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Argumentative Use and Strategic Function of the Expression ‘Not for Nothing’

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Abstract

In English discourse one can find cases of the expression ‘not for nothing’ being used in argumentation. The expression can occur both in the argument and in the standpoint. In this chapter we analyse the argumentative and rhetorical aspects of ‘not for nothing’ by regarding this expression as a presentational device for strategic manoeuvring. We investigate under which conditions the proposition containing the expression ‘not for nothing’ functions as a standpoint, an argument or neither of these elements. It is also examined which type of standpoint (descriptive, evaluative or prescriptive) and which types of argument scheme (symptomatic, causal or comparison) the expression typically co-occurs with. In doing so we aim to develop a better understanding of the role and effects of ‘not for nothing’ when used in argumentation. Finally, we show that the strategic potential of ‘not for nothing’ lies in its suggestion that sufficient support has been provided while this support has in fact been left implicit.

Keywords Linguistic construction · Not for nothing · Litotes · Strategic manoeuvring · Stylistic device · Evading the burden of proof · *Ignoratio elenchi* · Disguised presentation

1 Introduction

In English discourse one can find the expression ‘not for nothing’ being used in argumentation, emphasizing that there is a reason for something. This expression can be used both in arguments and standpoints, either in combination with an

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indicator of a standpoint (as in example 1) or with an indicator of an argument (as in example 2), or without such an indicator (as in example 3):

- (1) John is an expert. It is therefore *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter
- (2) John is an expert, since it is *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter
- (3) John is an expert; it is *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter

‘Not for nothing’ is mentioned by Schellens (1985, pp. 102–103) as an expression typically co-occurring with ‘argumentation from explanation’. This type of argument can consist of reverse causal argumentation—reasoning from an effect (expressed in the argument) to the potential cause of that effect (expressed in the standpoint)—or of symptomatic argumentation (argumentation from sign) in which a known event, which is stated in the argument, is presented as presupposing the event stated in the standpoint. As Schellens notes, in many cases it is hard to decide which of the statements connected by ‘not for nothing’ functions as the standpoint and which as the argument. The above examples (1–3) do indeed indicate this problem: when an indicator is absent, as in (3), both statements can be interpreted in both ways. This observation suggests that this expression has a strategic potential.

In this chapter we aim to present an analysis of the argumentative and rhetorical characteristics of ‘not for nothing’ by regarding this expression as a presentational device for strategic manoeuvring. In order to have a clearer picture of the role and effects of ‘not for nothing’ when used in argumentation, we will first investigate, in Sect. 2, under which conditions the proposition containing the expression ‘not for nothing’ functions as a standpoint, as an argument or as neither of these speech acts. Next, in Sect. 3, we will look more closely into the characteristics of the expression ‘not for nothing’ when it is used in an argumentative context. To this end, we will examine which types of standpoint (descriptive, evaluative or prescriptive) the expression typically co-occurs with and whether it is limited to the kinds of argument schemes mentioned by Schellens (reverse causal argumentation, symptomatic argumentation). Finally, in Sect. 4, we will use the argumentative characterization of the expression ‘not for nothing’ given in Sects. 2 and 3 to analyse its strategic potential as a discussion move. We will show that the strategic aspect of this expression lies in its suggestion that sufficient support has been provided while this support has in fact been left implicit.

Our study fits in a line of research within the pragma-dialectical tradition aimed at discovering the strategic aspects of the stylistic design of argumentative discourse (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 1999a, 2002; van Eemeren 2010). The pragma-dialectical concept of strategic manoeuvring is based on the presumption that in their discourse arguers try to reconcile the dialectical goal of being (or at least appearing) reasonable and the rhetorical goal of winning the discussion. Strategic manoeuvring refers to arguers’ attempts to meet both goals in an

optimal way. Although quite some research has been carried out into the ways in which figures of speech, word choice and sentence structure can contribute to strategic manoeuvring (e.g. van Eemeren and Houtlosser 1999a, b, c, 2000a, b; Snoeck Henkemans 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013; Zarefsky 2006; Snoeck Henkemans and Plug 2008; Tseronis 2009; Jansen 2009, 2011; Jansen, Dingemanse and Persoon 2011; Tonnard 2011; Boogaart 2013; van Poppel 2016; van Haaften and van Leeuwen 2018; van Haaften 2019), the study of the strategic aspects of specific linguistic constructions is a recent development (Jansen 2016, 2017).

2 Meaning and Functions of ‘Not for Nothing’ in the Context of Argumentation

2.1 The Semantics of *Not for Nothing*

According to the *Collins Online English Dictionary*, the phrase ‘not for nothing’ has the following meaning:

If you say that it was not for nothing that something happened you are emphasizing that there was a very good reason for it to happen.

