



Strategic Maneuvering in Supporting the Feasibility of Political Change

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A pragma-dialectical analysis of Egyptian anti-regime columns

SUMMARY

In their call for a radical political change in Egypt, anti-regime columnists before 2011 aimed at convincing readers that bringing Mubarak's regime down was desirable and feasible. They argued that peaceful massive protests were the only means to force Mubarak and his clique to step down. Alaa Al Aswany, a novelist of international fame and a political activist, was a prominent anti-regime columnist. The factors that made his columns worth reading and popular were shown to be reflecting a problem-solving orientation, providing a consistent explanation of the problems tackled, and making use of attractive stylistic choices. Al Aswany discussed the feasibility of political change in some of his columns published in the Cairene *Al Shorouk* newspaper. Using the extended pragma-dialectical argumentation theory as a theoretical framework, this dissertation set out to scrutinize how Al Aswany maneuvers strategically in supporting two topics related to the feasibility of political change: the possibility of defeating the police by massive protests (the "defeatable police" topic), and the expectation that protests would bring Mubarak's regime down (the "victorious protesters" topic).

I started out with determining the space for strategic maneuvering available to Al Aswany in addressing the two central topics. Al Aswany's strategic maneuvers are restricted by two types of constraints: extrinsic and intrinsic. The first type of constraints are the institutional preconditions of the macro-context of a political column. In order to identify these extrinsic constraints, I provided an argumentative characterization of political columns. The characterization was instrumental not only in determining the space for maneuvering, but also in justifying the analytical reconstruction of the illustrative cases of this dissertation.

The characterization took place in three steps. First, I identified the institutional point of a political column: the formation of a well-informed and critical public opinion that enables readers to act politically in a rational way. To realize this point, columnists

implement both the genres of information-dissemination and (indirect) deliberation. Second, I explained that a political column is an essentially or inherently argumentative activity type. Third, I characterized four focal points in the argumentative practices taking place in political columns: the initial situation of the discussion, the establishment of the procedural and material starting points, the use of argumentative means and criticisms, and the determination of the outcome of the discussion.

Next, I explained the intrinsic constraints on Al Aswany's strategic maneuvering by elaborating the rhetorical exigencies he is confronted with when discussing the topics at issue. Al Aswany, I argued, is confronted with a major rhetorical exigency when convincing his audience that the Egyptian police can be defeated. In view of the objective facts concerning the security apparatuses in Mubarak's era, it was clear that they would not hesitate to use a high degree of repression against any rebellion. In the last decade of Mubarak's era, however, the film image of a policeman had been changed into that of an individual employee with a distinctive psychological nature who is only loosely committed to the regulations of the institution he works for, so that the obstacle to overcome had become less forceful.

Another challenging exigency Al Aswany is confronted with when making his case that Mubarak's regime with its different pillars would be brought down by massive protests is that modern Egyptian history had never witnessed a radical shift of power by means of protests.

Al Aswany, I argued, exploited the new image of the police by rooting his argumentation in defense of the "defeatable police" topic in a psychological premise. In his view, the police could be defeated because police staff would stop practicing repression as a consequence of feeling guilty. Making use of narrative techniques and forms, Al Aswany presents this line of argumentation in two of his columns: "An Unfortunate Incident Befalling a State Security Officer" and "Why was the General Screaming?".

In testing my assumption that the specific narrative perspective adopted in each of these two columns is a strategic choice selected in adaptation to audience demand. I started by explaining how a narrative text can be reconstructed as a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion. I concentrated on solving two relevant problems: the attribution problem and the derivation problem. To solve the attribution problem, I suggested that the macro-context of the communicative activity type in which a narrative text is situated may justify applying the narrator = author equation. By

applying this equation, the gap between the author and the narrator vanishes, and the opinions expressed in the narrative text

can therefore be attributed to the author. The derivation problem was solved by considering the narrative text as consisting of the narrator's discourse and the characters' discourse. The former discourse consists of propositions conveying norms, values, and prejudices of the narrator that can be attributed to the author as propositions aimed to contribute to resolving a difference of opinion. Other propositions contributing to the same goal can be derived from the way in which the characters' actions and speech acts are presented in the text.

Next, I explained that a narrative perspective is selected strategically if it involves verbal actions which can be proved to be a topical choice or a presentational device selected in adaptation to audience demand. In conceptualizing a narrative perspective, I have made use of two different approaches. According to the first approach, a narrative perspective manifests itself in the relationships that link the author to the speech activity (status), to the readers (contact), and to the narrated world (stance). According to the second approach, a narrative perspective is the outcome of the application of different parameters: perception, ideology, field of vision, temporal organization, and linguistic choices. Represented in the narrative text, each of these parameters can reflect the narrator's choices (narratorial perspective) or one of the characters' choices according to how readers conceive the potential innermost of these characters (figural perspective).

In analyzing the case of "An Unfortunate Incident Befalling a State Security Officer", a symbolic story depicting how some officers suffer psychologically from practicing repression, I argued that adopting the narrative perspective was a successful maneuver made by Al Aswany. In this way he invoked his pre-established, prominent status and strengthened his contact with the readers in supporting the controversial stance he adopts.

In the case of "Why was the General Screaming?", Al Aswany fictionalizes the inner feelings of a general Al Aswany saw while he was oppressing a young protester. Given that it is not evident whether the perceptual and ideological perspectives invoked are narratorial or figural, I examined the linguistic choices in the fictionalized segments. I made it clear that in this case the linguistic perspective was much more narratorial than figural. Therefore, I concluded that adopting this linguistic perspective was not a successful strategic maneuver as it did not contribute to enhancing the acceptability of

the contestable standpoint (presented through the perceptual and ideological perspectives).

In the third illustrative case, “A Story for Children and Adults”, Al Aswany presents his vision of the confrontation between Mubarak’s regime and the protesters in an allegorical beast fable. In order to be able to justify an allegorical interpretation of the story at issue, and reconstruct the fable analytically as a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of

opinion regarding the “victorious protesters”, I discussed some speech-act-based insights into fiction. This resulted in a Searlean formulation of the speech act of fiction-making. I explained that the sincerity conditions of this speech act of fiction-making have not been fulfilled happily if fiction-making is performed in the macro-context of a political column. In an attempt to avoid judging Al Aswany as insincere, finding an appropriate allegorical interpretation of the fable is necessary.

The analytic overview of the allegorical beast fable at issue highlighted the conceptual-scenario-based propositions as topical choices coming into being as a consequence of the fictional form that is used. These propositions, I concluded, are aimed for by Al Aswany to present a simplified vision of a complicated reality as incontestable. However, some conceptual scenarios he invoked are unlikely to be acceptable to the audience, in spite of the plausibility of their corresponding fictional events. The use of an allegorical beast fable thus proved to be leading to disguising the fallaciousness of some conceptual-scenario-based argumentative moves.

