



The Soundness of Arguments in The American Presidential Debate Between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess the soundness of arguments uttered by the presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the first American Presidential Debate 2016. This study was a qualitative study using Criterial Approach proposed by Hughes (2014). The data were analyzed based on three criteria namely, acceptability, relevance and adequacy. The results of the study show that Hillary Clinton gave 24 arguments supported by 70 premises. 50 of her premises met the criteria of acceptability, and 59 premises met the criteria of relevance 19 met the criteria of adequacy. Overall 5 of her arguments have all the premises fulfilled all the criteria of soundness. While for Donald Trump, he produced 25 arguments, 21 were acceptable, 20 relevant, and 3 adequate. Out of his 25 arguments, only 1 met all the criteria and can be considered as a sound argument. The findings indicated that Hillary Clinton made stronger and sounder arguments since they were supported by more accurate and logical premises. Trump failed to give sound argument since most of his premises were more focused on attacking his opponent's personality rather than providing solid evidences or convincing reasoning. The results of this study should be beneficial for high school, college students or everyone who are interested in debating as an example of how to create a logically strong and sound argument.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than a millennium, people have been developing way sofcommunication. Speaking, writing, making gestures,sign language doing transactions, debating, making speeches, or sending e-mail are only a few examples of how people do communication every day. Smith (1966) defines human communication as a subtle set of processes through which people interact, control one another and gain understanding.

Communication thus is the thing which human being should do in various contexts, to make others understand, believe, or even do what they want. In other words, communication is a way to influence others. One example in which public speaking is used as a way to influence others is a debate. Freeley & Steinberg (2012) defined "debate" as "the process of inquiry and advocacy, a way of arriving at a reasoned judgment on a proposition". This definition shows that debate can be used to influence others to change their judgment about a certain proposition by providing enough reason to support it. Each side of debaters tries to convince their opponents and also the listeners to believe in their proposition.

To do this they need to employ what so-called critical thinking skill. Critical thinking is a term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze and evaluate arguments and truth claims (Basham et al, 2011). From this definition, it can be concluded that critical thinking is crucial for debaters to have because it will help them to analyze their opponent's argument for weaknesses also help them to form logical support for their proposition.Critical thinking has long become parts of EFL teaching. For example in the form of debate. Ebata (2009) conducted a research on the effectiveness of debate in EFL classes. The result of the research was the use of debate in EFL classes is especially effective in strengthening learners' speaking skills, and the information students

learn from their research plays a vital role in building their reasoning ability. In addition, debating allows them to utilize the related vocabulary they picked up from their reading. Finally, by evaluating their debate, students can learn from each other about their own strengths and weaknesses. This study however did not address the important aspect of critical thinking skills which are important for the students.

Kennedy (2007) in her study tried to integrate debates as part of her instructional strategies in order to promote active participation of the students. The result of her study showed the benefits of using in-class debates as an instructional strategy also include mastery of the content and the development of critical thinking skills, empathy, and oral communication skills. However this study did not investigate the quality of arguments produced by the students.

As an example of how powerful the impact of debate and critical thinking in influencing or even altering people's judgment, we can refer to a presidential debate. Due to its nature which involves a logical and systematic way of thinking, debate, which involves the use of critical thinking, has been in the world of education as a teaching technique.

There have been many pieces of research that have proved that critical thinking is beneficial in education. More specifically critical thinking skill taught through debate. Allen et al (1999) in his research on a debate as a method of language teaching found that student participation in debate promotes the use of critical thinking and boost confidence. Dewar (2011) stated that critical thinking skill developed through the practicing of debate makes the students consider two perspectives, not just their own.

One of the debates which can be used as an example of the application of critical thinking skills is the Presidential Debate, in this case, American Presidential Debate. This is a part of the campaign program in which the

presidential candidate gave their opinions about certain topics, usually the most current controversial issues during the time of election (CPD, 2018).

As an example of how powerful the impact of debate and critical thinking in influencing or even altering people's judgment, we can refer to the presidential debate. Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, (2000) pointed out that debates may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of the "marginally attentive" citizen. McKinney & Warner (2013) in their voter survey found out that after primary debate before 2012 election there are 35.4% voters who change their vote and there are 22.6% of swing voters who made up their mind.

