Using Contemporary Cases to Teach the (Non) Subtleties of Language Evident in Logical Fallacies

Artur Hadaj

Faculty of Philology
University of Tirana, Albania

Christina Standerfer

Clinton School of Public Service
University of Arkansas, USA

 Contact: turhadaj@gmail.com, ccstanderfer@clintonschool.uasys.edu

Abstract

This paper centers on a practical and relevant way to teach English as a second language learners how to avoid logical fallacies. The paper begins with a brief overview of the importance of teaching subtleties of language and a four stage method that can be used to teach not only logical fallacies, but principles of conversational coherence. This method leads students through a series of exercises in which they reimagine and reconstruct contemporary public arguments in ways that produce different and, perhaps, more favorable outcomes. The paper concludes with a case study instructors may use to introduce the concepts of logical fallacies and principles of conversational coherence to students. The case study contains the heated exchange between the editors of the Albanian daily newspaper *Shekulli* and representatives of the U.S. Embassy. In 2011, *Shekulli* published a lengthy editorial without a statement saying that views expressed in the article did not represent the stand of the newspaper. Immediately after this editorial, the U.S. Embassy issued a brief statement accusing this newspaper of using an *ad hominem* argument when they explicitly referred to the ambassador's Asian looks and his short stature. In their statement, the embassy conveyed information regarding money the U.S. government had donated to the Albanian Media Institute for the qualification of Albania journalists. The implication being that the journalists of this newspaper either did not want to

attend the qualification courses organized by the Institute or they could not understand the modern principles of newspaper writing. A few days later, the Dutch Embassy in Tirana severed relations with *Shekulli*, accusing its editors of engaging in slander. Throughout the case, analysis that focuses on logical fallacies evident in the discourse (e.g., *ad hominem* arguments, *non sequiturs*, *argumentum ad baculum*, and glittering generalities) is provided.

Using Contemporary Cases to Teach the (Non)Subtleties of Language Evident in Logical Fallacies

Teaching students to think critically about *any* language, whether that language is their first or second (or third or fourth) is a difficult task. One way to increase students' capacity to think critically about language is through the analysis of examples of logical fallacies. These can often be found in public discourse and debates. Being ignorant of the subtleties of fallacious reasoning keeps learners "in the dark" about the true meaning of many interactions, particularly if those interactions are argumentative in nature. Moreover, it makes them vulnerable to manipulation by those skilled in the art of rhetoric. Knowing how to identify fallacious reasoning increases students' ability to think critically about a language and reconstruct or reimagine interactions in more productive ways.

What follows is one method of reinforcing students' understanding of the subtleties of their first language while building their capacity to think critically and interact appropriately in another language. This method is appropriate for advanced language learners, but can be used with language learners at any level with some modifications. For example, beginning language learners may be introduced to the idea of thinking critically about their first language in preparation for later lessons about the subtleties of another language.

This method proceeds in four stages: 1) introducing types and examples of logical fallacies in students' first language; 2) having students

translate these interactions into the language being taught; 3) teaching the principles of conversational coherence (Grice, 1975); and 4) having students reconstruct the original arguments using principles of conversational coherence. The overall goal of these progressive steps is to develop students' ability to identify logical fallacies in the arguments of others and avoid them in their own arguments.

Introducing Types and Examples of Logical Fallacies in Students' First Language

This method starts with introducing students to types and examples of logical fallacies evident in public interactions or political discourse in their first language. Which fallacies are highlighted will depend on cultural contexts and printed material available. Generally, at least four types of logical fallacies can be found in most political interactions: 1) *ad hominem* arguments, those that attack a person's character rather than a person's arguments; 2) *non sequiturs*, arguments that are really not arguments at all but move the interaction to another topic; in other words, an utterance that "does not follow"; 3) *ad baculum* arguments, which are based almost exclusively in fear and coercion; and 4) "glittering generalities," which are used to invoke powerful emotions through value laden utterances but add little substantially to an argument.