(<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/not-for-nothing>)

The same definition is given by the *English Oxford Dictionaries* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nothing>) and *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2002). In these definitions, the double negation in ‘not for nothing’ is seen as an emphasizing device, an example of the figure *litotes*. Other definitions mention meanings that are more literal, in which ‘not for nothing’ means ‘not without reason’ or ‘for a reason’. An example is *The Free Dictionary*, according to which the expression cannot only indicate that there is a good (which they call ‘worthy’) reason but also just that there is a (specific) reason:

For a specific or worthy reason.

(<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/not+for+nothing>)

Idiomation gives the following definition, according to which ‘not for nothing’ can be used not just to refer to the fact that there is a reason for something, but also a cause or a purpose:

The idiom *not for nothing* actually means what’s about to be said or done is not to be said or done in vain; what’s about to be said or done has a cause, a purpose, a reason, or a use.

(<https://idiomation.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/not-for-nothing/>)

An exception to the argumentative use of ‘not for nothing’—indicating that there is a (good) reason for something—occurs in American English, where ‘not for nothing’ is also idiomatically used as a hedging device:

Used as an introductory phrase to indicate that the principle phrase which follows is intended neither to be commanding nor officious, but simply as friendly advice or constructive observation.

(<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=not%20for%20nothing>)

In this idiomatic use, ‘not for nothing’ is often followed by a sentence starting with ‘but’. An example given by the *Urban Dictionary* of this idiomatic use is:

Not for nothing, but you just bought the first iPad less than a year ago.

(<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=not%20for%20nothing>)

Because of our focus on the expression’s argumentative use, we will not take this idiomatic use of the expression into account in our analyses.

2.2 The Pragmatics of *Not for Nothing*

As we have seen, the expression ‘not for nothing’ can be part of the standpoint or of the argument. In example (1) it occurs in the standpoint:

- (1) John is an expert. It is therefore *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter

In that case the sentence containing the expression can be paraphrased as (1a):

- (1a) It is therefore *with good reason* that they have asked him to give advice

In example (2) the expression occurs in the argument, as the indicator ‘since’ makes clear.

- (2) John is an expert, since it is *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter

The sentence containing ‘not for nothing’ can then be paraphrased as (2a):

- (2a) Since *that is apparent from the fact/an indication for this is* that they asked him to give advice

If there are no indicators of argumentation or standpoints present, in principle, the example is ambiguous (cf. Schellens 1985, pp. 102–103). ‘Not for nothing’ taken by itself does then not give enough information to decide which statement functions as the argument or as the standpoint, as in example (3):

- (3) John is an expert; it is *not for nothing* that they have asked him to give advice in this matter

In practice, though, it may become clear from the context which of the two sentences functions as the standpoint and which as the argument. If one of the two

statements is clearly disputable in the context at hand, then that may be a clue that it is the standpoint. And if one of the statements contains information that the reader may be expected to know or accept already, or that is presented as if it is already acceptable to the reader, then that could be a clue that this statement could be the argument (Schellens, *ibidem*, p. 103; Snoeck Henkemans 2001).

Until now, we have looked at the expression ‘not for nothing’ when it occurs in a complete sentence, which may then be either the argument or the standpoint. There is, however, also a different use of the expression, where it is not part of a complete sentence, but occurs on its own, in a coordinate clause, introduced by ‘and’. In this type of construction, ‘not for nothing’ always forms part of the standpoint and the argument always follows the sentence containing ‘not for nothing’. This is for instance the case in example (4):

- (4) Next month the National Health Service turns 70. The institution is greatly loved, **and not for nothing**. The fear of ill-health runs deep in most of us and is ineradicable; but the fear of not being able to afford treatment, which must haunt most of the world’s population, has been abolished in Britain—and for that inestimable benefit we have the NHS to thank.
(<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/how-does-anyone-manage-to-navigate-the-maze-of-our-second-rate-nhs/>)

Here, ‘and not for nothing’ both functions as part of the standpoint (the NHS is justly greatly loved) and serves as an announcement of the argumentation that follows in (the second part of) the next sentence:

Standpoint: It is not for nothing [it is with good reason] that the NHS is greatly loved

Argument: Due to the NHS the fear of not being able to afford treatment has been abolished in Britain

The following overview can now be given of positions in which ‘not for nothing’ may appear in two sentences, one of which could be the standpoint and the other the argument:

1. ‘Not for nothing’ in the first sentence of the two sentences.
 - 1a In a whole sentence: *(It is) not for nothing (that) X. (Since) Y*
 - 1b In a clause added to the first sentence: *X, and not for nothing. (Since) Y.*
2. ‘Not for nothing’ in the second sentence of the two sentences.
 - 2a *X. (Since) (it is) not for nothing (that) Y*
 - 2b *Y. (So) (it is) not for nothing (that) X*

Under what conditions can ‘not for nothing’ in each of these cases be indicative of an argument or a standpoint?