The numbers above show how influential the presidential debate toward the outcome of the election. The voters may change their preference based on the performance of the candidate in the debate. Thus, the candidates need to present convincing arguments to make the voters believe and vote for them and that is when they need critical thinking skills.

The strategy used by candidates to be able to convince voters with their arguments means the candidates should create what so-called sound argument. A sound argument is an argument that has both logical strength and true premises.

Cotrell (2005) defined an argument as using reasons to support a point of view, so that other party may be persuaded to agree. Hughes (2014) stated that an argument is a set of statements which claims that one or several of those, called premise, support another of them called conclusion. A premise is a proposition upon which an argument is based or from which a conclusion is drawn.

The conclusion of an argument is the claim that the argument tries to convey that supported by other statements (premise)

Hughes (2014) stated that a sound argument needs to fulfill three criteria. First it must have acceptable premises. Without

acceptable premises and argument has no support and no reason to believe its claim.

The second is that the premises must be relevant to the conclusion. An argument may have premises that are known to be true, but that nevertheless fails to provide any support for its conclusion. This is what happens when the premises are not relevant to the conclusion. Clearly, if the premises of an argument are to support its conclusion they must supply us with information that is relevant to the question of whether or not the conclusion is true. Precisely what information is relevant to the truth of a particular conclusion may sometimes be difficult to determine, but it is clear that what we are looking for is relevant information.

The logical strength requirement also gives rise to our third criterion, namely, that the premises must be adequate to support the conclusion. A premise may be both true and relevant to the conclusion, but it may nevertheless not be adequate to support the conclusion. Adequacy is usually (but not always) a matter of degree. In most cases, a true, relevant premise can provide the support that ranges from very little to a great deal. It will determine whether an argument is sound or defective.

We are not entitled to pass final judgment on any argument until we have assessed it against each of these criteria. If it meets all three criteria we should conclude that it is a sound argument.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach. The data analyzed in this study were classified into two. The first is primary data which were taken from videos of The First Presidential Debate between downloaded from several sources namely Fox News (2016), The Washington Post (2016), and New York Times (2016). The videos were then transcribed. This transcription was verified by comparing it with several other transcriptions available online (Politico, 2016). Meanwhile,

the secondary source is the references, from which the supporting theories were taken. It includes books, dictionaries, websites, as well as the previous research on a similar topic.

There were several steps taken in this study to carry out the data collection adapted from some sources (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Berg, 1989, and Creswell, 2012). Those

steps namely reading the transcription, identifying the arguments, premise, and conclusion, and classifying them. Not all of the transcription is used. Only statements were analyzed. Imperatives, interrogatives, tags, and others are omitted. After that the identified premises and conclusions were classified in the table as follows

Table 1. Inventory Table

Datum number	Found in Sentence	Premises	Conclusions
1		P1_____	C_____
		P2_____	
2		P1_____	C_____

After the data had been collected and classified the next step is to analyze it. Hughes (2014) suggested several steps analyze the soundness of an argument. The first step is to assess the acceptability of the premise. After assessing the acceptability, the next step is to assess the relevance of the premise. Even if a premise is acceptable or true, but if it is irrelevant to the claim of the conclusion, it will fail to provide any support. Similar to the previous step the assessment of relevance also was conducted the author and co-researchers and the judgment will be decided by majority decision

The last step is to assess the adequacy of premise to support the conclusion of the argument. For this one only premises which are acceptable and relevant since failing one of these two criteria will render the premises inadequate. Even if the two previous criteria have been fulfilled, that does not guarantee a premise adequately support the conclusion.

This assessment is also conducted by a group of peer researchers and the decision is decided through majority decision.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Acceptability is one of the requirement of soundness based on criterial approach so the first step in finding out the soundness of an argument is by assessing the acceptability of its premises.

Those premises were first examined for their acceptability by five different examiners independently. The results of the examination from the examiners were compared. For the premise to be considered acceptable, it has to be accepted by 3 out 5 examiners.

