

## Topos and Enthymeme: A Case Study of 2020 American Presidential Debates

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### Abstract:

*As two essential concepts in Western rhetoric, rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme bears close relationship with topos/topic, the “place” for arguments to reside in. In Aristotle, topos is equal to “an element of enthymeme”, the same thing as “a line of enthymematic argument”. Previous explorations have accumulated abundant evidence suggesting the firm connection between these two notions, however, how topos functions as “a line of enthymematic argument” in discourse has long suffered neglect. This inquiry, via analyzing the economic enthymemes in the first 2020 American presidential debates, observes that Donald Trump and Joe Biden built their enthymemes mainly from the generative topos of Definition, Comparison, Relationship, and Circumstance; in addition, the major premise and conclusion in enthymeme are the places where topos appears most frequently. When the proposition containing topos appears in the major premise, it is always implied, while in the conclusion, it can be both implied and expressed. Through a deeper investigation on the argumentative premises drawn from the corresponding topos, different ideologies of Trump and Biden appear. In contrast to Trump’s emphasis on the reinvigoration of American power, the benefit of the rich as well as the investment in market, Biden pays more attention to social equality, welfare, and people’s livelihood. This tentative study, via analyzing the element of enthymeme, will contribute to providing an instruction on how to construct enthymeme from topos and offering*

*a new perspective of enthymematic research in relation to ideology revealing.*

**Keywords:** enthymeme, topos, presidential debates, ideology

## INTRODUCTION

As one of the core concepts in Western rhetoric, rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme has attracted much attention from antiquity to the contemporary time. Aristotle, who systematically explores enthymeme in his monograph, regards it as “the substance of rhetorical persuasion” (*Rhetoric*, 1954, p. 20). Due to its wide application value, scholarship in the past decades has investigated enthymeme from diverse perspectives: the reexamination of its definition or patterns (Walker, 1994; Deng, 2003; Yuan, 2006); the comparison between modern and Aristotelian enthymeme (Walton, 2001; Smith, 2007); the inquiry into relations between enthymeme and *topos* (Wu & Liu, 1994; Dyck, 2002); the application of enthymeme in advertisements (Deng, 2003), presidential debates (Jamieson et al., 1999), or visual argumentation (McHendry, 2017). However, the exploration on the relationship between enthymeme and inventional *topos*, “an element of enthymeme” (Aristotle, 1954, p. 163), has so far received little scholarly attention. Besides, no research has yet clearly clarified how *topos* functions as “an element” conducive to the construction of enthymeme in real contexts, or revealed the underlying ideology conveyed by the employed *topos*. In response to this deemphasis, this investigation attempts to firstly review the relationship between *topos* and enthymeme based on previous studies, and then to explore how *topos* plays a significant role both in generating enthymeme and conveying ideologies in 2020 American presidential debates.

### Topos and Enthymeme

Being two core concepts in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, *topos* and enthymeme, has a firm link between each other, which is detected with no difficulty. In the clear statement of Aristotle, *topos*, which refers to “an element of enthymeme”, is the same as “a line of enthymematic argument” (1954, p. 163). Within this definition, we encounter another notion, enthymeme. In order to better comprehend their

relation, it is of great necessity to re-clarify what are enthymeme and *topos* at first.

○ **Enthymeme**

Enthymeme is derived from the Greek word *enthymema*, whose root *thymos* means “the seat of emotions and desires, or of motive” (Walker, 1994, p. 48). This popular concept has been developed and discussed since the Isocrates era. Due to the limit of space, we commence the inquiry from Aristotle’s famous exploration. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle places high value on enthymeme, since he appreciates it as “the substance of rhetorical persuasion” and “the most effective of the modes of persuasion” (1954, pp. 20-22). However, rather than offering a standard definition of enthymeme, he just regards it as “rhetorical syllogism” (1954, p. 26), and specifies it with two distinct features: incompleteness and probability.