Case 1a

The use of the expression ‘(it is) not for nothing (that) X’ creates the expectation that a reason for X will be given (in the following sentence) or has just been given (in the preceding sentence). If there is no text prior to the phrase ‘It is not for nothing that X’, or no plausible reason has been given before the phrase occurs, the reader will expect that a reason will be given after the first sentence. This expectation comes true in example (5):

- (5) **It’s not for nothing** that sugar is being labelled the new tobacco in health circles. The statistics in relation to childhood obesity in Ireland are frightening. One-in-five Irish children (aged 5 years) are considered overweight or obese. While there are many causes, including more inactive lifestyles today, consuming too many calories in sweet treats and drinks is causing huge problems. (<https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/work/operating-childcare-service/nutrition/the-lowdown-on-sugar/>)

Example (5) can be reconstructed as follows:

Standpoint: **It’s not for nothing** [it is with good reason] that sugar is being labelled the new tobacco in health circles

Argument: Consuming too many calories in sweet treats and drinks is causing huge (health) problems

Subargument: One-in-five Irish children (aged 5 years) are considered overweight or obese

If ‘it is not for nothing that X’ is found in the first sentence, this proposition may thus be taken to be the standpoint.

Case 1b

In case 1b, the coordinate clause containing ‘not for nothing’ always introduces the standpoint. This may again be explained by the fact that the ‘not for nothing’ clause functions as an announcement that a reason will next be given (or at least, that this might be expected) for the statement that precedes the ‘and not for nothing’ phrase, as in example (4).

Cases 2a and 2b

If ‘not for nothing’ appears in the second sentence, there are, as we have seen, two possibilities. If the first utterance can be interpreted as a reason, then the sentence with ‘it is not for nothing’ functions as the standpoint. This is the case in example (6):

- (6) You see? Accidents can happen all too easily. It's not for nothing that we tell you to wear a seatbelt!
Farlex Dictionary of Idioms (2015)

Standpoint: It's **not for nothing** that we tell you to wear a seatbelt.

Argument: Accidents can happen all too easily.

If, on the other hand, given the context it is likely that the first utterance functions as the standpoint, then the sentence containing 'not for nothing' can be seen as a reason in its support. This is the case in example (7), where the context of the example makes clear that the standpoint has to do with the fact that antisemitism is still a real threat to the Jewish community in Britain:

- (7) Britain's Jews are a success story. They are comfortable and well-integrated, confident that these days no area is closed off to them: individual Jews have reached the top in the law, politics, business, entertainment and academe. Yet they are not free of anxiety. Internal worries are bound to fill the in-tray of the new chief rabbi. [...] Jews sense danger from without too. Antisemitism remains real and present; **not for nothing** does every Jewish school in the country have a security guard on the door
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/15/british-jews-success-story>)

Standpoint: Antisemitism remains real and present.

Argument: **Not for nothing** does [an indication for this is that] every Jewish school in the country have [has] a security guard on the door.

3 Combinations of 'Not for Nothing' with Types of Standpoints and Types of Arguments

3.1 Argument Schemes

The cases of argumentation presented with 'not for nothing' that have been discussed so far consist of two sentences, one of them containing the expression. Content-wise, in such argumentation it is always the case that the sentence without the expression provides a reason for the sentence of which the expression is part. This is regardless of whether 'not for nothing' is part of the standpoint or whether it is part of the argument. The examples given in the introduction serve as an illustration. Both in (1) and (2) the fact that John is an expert is the reason that he has been asked to give advice:

- (1) John is an expert. It is therefore *not for nothing* [for this reason¹] that they have asked him to give advice in this matter
- (2) John is an expert, since it is *not for nothing* [for this reason] that they have asked him to give advice in this matter

The two sentences (1) and (2) have a similar content-relation connecting a reason and a consequence of that reason. At the same time they have a different epistemic (i.e. argumentative) relation, because in (2) the reason in the content-relation is expressed in the argument, whereas in (1) it is expressed in the standpoint. As a result, each of these argumentations is based on a different argumentation scheme.