Numbers of arguments produced by Hillary Clinton was 24 arguments with 71 premises. The results of the argument’s assessment are as follows

Table 2. The Result of Hillary Clinton's Argument's Assesment

Argument Number	Premise	Acceptable Premise	Relevant Premise	Adequate Premises
1	7	7	7	2
2	7	3	3	
3	3	3	3	3
4	2	1	2	
5	2	2	0	
6	2	1	1	
7	2	1	2	
8	1	0	1	
9	6	1	6	
10	3	3	3	3
11	2	2	2	2
12	2	2	2	2
13	2	0	2	
14	3	3	2	
15	2	1	1	
16	2	2	2	2
17	1	1	1	1
18	4	4	4	1
19	4	2	4	
20	1	1	1	
21	2	2	2	1
22	1	1	1	
23	3	3	3	2
24	6	4	4	
Total	70	50	59	19

Out of the 70 premises produced by Hillary Clinton, 50 premises are acceptable. 12 out of 24 arguments have all their premises acceptable. 59 out of 70 premises are considered relevant to the conclusions of their arguments. 15 out of 24 arguments have all of their premises relevant to the conclusions. From all 25 arguments only 14 arguments have all their premises acceptable and relevant therefore they can be assessed for adequacy.

The result of Hillary Clinton's premise adequacy assessment show that only few of her argument have all of the premise adequate to support the claim of their conclusions. In total there are 5 argument which all of their premises provide logical support to the conclusion. Thus it can be concluded that out of 24 arguments produced by Hillary Clinton

only 5 that can be considered as sound arguments.

There are several reasons why many of Hillary Clinton's argument failed to meet the criteria of sound argument. The first reason is the unacceptable premise. Many of the unaccepted premises was caused by inaccuracy of what the premise claimed. It can be proven by the existence facts to counter them. The example of the premise which is inaccurate is the 1st premise of Hillary Clinton's argument number 2 where she claimed that Donald Trump's tax plan was the biggest tax cut and would only benefit the wealthy citizens of America. This might be true according to Donald Trump's old tax plan, however by the time of the debate the plan had been revised. The rate of the tax

reduction had been lowered, thus made the premise unacceptable.

Another reason why a premise cannot be accepted is exaggeration. In premise 1 of argument number 4 Hillary Clinton claimed that during her husband's presidency everybody's income went up. Obviously it is an exaggeration and overgeneralization.

The second reason why Hillary Clinton's argument failed to meet the criteria of sound argument is due to the premises of that argument being irrelevant. Hughes (2014, p 130-138) says that an argument whose premises are irrelevant to its conclusion obviously suffers from a major weakness. What we need from our premises, if they are to be relevant to the truth of the conclusion, is that they should make it more likely that the conclusion will be true. We cannot expect that the truth of a premise will always guarantee the truth of the conclusion, but we can demand that it makes the conclusion more likely to be true than it would be if the premise were false. In brief, a premise is relevant when it makes it reasonable to accept the conclusion.

The example of this irrelevance can be seen in argument 2 premise 2 and 3, Hillary Clinton in the conclusion she wanted that ensure that Donald Trump's tax plan was a model of trickle down economy, yet the premises explained about what happened during the financial recession. Both of the premises even if they are acceptable or true, will not guarantee the truth of what the conclusion claimed since what already happened in the past will not make sure the same thing happens in the future. In these two premises Hillary Clinton did what is called as Post Hoc fallacy, a situation where one relies on the past to justify what will happen in the future.

The third reason is the inadequacy of the premise to support the claim of the conclusion. To be called adequate, an argument does not only need to be acceptable and relevant but also could provide enough support for the claim of the conclusion to be justified (Hughes, 2014) Due to its nature, thus adequacy is a matter of degree, the degree of

how strong is the conclusion's justification provided by its premises. An argument may have all of its premises acceptable and relevant it does not guarantee their logical strength to support the claim of the conclusion.

The example of inadequacy can be seen in the first argument by Hillary Clinton claimed that "we have to build an economy that works for everyone, not just those at the top". The argument supported by several premises. The first premise is Hillary Clinton wanted to invest in the people of America. In the previous section it was mentioned that it was acceptable and relevant. However that does not provide the strong support the conclusion needs. Even if we apply the principle of charity in this premise, it still fails to provide strong support for the conclusion since nobody can guarantee whether Hillary Clinton's intention will be realized or not. The second premise supported the truth of the first premise. Unfortunately since it has not been realized, it cannot provide the solid support needed. The third premise stated that the National minimum wage should be raised. This premise, like other premises in this article, does not provide any hard evidence, which means it cannot strongly support the conclusion.

While the rival candidate, Donald Trump, during the debate produced 25 arguments with a total of 59 premises. For the first criterion, acceptability, only 20 out of 59 premises are considered as acceptable.

