter, [because]_{IM} we have access to the internet, and we have had it for 30 years, [as the P4 stated]_A. So, what do we have there? We have access to [practically]_G all the uploaded knowledge that Chat GPT, and all other tools have access to. And we ask, is this [bad]_E?

This passage is also full of other persuasive devices, but let us focus on the examples of assuring phrases. The first use emphasizes the ironic confession that the speaker is nervous after hearing his opponents. We also encounter several uses of "indeed," framing what the proposition team did in the debate and his role as the fourth or fifth speaker. Finally, it is used to quote facts provided by the P4.

Inference Markers

The speech continues as follows:

O4: We also discussed school and asked the opposing team what it ultimately is. [We learned that]_A yes, indeed, it will extract some [tedious]_E information from us, it will make us learn from what the curriculum dictates, which assumes that we have to pass an exam, and then what? Well, off you go, Johnny, into the world and – [so to speak]_G – let's see what happens next. And here we are trying to show you that when this student is in this school environment, which has to change, [because]_{IM} reality itself has to change [since]_{IM} widespread access has already occurred, [as explained by O1]_A, then this school will benefit along with this student, specifically this student, [because]_{IM} we will be talking about them. Ladies and gentlemen, [so]_{IM} we have this argument of the knowledge base, where [we did not hear, at least I did not hear from the proposition team, why]_A this knowledge is [false]_E. After all, we are entering this library with access to the entire database. And it is not as if when we ask about the Battle of Grunwald, Chat GPT will suddenly tell us that

it was a battle between the Chinese and the French. The French were [indeed]_A involved in this battle, [but]_D they were on the Teutonic side, by the way.

Here, we can also find an interesting use of an assuring phrase – this time, O4 quotes his teammate to highlight the coherence of the line of argument presented by his team. He also makes a surprising point concerning the involvement of French soldiers during the Battle of Grunwald.

Alongside this, in both fragments, O4 formulates subsequent, direct arguments – employing IM – that reality has to change, that Chat GPT is up-to-date since it is connected to the internet, and that Johnny, who one day will become John, needs to know how to use tools such as Chat GPT. All these points work in favor of his team position. In the previous fragment, O4 also uses IM as part of the strategy, “I will tell you something about the debate from the fifth speaker’s point of view,” to make his assessment seem unbiased.

Analyzing a single debate allowed us to present a kaleidoscope of different ways of using the aforementioned persuasive strategies. Undoubtedly, we have skipped many issues. Still, we managed to show the functioning of these strategies in different debater roles, at various levels of the debate, and with different strengths and persuasive values. This case study complements the macro picture presented in the previous section and exemplifies the methodological value of combining macro (corpus-based, quantitative) and micro (close reading, qualitative) perspectives.

Final Thoughts: Corpus Rhetoric in Action

The main point is that corpus rhetoric methods proved fruitful and valuable in dealing with competitive debates as an object of research. At the macro level, corpus rhetoric methods enabled us to compare three discourses regarding IM and SMP as constituting complementary persuasive strategies, which revealed interesting features of competitive debate. At the micro level, these methods facilitated a close analysis of selected speeches by leveraging stylometric measures and concordances generated through various queries and filters.

From a methodological standpoint, our research encounters two notable limitations. First, the size of the competitive debate corpus needs to be increased for statistical analysis and for drawing broader conclusions about the genre itself. Second, the categories of persuasive strategies are too coarse-grained, affecting the tagset for the training/testing dataset and corpus labeling. We aim to address these primary issues in our future work: building a larger corpus and refining our approach to persuasive strategies. This refinement will involve adopting a more fine-grained understanding of IM and SMP and incorporating categories from the rhetorical canon. We view this study as a crucial step toward achieving this goal, guided by the methodology of corpus studies.

After the necessary refinements, corpus rhetoric can be a research approach that combines the quantitative nature of corpus linguistics with the qualitative characteristics of rhetorical analysis to enhance the understanding of persuasively dense texts. This approach helps us grasp their characteristics as rhetorical genres, aligning with the rhetorical criticism approach of genre description (Foss 2018, 184). It also aids in understanding persuasive strategies in their natural habitat, elucidating the differences and similarities between various discourses, and using specific techniques.

Last but not least, our research remains focused on the educational context. Competitive debates require empirical analysis, methodical diagnosis, and a deeper understanding to achieve their claimed educational goals better. We are confident that corpus rhetoric methods can support judges in debate assessment and feedback formulation, help debaters develop their argumentation and public speaking styles, and assist the audience in understanding the dynamics of the debate and the speakers' fulfillment of their roles. We can accomplish this through the cooperation between the debate and academic communities, which we hope to foster.

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