When ‘not for nothing’ is part of the standpoint, the content-relation is identical to the epistemic relation. If a standpoint is introduced by means of ‘not for nothing’, as in (1), the expression indicates that there is a (good) reason for the standpoint being the case. This reason is provided in the argument. In these cases, the argumentation is based on a causal relationship, which is apparent in (1): that John is an expert has motivated other people to ask for his advice. So, in cases where ‘not for nothing’ is part of the standpoint, that which is expressed in the argument can be regarded as having caused that which is expressed in the standpoint, which means that the argument scheme is of the prototypical causal type (i.e. reasoning from cause to effect). Take example (8), where the argument that Amazon practically invented online buying and created a customer-focused online sales empire functions as an explanation for the assertion that it is now one of the largest companies in the world:

- (8) Amazon is one of the largest companies in the world, and **not for nothing**. It practically invented online buying, along the way creating a customer-focused online sales empire
<https://medium.com/@ejwalters/amazon-llp-1b721ed4baad>

This argumentation is based on a line of reasoning saying that innovation and customer-focus can make a company big, which is a causal relation. In cases like (8), the (logical minimum of the) unexpressed premise can be read ‘[argument] causes [standpoint]’:

Standpoint: Amazon is one of the largest companies in the world, and **not for nothing** [for good reason]

Argument: It practically invented online buying, along the way creating a customer-focused online sales empire

¹ We acknowledge that the combination of ‘therefore’ and ‘for this reason’ in example (1) is a tautology. The tautology is less obvious or maybe even absent if ‘for this reason’ is replaced by ‘not without a reason’ or ‘with good reason’, which are also translations of ‘not for nothing’. In Sect. 4 we argue that the tautology makes us think that ‘not for nothing’ has a stronger meaning than merely indicating that a reason can be provided.

Unexpressed

premise: That Amazon practically invented online buying, along the way creating a customer-focused online sales empire resulted in the fact that it is now one of the largest companies in the world

When it is not the standpoint but the argument that contains the expression ‘not for nothing’, the epistemic argument-standpoint order is opposite to the content-related cause-effect order. This is due to the fact that the reason for the ‘not for nothing’ sentence is provided in the standpoint. In these cases, the argumentation is of a symptomatic nature: the argument provides a sign/a symptom/an indication of the acceptability of the standpoint. Take example (9), in which the acceptability of the positive assessment of a café in Scotland is supposed to be indicated by the decision of the writer to choose this place for a golden anniversary:

- (9) Excellent food, wonderful ambiance. **Not for nothing** did we choose it for our golden anniversary
(https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g4833042-d3528610-r358644577-Cafe_Circa_Abernyte-Abernyte_Perth_and_Kinross_Scotland.html)

In this example the choice for a certain place to celebrate ones golden anniversary is presented as an indication of this place being perfectly suitable for such an occasion, i.e. having a wonderful ambiance and great food. The unexpressed premise of arguments like (9) can be read as ‘[argument] indicates [standpoint]’:

Standpoint: The food in this restaurant is excellent and the ambiance is wonderful

Argument: **Not for nothing** did [an indication for this is that] we choose it for our golden anniversary

Unexpressed

premise: That we chose this restaurant for our golden anniversary indicates that it serves excellent food and has a wonderful ambiance

Regardless whether ‘not for nothing’ is expressed in the standpoint or the argument, there is a typical use of this expression in which a typifying name or characterization is connected to something mentioned in the argumentation. Take example (10), where ‘not for nothing’ is part of the standpoint and so is the typifying name, as the standpoint claims that it is not for nothing that Nuno Oliveira named SI the aspirin for horses:

- (10) SI will strengthen the horse’s hindquarters and releases weight from the more fragile front legs, So, it is **not for nothing** that Nuno Oliveira named SI the aspirin for horses!

(<https://www.karoliina-koho.com/blog/internship-in-academic-art-of-riding-and-straightness-training-with-ylvie-fros>)

Standpoint: It is **not for nothing** [it is with good reason] that Nuno Oliveira named SI the aspirin for horses

Argument: SI will strengthen the horse's hindquarters and releases weight from the more fragile front legs

Unexpressed

premise: That SI strengthens the horse's hindquarters and releases weight from the more fragile front legs resulted in the fact that Nuno Oliveira named SI the aspirin for horses

In cases like this a certain name is called an appropriate description of a person, an object, or a certain situation or phenomenon. This name is always provided in the sentence containing 'not for nothing', whereas the typified subject is mentioned in the other sentence being part of the argumentation. This kind of argumentation often goes together with another characteristic, i.e. that the characterization by a name originates from a source other than the speaker, i.e. from some or other authority. In (10) the authority is Nuno Oliveira—a 20th century Portuguese equestrian, horse trainer and dressage instructor, who inspired riders and trainers all over the world.

In this typical, typifying use of 'not for nothing' the expression can also be part of the argument. If that is the case, the typifying name is provided in the argument. An example is (11), where the acceptability of the standpoint that Andy Warhol was a pitiable heap of neuroses is supposed to be apparent from his nickname:

(11) (...) what a pitiable heap of neuroses he [Andy Warhol] was. **Not for nothing** was he called Raggedy Andy

(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2013/06/28/andy-warhols-genius-eccentricities-just-pop/2469423/>)

Standpoint: Andy Warhol was a pitiable heap of neuroses

Argument: **Not for nothing** was [an indication for this is that] he [was] called Raggedy Andy

Unexpressed

premise: That Andy Warhol was called Raggedy Andy indicates that he was a pitiable heap of neuroses

Examples (10) and (11) show that also in this typical use of 'not for nothing', the argumentation is causal when the expression is part of the standpoint and symptomatic when it is part of the argument.