Similar to Hillary Clinton's, many of Donald Trump's premises were unacceptable because they were inaccurate. For example the second premise of the first argument stated that China is devaluing their currency in order to keep the price of their product competitive. This claim could not be accepted since it could not be easily accepted by common sense and required evidence which was not provided. Counter evidence also exists. According to Jin Xing and Congcong Zhang, Xinhua's chief economic editor, "the practice of keeping currency

artificially low to boost exports had been practiced in late 1990's. However IMF report shows that China's real exchange rate has risen by 39.5 percent since the end of 2004. Last year, The International Monetary Fund declared that China's currency was no longer undervalued." (New York Times, 2016)

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An example of a premises are even blatantly opposing fact. Like the premise where Donald Trump claimed that his father only gave a small loan when he started his business. While there are many proofs that indicate otherwise.

Beside against the fact or not supported by hard evidence, hyperbolic statement also appeared in Donald Trump argument for example in argument number 11 where he claimed that Hillary Clinton has fought ISIS for the rest of her adult life. This statement was highly exaggerated since according to Centre for Analysis of Terrorism' report, ISIS was formed in 2003 after US military aggression in Iraq.

In terms of relevance, 21 out of 59 premises are considered as relevant to the

conclusion. The reason of these irrelevance is the lack of logical connection between the premise and the conclusion. The example of fallacy that caused a premise to be irrelevant can be found in argument 4 where, in the premise, Donald Trump claimed that Mexico applies 16% VAT tax when the country trades with the U.S. to support the conclusion's claim that America needs to renegotiate its trade deal. What was not mentioned in the premise was the nature of the VAT tax itself. VAT tax does not only apply to U.S's product but every product sold in Mexico including the domestic product. Mexico doesn't get any leverage against US from this tax. Therefore this premise is irrelevant. This misinterpretation or probably intentional misleading is called Red Herring Fallacy.

In term of adequacy Donald Trump also perform very poorly. From all 25 arguments only 3 arguments which have all their premises, in this case 6 premises, relevant and acceptable. From those those number 1 premise from 1 argument failed to meet the criteria of adequacy.

The example of premise which is fail to fulfill the criteria of adequacy is premise in argument number 3. This argument claimed that Donald Trump's tax plan will create many jobs like what people have ever seen since Ronald Reagan Era. This conclusion supported by one premise which claimed that part of the Donald Trump tax plan is to cut the tax from 35% to 15% companies, big and small business. Although the premise is acceptable and relevant, but it could not provide support the conclusion. It is true that tax cut can stimulate businesses to flourish, but that does not guarantee that many new jobs, especially numbers of jobs people have never seen since Ronald Reagan.

The detail on the assessment of Donald Trump's arguments' assessment can be seen in the table 3.

Table 3. The Result of Donlad Trump’s Argument’s Assesment

Argument Number	Number of premise	Acceptable Premise	Relevant Premise	Adequate Premises
1	2	1	1	
2	3	1	1	
3	1	1	1	
4	2	0	0	
5	2	1	1	
6	2	0	0	
7	1	0	1	
8	4	2	2	
9	2	0	0	
10	2	1	1	
11	2	1	1	
12	3	0	0	
13	2	1	1	
14	2	0	0	
15	2	0	0	
16	1	0	0	
17	3	2	2	
18	3	2	2	
19	3	3	3	1
20	2	1	1	
21	2	2	2	2
22	3	2	2	
23	2	0	0	
24	1	0	0	
25	1	0	0	
Total	59	20	21	3

The table indicated that there are 3 premises from two different arguments successfully fulfill the criterion of adequacy. However, only 1 of Donald Trumps arguments which met the three criteria.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data above it can be concluded that Hillary Clinton produce more sound arguments compared to Donald Trump. Even though Hillary Clinton produced less arguments compared to Donald Trump, but she has more premises. This indicates that she provide more support for her claims. She give more reasons for people to accept her

arguments. While Donald Trump’s arguments are lack of support.

In this study principal of charity is applied in interpreting the meaning of each statement. There was no access to directly confirm the meaning or intention of the speakers, hence the best way is to interpret the meaning of the statements in the best way possible. For the future researchers who are interested in this field of study should consider to directly clarify the meaning of the statements to speaker to avoid any misinterpretation.

Also for suggestion of further study, researcher may investigate the application of soundness theory in teaching writing

especially argumentative essay or discussion text

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