Incompleteness means that “the enthymeme must consist of fewer propositions, fewer often than those which make up the normal syllogism” (ibid, p. 28). As Edward Corbett’s definition makes clear, enthymeme is “an argumentative statement that contains a conclusion and one of the premises, the second premise being implied” (1965, p. 62). The type of propositions being omitted are often those contain common knowledge shared by people. Aristotle further explains this trait with an example: “to show that Dorieus has been victor in a contest for which the prize is a crown, it is enough to say ‘For he has been victor in the Olympic games’, without adding ‘And in the Olympic games the prize is a crown’, a fact which everybody knows” (1954, p. 28).

The feature of probability suggests the “contingent” nature of rhetorical syllogism or enthymeme in contrast to “necessary” feature of standard syllogism. For “there are few facts of the ‘necessary’ type that can form the basis of rhetorical syllogisms. Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities” (ibid, p. 28). Probability often exists in major premise, which is generally true but not necessarily or absolutely true.

○ **Topos**

The Greek word *topos* (Latin counterpart, *locus*) means literally a “place” or “region” for arguments to reside in. As an essential

inventional tool, *topos* has been placed high value by rhetoricians. Aristotle, the pioneer in the realm of *topos* research, devotes his first two books to the ways in which arguments are found and developed. In *Topics*, hundreds of dialectic *topoi* are deemed as principles or laws supporting enthymemes. It is in his *Rhetoric* that he divides rhetorical *topoi* into common (*koinoi*) *topoi*, applicable to all subjects, and special (*idioi*) *topoi*, unique to specific disciplines. These two types are regarded respectively as “formal” and “material” categories by modern scholars (cf. Grimaldi, 1958), who embrace the view that special *topos* offers the material for propositional statements and the common type offers forms of inferences into which the material may be put. Apart from special *topoi* about “good” and “evil”, the “noble” and “base”, “justice” and “injustice”, and those about types of “character”, “emotions”, and “moral qualities” discussed as lines of argument applicable to enthymemes, twenty-eight common *topoi*, such as proof based upon opposite, key-word modification, correlative terms, “a fortiori” (more or less), definition, division, cause to effect and so on (1954, pp. 142-155), are also illustrated in Chapter 23.

The example of the enthymeme constructed according to the first *topos* from the opposite, for example, runs:

“Temperance is beneficial; for licentiousness is hurtful.”

Aristotle does not state the enthymeme with its corresponding opposite *topos* explicitly, but it can be restated in the following way:

“If licentiousness is hurtful, and temperance is the opposite of licentiousness, beneficial is the opposite of hurtful, then Temperance is beneficial.”

Evidently, in the above inference, the *topos* from opposite functions as major premise connecting the propositions of rhetorical syllogism. In this vein, *topoi* provide principles warranting movement from the premise to the conclusion (Leff, 1983b, p. 26). Enthymeme, then, can be defined as a form of inference constructed via one or more *topoi* according to Aristotle.

#### ○ **Relation between Topos and Enthymeme**

The discussion by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* offers an indication that rhetorical *topos* brings the process of inference into focus, which suggests the cozy link between *topos* and the reasoning of enthymeme. But given the vague statements in *Rhetoric*, modern researchers

strive to refine the concepts of classical *topos* and enthymeme in order to distinctly and intelligibly elucidate their tight relations.

Via offering examples of enthymeme and its corresponding *topos*, Slomkows (1997) redefines enthymeme as “arguments which are warranted by the principle expressed in the *topos*”, embracing the view that enthymemes are “instances” of *topoi* (p. 45). In his article *Topos and Enthymeme*, Dyck (2002, p. 109) suggests that *topoi* functions as elements in enthymemes. He claims that a *topos* may be understood as a “binary relation” which on one hand “replaces implication in the syllogism to yield an enthymeme”, on the other hand, is used to construct “if-then” statement or “some unspecified kind of deduction”. Based on this refining, Dyck further offers the typical form of enthymeme into “If P, and T (P, Q), then Q (where T is a suitable *topos*)” (p. 111), and “P implies Q” (p. 111). In addition, Macagno and Walton (2009) reinterpret enthymeme as a defeasible argumentation scheme (modern theory of *topos*), which echoes the trait of probability in Aristotle.

Regarding the explorations on the connection between *topos* and enthymeme in China, meager attention has been attached. Wu and Liu (1994) distinctly elaborate the implied inference mode of twelve common *topoi* from Aristotle’s twenty-eight list. Kang and Fan (2005) consider that arguers must resort to *topos* for enthymematic arguments.