Our analyses in this section in terms of argument schemes partly confirm Schellens' claim about the type of argument schemes co-occurring with the use of 'not for nothing', i.e. symptomatic and reverse causal argumentation. Co-occurrence with

symptomatic argumentation is confirmed, also in Schellens' description of this type of argument, i.e. that in this argumentation the acceptability of the situation in the standpoint is presupposed by the known situation stated in the argument. Indeed, having chosen a certain restaurant for one's anniversary presupposes that it is a good restaurant, and the name Ragged Andy presupposes that Andy has a neurotic character. The symptomatic argumentation that we identified in those cases could also be regarded as reverse causal argumentation, as will be argued below. Where our findings deviate from Schellens, however, is that our analyses show that the argumentation scheme is of the prototypical causal type when 'not for nothing' is part of the standpoint. This deviation may be explained by the fact that Schellens only discusses an example of a case in which 'not for nothing' is part of the argument.

All our findings are in line with Schellens' claim that instances of 'not for nothing' when used in argumentation produce 'argumentation from explanation' (1985, p. 102). Any example in the corpus that we studied can be read as an explanatory argument in which the reason announced by 'not for nothing' functions as an explanation, regardless of whether this reason is stated in the standpoint or in the argument. The fact that John is an expert explains the fact that he has been asked for advice, regardless of whether 'not for nothing' is part of the argument or part of the standpoint. It is therefore not surprising at all that the argumentation scheme changes when the reason (explanation) announced by 'not for nothing' is part of the argument or part of the standpoint. After all, content-wise both situations convey an opposite direction of reasoning (from argument to standpoint or the other way around). Instead of analyzing cases where the reason is stated in the standpoint as symptomatic argumentation, an analysis as reverse causal argumentation would therefore also do in these cases. That a certain restaurant serves excellent food can be regarded as having caused people's decision to celebrate their anniversary in that place. That Warhol was a neurotic person can be regarded as being the cause of his nickname. That these examples typically concern causality in terms of human motivation complies with Schellens' comment that 'with regard to argumentation from effect to cause the terms 'cause' and 'effect' are not necessarily limited to strict physical laws' and that 'many argumentations based on sign can be characterized as interpretations of human behavior' (*ibidem*, our translation).

3.2 Types of Standpoints

The expression 'not for nothing' is always connected with a proposition that is descriptive in nature, i.e. referring to an empirically verifiable situation. The semantic content of such a sentence actually consists of two parts: (1) a descriptive part referring to a state of affairs in reality and (2) a qualification of this content by means of 'not for nothing'. What does this mean for the characterization of the type of standpoint? In some examples 'not for nothing' seems to provide the sentence with an evaluative flavour, i.e. when it can be translated as 'justly' 'or rightly'. For instance, the standpoint in example (5) can be understood to mean that sugar is rightly labeled the new tobacco, and in (4) it can be interpreted as saying that the National Health Service is justly greatly loved. On the other hand, however, such an

evaluative understanding is not always possible, for instance in example (12), where the standpoint also contains the ‘not for nothing’ expression:

- (12) **It’s not for nothing** that Ms. Yates testified as a private citizen. She’d already gone the way of Mr. Comey, dismissed by the Trump administration after 10 thankless days in office.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/opinion/can-we-get-back-to-sally-yates-for-a-minute.html>

In example (12) it would be odd to say that Ms. Yates justly testified as a private citizen. What is meant in this example is that there is an explanation for her status as a private citizen: she was no longer in service. A translation as ‘rightly’ or ‘justly’ is also not possible in example (8), where the standpoint cannot be taken to mean that Amazon is rightly the largest company in the world. Instead, the only interpretation making sense is that it is understandable that this is the case. In these examples, ‘it is not for nothing’ does not have another meaning than that a convincing explanation can be provided for the descriptive proposition.