The examples used by the instructor should be current and relevant to learners rather than general examples available in a logic textbook. Current and relevant examples reinforce the usefulness of knowing how to identify logical fallacies, rather than simply introducing students to concepts without any anchoring in their daily language use. Such examples can be found in almost any daily newspaper or online new source that recounts arguments among different public figures about public issues or actions. One such example is offered at the end of this essay.

After students are acquainted with theoretical aspects of logical fallacies[1] and their applications, instructors should ask students to analyze

additional examples that they find on their own. These examples should be contemporary, taken from what students encounter daily in print or electronic media.

Translating Examples into Target Language

Once students are comfortable recognizing logical fallacies in their own language, the next step is to have them translate utterances that contain logical fallacies into the language they are being taught. This requires students to do more than translate the utterances literally, but to think through how a fallacious statement would be constructed in the target language.

Teaching the Principles of Conversational Coherence

While the first two stages of this method focus on identifying and translating logical fallacies, the next two stages focus on how to respond to and avoid such fallacies in everyday conversations. While various *theories* of conversational politeness exist (Lakoff, 1973), Paul Grice's conversational maxims are among the most practical and clearly defined principles that can be used to teach students the subtleties of polite and coherent conversation.

Most learners can grasp Grice's principles of quantity, quality, relation, and manner easily, and these maxims can be used to instruct students on specific ways of responding to or avoiding logical fallacies. The instructor can quickly review the maxims offering specific examples before asking students to engage in simple role-play to reinforce their application to everyday conversation.

Reconstructing the Original arguments Using Principles of Conversational Coherence

The last stage of this method involves leading students through the reconstruction of the fallacious arguments they have identified from various sources into more appropriate and productive utterances. This stage requires the most work for the student and the instructor, as the task is not simply to identify a fallacy or even to translate it but to reconstruct the argument in a logical and coherent manner that leads to a more productive outcome.

Leading students through these four stages of identifying logical fallacies, translating them, and then reconstructing them to be logical and coherent, offers students instruction that surpasses simple, polite conversation to an understanding of how a language can be used in both deceptive and productive ways.

Exemplar Case Study for Identifying Logical Fallacies: *Shekulli* versus the U.S. Embassy

The conflict between *Shekulli* newspaper and the U.S. Embassy can be used to analyse logical fallacies. A summation of this argument is as follows: In an article entitled, "Intellectuals and the Short Ambassador of a Great Country," a Shekulli writer, Yzeiri, makes reference to the ethnic features and short stature of the U.S. Ambassador to Albania, Alexander Arvizu. In a terse and pointed letter to the newspaper, the U.S. Embassy accuses *Shekulli* of irresponsible journalism and report that they will sever all ties with the newspaper. Yzeiri then responds with a lengthy and rambling piece in which he generally praises himself for his various accomplishments and positions, presumably as an argument in defence of the statements made in his previous article. The full text of this conflict can easily found on the internet. Instructors could distribute these materials to students to identify logical fallacies in each article. Below are examples of fallacies found in each of these articles.

Ad hominem **attack of Yzeiri on the U.S. Ambassador to Albania**. The students should analyze Yzeiri's article to find cases in which he deliberately launched personal attacks against the American ambassador. The title itself, "Intellectuals and the Short Ambassador of a Great Country" is an *ad hominem* attack. Moreover, the author makes reference to the ambassador's "distasteful features" in order to manipulate the reaction of the readers. As students explore these *ad hominem* arguments they can be instructed to consider both the potency of such comments as well as their destructive impact on future interactions.

Ad baculum **arguments evident in U.S. Embassy's response letter**. The U.S. Embassy's response states that the article crossed the line and became an inappropriate personal *ad-hominem* attack on Ambassador Arvizu and the United States by resorting to defamation of his ethnicity and race. It further states that the embassy is cancelling all subscriptions to this newspaper, and that *Shekulli* staff will no longer be invited to participate in activities or trainings sponsored by the U.S. Embassy. The embassy will also stop sending press releases to *Shekulli*. While the intent of such *ad baculum* arguments may be to force the newspaper to apologize, students may be instructed to consider how effective such arguments are and the consequence of arguing with threats of little consequence to those being threatened.