Apart from the theoretical perspective, how *topos* serves as an element for enthymeme construction in discourse has been a focal point among modern researchers. Previous application studies on enthymeme, especially on the major premise, have accumulated abundant evidence suggesting that beliefs or values are necessary elements in enthymeme research. Rossolatos (2014), for example, conducts an inquiry to find the hidden visual premises in multimodal advertising discourse, and then to reveal underlying cultural values embodied in visual enthymematic arguments.

Since the major premise of enthymeme ordinarily uses “some widely held community belief” (Crowley & Hawhee, 2004, p. 141), it is evident that the reasoning of enthymeme “occurs within ideology” (ibid, p. 118). Therefore, in present exploration, the first 2020 American presidential debate will be analyzed to investigate two research questions: First, what types of *topos* have been employed by

Donald Trump and Joe Biden to construct enthymemes? Second, what ideologies are conveyed through these *topoi* adopted in enthymemes?

- **Reasoning with Topos in 2020 American Presidential Debate**

The first televised presidential debate was held on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, consisting of six topics: The Supreme Court, COVID-19, The Economy, Race and Violence in American, Climate, and The Integrity of the Election. With a text of nearly 21908 words (collected from <http://www.debates.org>), the debate regarding the issue of Economy occupies a large section. We thus mainly focus on the arguments concerning American economy constructed by Trump and Biden respectively.

Due to the applicability of common *topos*, we, then, confine this research to investigating how this type of *topos* functions in providing lines of enthymematic arguments. A deep examination of the economic issues in debate reveals that the sources of enthymematic argument mainly derive from four general *topos*, namely Definition, Comparison, Relationship, and Circumstance. Besides, via further analyzing argumentative premises of economic enthymemes, divergent policies and ideologies of Trump and Biden are easily detected. Below are the explorations on the two candidates' enthymematic arguments in terms of the policies of economic recovery and tax in the United States.

- **A Contrastive Analysis of Trump's and Biden's Enthymemes**

Being the third topic discussed after the debates concerning The Supreme Court and COVID-19, the moderator Chris Wallace commenced The Economy issue through a question about the difference between Trump's so-called "V-shaped recovery" and Biden's "K-shape". Due to the outbreak of the pandemic in this year, the economic policies advocated by Trump and Biden assume wide differences, which brings about diverse enthymematic arguments.

- **Enthymemes about Economic Recovery**

Firstly, concerning whether it is reasonable and necessary to open or close the country during COVID-19 emerges distinctly different

arguments coded in the text, accordingly, different *topos*, as shown in the following Table I.

**Table I**  
***Trump’s and Biden’s Enthymematic Arguments about Economic Recovery***

	Policies	Key Arguments	Topos
Trump	Close country during COVID-19	We closed it down because of the China plague.	Relationship (cause and effect)
	Re-open country to fix economy	You’re talking about almost it’s like being in prison; It’s almost like a ghost town.	Comparison (similar)
		And you look at what’s going on with divorce, look at what’s going on with alcoholism and drugs.	Relationship (cause and effect; opposite)
Biden	Shut down the country to protect the safety and health of people	...you have almost half the states in America with a significant increase in COVID deaths and COVID cases...	Circumstance
		They were going to give, his Administration going to give the teachers and school students masks, and then they decided no, couldn’t do that because it’s not a national emergency... They’ve done nothing to help small businesses.	Definition
		He ought to get on the job and take care of the needs of the American people so we can open safely.	Relationship (antecedent and consequence)

• **Trump’s Enthymemes Concerning Economic Recovery**

Policies advocated by Trump, who bears in mind the slogan “Keep America great”, are oriented towards the boom of America. “We built the greatest economy in history”, boasted by Trump who obviously insisted that it was his policy of shutting down during the virus and then re-opening that efficiently protects and quickly revives American economy. The argument accounting for his closing strategy ran in this way “we closed it down because of the China plague”; Trump obviously built an enthymeme conforming to the features of incompleteness and probability as shown in the following:

**Implied MP:** The outbreak will exert a negative impact on global economy.

**Expressed mp:** There is an outbreak in China.

**Implied Con:** The U.S. economy will be negatively affected.

The major premise or the argument was omitted, which is drawn from Relationship (cause and effect) commonly shared by the community but is unnecessarily true. In other words, Trump implicitly conveys his idea that those things or actions that will give rise to adverse impacts should be stopped. Labeling the pandemic as “China plague”, Trump professed his biased thinking that the recession of American economy was ascribed to China’s fault.