If ‘not for nothing’ is part of a sentence functioning as an argument, the examples that were discussed so far show that both descriptive and evaluative standpoints are possible. See (11) for an example of a descriptive standpoint and (9) for an example of an evaluative standpoint. Prescriptive standpoints are not possible. Although (13) presents an example of a prescriptive standpoint and an argument containing ‘not for nothing’, a relationship between the standpoint and the ‘not for nothing’ part of the argument is lacking:

- (13) You really should not work on your free day tomorrow! It is **not for nothing** that you have reduced your contract to four days a week

In (13) the prescriptive standpoint advising not to work on a free day only has a relation with the purely descriptive part of the argument, i.e. ‘you have reduced your contract to four days a week’, and not to the ‘not for nothing’ part. After all, the advice not to work on one’s day off could never be the reason for a reduction of a contract. And this is only logical, because a prescriptive statement can never support a descriptive statement. This means that the reason hinted at in the ‘not for nothing part’ is not provided in this little piece of argumentation and has been left implicit. A reason for a reduction of the contract could be, for instance, that the person addressed found that he had too little time for his hobbies or wanted to spend more time with his children. These reasons could function as subarguments supporting the ‘not for nothing’ sentence in the example:

Standpoint: You really should not work on your free day tomorrow!

Argument: It is **not for nothing** that you have reduced your contract to four days a week

Subargument: You wanted to spend more time with your children

4 Strategic Potential of ‘Not for Nothing’

In this section we will discuss some examples of strategic manoeuvring with ‘not for nothing’. All examples exploit the litotes meaning of the expression.² ‘Not for nothing’ contains a double negation and we argue that this marked stylistic design steers to a strong positive interpretation that goes beyond merely pointing out that there is a reason for the sentence containing this expression.

Litotes constructions can get different interpretations varying from a meaning that is weaker than a straightforward positive formulation to one that is stronger. According to van der Wouden (1996, p. 6), a phrase like ‘It is not nothing’ is truth-functionally equivalent to both ‘it is something’ and ‘it is everything’. The pragmatic interpretation of such a litotes is vague and, depending on the context, can be anything between ‘at least something’ and ‘quite a lot’. Similarly, a weak interpretation of ‘not for nothing’ in argumentation would translate to ‘for a reason’ or ‘for some reason’, while the strong interpretation boils down to ‘for a very good reason’. While the rhetorical tradition associates litotes with a strong positive interpretation, linguists opt for the weaker interpretation, although they do acknowledge that litotes can occasionally lead to a strong positive interpretation via understatement (*Ibidem*, p. 5).

In our opinion ‘not for nothing’ forms one of the occasions where litotes gets a strong positive meaning. This interpretation complies with meanings of ‘not for nothing’ mentioned in the eminent dictionaries (see 2.1). That a weak interpretation yields a tautology in cases where a standpoint indicator is also present suggests a stronger interpretation as well (cf. note 1).³ The pragmatic, conventional meaning of ‘not for nothing’ seems to be that the reason referred to is an obvious one and also that it is a sufficient justification of the sentence containing the expression. This makes ‘not for nothing’ a strategic presentational device, because the suggestion of a self-evident and sufficient argumentative relationship can function as a means to withhold an antagonist from raising criticism. This strategic use of ‘not for nothing’ may derail into a fallacy when only weak support is provided or if support is absent at all—some cases of which will be discussed below.

A first opportunity for strategic manoeuvring offered by the use of ‘not for nothing’ is *leaving the standpoint implicit*. In these cases the sentence containing the expression suggests that it supports a certain (sub)standpoint, but readers or hearers have to reconstruct this (sub)standpoint’s content themselves. This provides strategic advantage to the arguer because hearers/readers are responsible for their own interpretation (cf. Zarefsky 2014, p. 208). Example (14) provides an example of such a manoeuvre:

² Van Poppel (2016) explores the rhetorical function of litotes in general and distinguishes two strategic functions of this figure of style: (1) downplaying one’s commitments, (2) preventing an antagonist from raising criticisms. Based on a different line of reasoning, both of these elements also play a role in the analyses that we present in this section.

³ We note that it is much easier to find actual examples of ‘not for nothing’ combined with a standpoint indicator (‘so’, ‘therefore’) than examples containing an argument indicator (‘since’, ‘as’, ‘because’); we conclude this from a google search with combinations of these indicators with ‘not for nothing’.

- (14) When the Reading Eagle of Berks County (PA) published the July 17, 1952 edition of the newspaper where it was reported that Democrats felt certain President Truman could be swayed to change his mind about stepping aside to allow another to run for the office of President, it was said that Mrs. Truman had two motives for returning to Washington: The first was because she missed her husband when he was away from her, and the second was to be on hand if the call should come asking him to run for President again. The article read in part: As is well known, Mrs. Truman has been irrevocably opposed to another four years in what she considers a cruel kind of imprisonment. And **not for nothing** does the President refer to her as “the boss.”
(<https://idiomation.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/not-for-nothing/>)