Non sequitur **arguments evident in author's response to U.S. Embassy's letter.** Instead of presenting arguments that rebuff the accusations by the embassy that he attacked the ambassador (*ad hominimen*), the author of the original article chooses a curious series of *non* sequitur arguments to defend his original position. Yzeiri praises himself as a well-known journalist and a master and professor of communication science. He says: "I would like to inform you that I am a participant of *Blogue Planétaire, TV5 Monde*. There, I have published several comments, together with 25 writers and journalists from the four

corners of the planet. When I analyzed and commented on the character of Arvizu in the role of the Ambassador of the USA to Tirana," says the journalist, "I did this in the name of many characters I play… a professor… a journalist… and as a collaborator of *TV5 Monde*. In the name of all these characters I play, I gave myself the right to interpret the role that the Ambassador of the USA plays in Albania." This self-praise belongs to the *non sequitur* group, because it is not related to the main accusation the embassy raises against this journalist, using *ad hominem* attacks.[8] Students may be instructed to consider how such illogical arguments are interpreted by readers and what kind of impact they have on the credibility of the writer or speaker.

These are just a few examples of what can be mined from the case of *Shekulli* versus the U.S. Embassy. Other things to consider include the length of the original author's response to the U.S. Embassy's letter including his use of *non sequiturs* and the glittering generalities of the arguments used by the editor-in-chief of Shekulli in defending his staff writer. In regard to the length of the staff writer's response, it is worth noting that the embassy's statement is very brief. It contains only 130 words, whereas Yzeiri's response contains 1510 words. This suggests a violation of Grice's principles that one should construct his or her contribution to an interaction to be as informative as is required, but not more informative than is required.[10]

As to the editor-in-chief's defence of his writer, instead of apologizing for any misunderstanding or trying to smooth the waters between the paper and the embassy, he commits the logical fallacies of glittering generalities and *ad hominem*, asserting that the Ambassador does not deserve a response, but instead owes a response to his readers. He then goes on to accuse the Ambassador of "nervousness." With such declarations, the editor-in-chief declares his allegiance to Yzeiri instead of making a distinction between the free thoughts and opinions of the journalist and the official stance of the newspaper. He is shouting down his opponent with whom he disagrees in order to prevent the argument from being debated.

Conclusion

Understanding a language requires more than simply memorizing vocabulary and knowing proper grammatical structure. To truly know a language, one must be able to analyze it, to understand its subtleties, and to know how to avoid or combat logical fallacies and faulty arguments in one's own discourse as well as the discourse of others. The method presented above offers one way to engage students in the exploration of their first language as a means to delve deeper into the logic and complexities of another language. Through such explorations, students can become better communicators in both languages.

References

http://www.fallacyfiles.org/adconseq.html

Ilir Yzeiri, "Shekulli" "Ambasadori i vogël i një shteti të madh", 9 prill, 2011

Reagimi i Ambasades Amerikane, "Shekulli" 29 prill, 2011.

Ilir Yzeiri, "Shekulli", "Gabohesh zoti Ambasador Arvizu", 06/04/2011

A. Thano, (Shekulli, dt. 09.04.2011)

Enri Xhafo, "Gazeta Shqip"Ambasadori Arvizu dhe liria e shprehjes , datë 2011-04-20

Fjalori I Gjuhëssë Sotme Shqipe, Akademia e Skencave, Shtypshkronja 'Mihal Duri", Tiranë 1984, (faqe 1628).

Le Robert & Signorelli, Dictionaire Italien –Francaise, Francais -Italien Dictionaire, Paris 1999, page 214.

Irving M. Copi & Carl Cohen, Introduction to Logic (Tenth Edition) (Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 165-166.

Grice (1989, 26), George Orwell, Study guide, http://www.enotes.com/1984