Regarding re-opening the country to recover American economy, Trump invariably conformed to his slogan “Keep America Great” and contended that “Our country is coming back incredibly well, setting records as it does it. We don’t need somebody to come in and say, ‘Let’s shut it down.’” He, then, disputed Biden’s claim of shutting down and sung high praise of his opening policy. “He will shut it down. He will destroy the country”, via comparing Biden’s closing strategy, Trump dismissed it as harmfulness and argued that only through re-opening will the economy be booming again. By contrast, the city closed, such as New York, was “almost like a ghost town” and will result in the increasing of divorce, alcoholism and drugs. In these arguments, Trump successfully constructed two enthymemes from the corresponding *topos* from Comparison (similarity) and Relationship (cause and effect, opposite) respectively. On the one hand, by using the figure simile, Trump compared the closed country to a ghost town and prison. Adopting similarity *topos*, his enthymeme can be constructed as:

**Implied MP:** The closed country is almost like a ghost town and prison.

**Implied mp:** America has been still closed.

**Expressed Con:** The closed America is like a ghost town and prison.

In this enthymeme, the similarity *topos* which conveys the deduction that the closed country is likely to be poor and desolate on the grounds that the ghost town used to be busy and wealthy but is now poor and deserted. What Trump evidently wanted to persuade people from this conclusion was that the strategy of shutting down insisted by Biden was unreasonable and will beget slowdown.

On the other hand, the seriousness of divorce, alcoholism and drugs appearing in the closed cities was another persuasive point of Trump. In order to argue that his proposal of re-opening was beneficial to the economy, Trump generated his enthymematic



argument from Relationship (cause/effect or opposite) with an indication that closing country will, to a large degree, bring about the growth of divorce, alcoholism and drugs, then opening country, by contrast, will decrease or mitigate these negative actions. The argument constructed from Relationship *topos*, again re-claimed Trump's opposition to Biden's shutting down.

- **Biden's Enthymemes Concerning Economic Recovery**

Shifting to the policies of Biden who belongs to the Democratic Party advancing the benefits of the individual and small business, the arguments of closing country, accordingly, echoed his political stance. Compared with Trump's appeal for economic recovery, in Biden's point of view, "You can't fix the economy until you fix the COVID crisis." Therefore, he started his debate from the representation of the circumstance American people confronted with, "And the idea that he is insisting that we go forward and open when you have almost half the states in America with a significant increase in COVID deaths and COVID cases." At this time, Biden successfully established his enthymeme from *topos* of Circumstance to emphasize the negative effect caused by opening country:

**Implied MP:** The flow of people will cause an increase in COVID cases and deaths.

**Implied mp:** The opening United States has population flow both at home and abroad.

**Expressed Con:** In America, almost half the states have a significant increase in COVID deaths and COVID cases.

Under such urgent situation, what the government needed to do is to deal with exigent problems, such as the supply of masks and the recovery of small business. However, "his Administration going to give the teachers and school students masks, and then they decided no, couldn't do that because it's not a national emergency", it was clear in Biden's contention that the Administration of Trump neglected such problems demanding prompt solution, for they were not national emergencies in their opinion. In the statements of Biden, his underlying view can be easily detected that rather than restoring economy eagerly, giving teachers and school students masks, helping small businesses, getting on the job, and taking care of the needs of the American people should be defined or treated as national emergencies during COVID-19. Using this argument from Definition

as conclusion, Biden emphasized his concern about the safety and livelihood of people during COVID-19. Then the following arguments built from Relationship (antecedent and consequence) again echoed his worries, which can be reconstructed as: If the jobs are got on and the needs of the American people are taken care of, then we can open our country safely.