In (14) a line of reasoning is suggested of which several elements have been left implicit. It is clear that the sentence containing ‘not for nothing’—i.e. ‘And not for nothing does the President refer to her as “the boss”’—has an argumentative function; this is clear, after all, from the expression itself. How this sentence relates to the other sentences in an argumentative way should be established by taking the content of the preceding sentences into account. The main standpoint that is defended but left implicit seems to be that it is unlikely that President Truman could be persuaded to serve yet another term. The main argumentation that the text offers for this standpoint is that (a) Mrs. Truman returned to Washington to be present in case her husband was asked to candidate himself for another term and (b) the knowledge that she considered the White House as a cruel kind of imprisonment, meaning that she was against a positive response to such a request and would try to prevent her husband from giving a positive response to the request. The sentence containing ‘not for nothing’ seems to be somehow related to this argumentation, but can only be connected through an intermediate step that was left implicit in the text, saying that in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Truman it is she who takes all decisions. This intermediate step is an implicit sub-standpoint (1.1c) in this line of argumentation⁴:

- (1) (It is unlikely that Truman could be persuaded to serve as President for another term)
- 1.1a Mrs. Truman returned to Washington to be present in case her husband was asked to candidate himself for another term
- 1.1b She was against a positive response to such a request
- (1.1c) (In this marriage it is Mrs. Truman who takes all decisions)
- (1.1c).1 **Not for nothing** does [an indication for this is that] Truman refer[s] to her as “the boss”

The strategic effect of this manoeuvre—of leaving the (sub)standpoint implicit—is that the arguer transfers responsibility for and commitment to the implicit (sub)standpoint to the addressees, because they have to reconstruct this content themselves. As a result, addressees may be more convinced, since they will reconstruct

⁴ See for the pragma-dialectical notation of complex argumentation Van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans (2016).

implicit elements in a way that makes the argumentation most convincing for them. Moreover, in this case the typical use of ‘not for nothing’ by which a characteristic name is applied to something (see Sect. 3.1) even allows the arguer to deny commitment to the (sub)standpoint, were its content attacked. That is, in these typical cases in which a typifying name is related to another element expressed in the argumentation, it is never the arguer himself who applies the name. In these cases the arguer always refers to or suggests another responsible source: either a specific person (like Truman in 14) or unspecified agents in a passive construction (as in 5 and 10). Were the arguer attacked for the inappropriateness or unfittingness of the name, he could always respond by saying that it is someone else who made up the name.

The above comments do not necessarily imply that the strategic use of ‘not for nothing’ is fallacious. If the context provides enough clues for the reconstruction of the implicit element, as in example (14), and if the implicit element is acceptable to the addressee, then there is just sound manoeuvring. The strategic function lies in the fact that it is questionable whether an addressee really takes the effort of reconstructing an implicit element or just assumes that sufficient argumentation is provided because of the presence of ‘not for nothing’. A fallacy arises when the context does not offer clues for a reconstruction and the addressee is thus (verbally) hindered in his potential critical efforts, or when the reconstructed element is not part of generally shared starting points.

A second opportunity for manoeuvring is *leaving the argument implicit*. In such cases, there is a (sub)standpoint that is presented with ‘not for nothing’ while there is no argument supporting it. Just like cases with an implicit standpoint, cases with an implicit argument invite an addressee to reconstruct the implicit element him/herself. Again, this is strategic because it makes addressees themselves responsible for the content of the reconstructed element. An example of such a manoeuvre can be found in (15):

- (15) “This guy’s a liar,” Donald Trump said at a recent G.O.P. debate, pointing at Cruz. Trump thinks a lot of people are liars, especially politicians (Jeb Bush: “Lying on campaign trail!”) and reporters (“Too bad dopey @megynkelly lies!”). **Not for nothing** has he been called the Human Lie Detector. And **not for nothing** has he been called a big, fat Pinocchio with his pants on fire by the fact-checking teams at the Times, the Washington Post, and Politifact, whose careful reports apparently have little influence on the electorate, because, as a writer for Politico admitted, “Nobody but political fanatics pays much mind to them”.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/21/the-internet-of-us-and-the-end-of-facts>)

In (15) the expression ‘not for nothing’ occurs twice. Both sentences seem to function as standpoints. The first standpoint—‘Not for nothing has Trump been called a Human Lie Detector’—is supported by the preceding sentences, i.e. the observation that Trump thinks that a lot of people are liars and the presentation of three examples in which he calls someone a liar. The information presented in these sentences functions as an explanation of Trump being called a liar. The second standpoint is ‘Not for nothing have the fact-checking teams at the Times, the Washington Post, and Politifact called Trump a big fat Pinocchio with his pants on fire’. The argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

1. **Not for nothing** has [it is with good reason that] Trump [has] been called a Human Lie Detector
 - 1.1 He thinks that a lot of people are liars, especially politicians and reporters
2. **Not for nothing** have [it is with good reason that] the fact-checking teams at the Times, the Washington Post, and Politifact [have] called Trump a big fat Pinocchio with his pants on fire
 - (2.1) (He often lies/He is a big liar)

The expression ‘not for nothing’ indicates that there is a reason for standpoint 2. This reason must be something like the reconstructed support in (2.1), i.e. that Trump lies regularly, but such a reason cannot be found in the text. That a reason is absent, is disguised by the fact that standpoint (2) is part of a sentence that also contains information that does not belong to the standpoint (saying that the message that Trump is a liar does not reach a lot of people). A superficial reader could be misled by this other information and take it as support for the standpoint. Another reason to be misled and thus for not seeing the lack of support is the fact that the second standpoint contains a repetition of ‘not for nothing’. The repetition may suggest that the support provided for the first standpoint also holds for the second one.⁵

Whether this is a case of derailed strategic manoeuvring depends, again, on the difficulties an addressee has in reconstructing the implicit argument and whether this argument relies on a generally accepted starting point. In this case, it seems obvious that an argument is implied saying that Trump is a liar. However, it is not very likely that any antagonist will just accept this argument. In order to be more convincing, examples should have been provided of lies committed by Trump in the past. Because of this omission, this case could be considered as an instantiation of derailed manoeuvring constituting the fallacy of evading the burden of proof. This judgement is based on the consideration that the argumentation is presented as sufficiently supported (by means of ‘not for nothing’) while it is not.

Apart from the ‘blunt’ absence of argumentative support in (15), it can also be the case that an argument has been put forward indeed, but that this argument does not support the ‘not for nothing’ part of the standpoint. An example is (16):

⁵ One could also argue that the fact that taken together these standpoints bring to light an inconsistency in Trump’s behaviour can make a reader even more negative about Trump: this person accuses other people of things he does himself. Therefore one might even reconstruct an implicit main standpoint ‘Trump does not practice what he preaches’, which is supported by both of the formerly identified standpoints.

- (16) **Not for nothing** do many film people love the game [tennis]. “Confession: Before I loved movies, I loved tennis,” TIFF artistic director Cameron Bailey said from the podium of the elegant Roy Thomson Hall before the “Borg/McEnroe” screening. He then showed off a pair of vintage white tennis shoes to go with his sleek dark tux
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-toronto-film-festival-tennis-movies-20170911-story.html>)
1. **Not for nothing** do [it is with good reason that] many film people love the game [tennis]
- 1.1 TIFF artistic director Cameron Bailey said: “Confession: Before I loved movies, I loved tennis”

Artistic director Bailey’s “confession” only supports the assertion *that* there are many film people who love tennis. But the argument does not give a reason *why* film people love tennis, although the use of ‘not for nothing’ does require such an explanation. The argument does therefore only partly support the standpoint, i.e. only the part without ‘not for nothing’. This is strategic because the expression ‘not for nothing’ creates the expectation that a sufficient reason will be provided in the argument. A superficial reader may overlook the fact that the argument does not fully support the standpoint—a fact that is disguised by the combination of ‘not for nothing’ and the fact that an argument is present indeed. We regard this as a case of derailed strategic manoeuvring in the form of irrelevant argumentation (or *ignoratio elenchi*). Apart from that, this specific example also contains an instance of the fallacy of hasty generalization, because one example cannot justify the generalized statement that many film people love tennis.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter we discussed the use of the expression ‘not for nothing’ in an argumentative context. This expression can be used in a sentence functioning as a standpoint and in a sentence functioning as an argument. In both cases ‘not for nothing’ indicates that there is a (very good) reason justifying the descriptive proposition that is combined with this expression. If ‘not for nothing’ is part of the standpoint, this reason should be expressed in the argument, and the argumentation is causal in nature, i.e. reasoning from a cause in the argument to an effect expressed in the standpoint. If ‘not for nothing’ is part of the argument, the reason should be expressed in the standpoint, which means that the argumentation is based on a reverse causal argumentation scheme or on a symptomatic one.

The strategic potential of ‘not for nothing’ particularly relates to the fact that it can be part of an argument but also of a standpoint, and that, as a result, the reason that this expression announces, can accordingly be found in either the standpoint or in the argument. On the one hand, the stylistic phrasing as a litotes with

a double negation has the effect of suggesting that a very good, i.e. sufficient, reason is present. On the other hand, it may very well be the case that such a reason has been left implicit. This may result in cases containing an implicit (sub) standpoint or cases with an implicit (sub)argument. This is particularly strategic in a context where other argumentative moves are present, thus potentially misleading addressees who do not carefully check whether these other moves do indeed provide the announced reason. But even if addressees do reconstruct the reason themselves, this is strategic because they thus take the responsibility for the reconstructed standpoint or argument. The manoeuvring would derail into a fallacy under two conditions: (1) if addressees are verbally hindered in their efforts to reconstruct the implicit element, i.e. if the context does not offer clues for its reconstruction, and (2) if the implicit element does not belong to generally shared starting points.

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