▪ **Enthymemes about Tax**

Another issue heatedly discussed under the economic topic was tax. Being the supporters of two opposite parties, Trump and Biden obviously entertained different views towards tax, thus forming varying enthymematic arguments. As presented in the following Table II, key arguments are extracted and concluded with its corresponding *topos*.

**Table II**  
*Trump’s and Biden’s Enthymematic Arguments about Tax*

	Policies	Key Arguments	Topos
Trump	Lower the tax of individual and corporations	When the stock market goes up, that means jobs.	Relationship (cause and effect)
		...you want to terminate my taxes. I'll tell you what, you'll lose. Half of the companies that have poured in here will leave. And plenty of companies that are already here, they'll leave for other places. They will leave and you will have a depression...	Relationship (opposite; cause and effect)
Biden	Improve the tax of the rich and major corporations	The more money you get, the more tax you should pay (summarized from Biden’s arguments)	Comparison (more/less) Relationship (opposite)
		And make sure that we invest in the people who in fact need the help. People out there need help.	Circumstance

• **Trump’s Enthymemes Concerning Tax**

Since the topic has turned to the tax paid by Trump, he argued “I don’t want to pay tax. Before I came here, I was a private developer, I was a private business people. Like every other private person, unless they’re stupid, they go through the laws.” Through these lines, Trump claimed his denial of individual or business tax, for the implied purposes of investing more money in market and stimulating more individual consumption. “When the stock market goes up, that means jobs”, his statements can be clearly restated as “lower or terminate

tax will bring the boom of stock market, thus bring more jobs”. Here Trump again constructed an enthymeme from the *topos* of Relationship (cause and effect):

**Implied MP:** Lower tax will bring the boom of stock market.

**Expressed mp:** When the stock market goes up, that means job.

**Implied Con:** Lower tax will bring more jobs.

When confronted with Biden’s argument of “eliminating the Trump tax cuts”, Trump struck back and responded that if you terminate my taxes, you’ll lose. Through the argument “half of the companies that have poured in here will leave. And plenty of companies that are already here, they’ll leave for other places. They will leave and you will have a depression, the likes of which you’ve never seen”, Trump firmly asserted his view based on Relationship (cause and effect) that without tax cuts or imposing high tax on the business will result in the phenomena of decreasing companies and even worse, economic depression. Besides, via making use of the argument from opposite, Trump reemphasized his view that lower tax will bring more jobs, as more tax or without tax cuts brings economic recession.

#### • **Biden’s Enthymemes Concerning Tax**

Obviously divergent opinions on tax were conveyed by the arguments of Biden. Returning to the difference between the “V-shape” and “K-shape” recovery, Biden answered this question from the perspective of tax inequality, “the difference is millionaires and billionaire like him in the middle of the COVID crisis have done very well. Billionaires have made another \$300 billion because of his profligate tax proposal, and he only focused on the market. But you folks at home, you folks living in Scranton and Claymont and all the small towns and working class towns in America, how well are you doing?” The comparison between the tax paid by the rich and those working class undoubtedly revealed Biden’s objection to Trump’s policies of tax cuts and focusing on the market excessively. On the basis of this comparison and the view of Democratic Party, the arguments of Biden can be further interpreted through Comparison (more or less) *topos*. According to his arguments, we can summarize and restate his enthymematic argument as: The more money you get, the more tax you should pay. Then, this enthymeme can be established as:

**Expressed MP:** The more money you get, the more tax you should pay.

**Implied mp:** The rich and major corporations have a greater ability to pay tax for its higher income.

**Implied Con:** The government should raise the tax standard for the rich and major corporations.

The argument on the other hand can be derived from Relationship (opposite), as people commonly recognize that the rich and major companies are the opposites of the working class and small business respectively. What followed Biden's arguments of improving the tax of the rich and major corporations was his corresponding plans: "I'm going to eliminate the Trump tax cuts" and "I'm going to eliminate a significant number of the taxes. I'm going to make the corporate tax 28%. It shouldn't be 21%", distinctly demonstrating his decisions and presenting the audience a logic expression.

Apart from the advocate of tax equality, rather than exceedingly investing in market, Biden proposed that it is of great necessity to "make sure that we invest in the people who in fact need the help". Again, he observed the present fact or conditions faced by the American, and deemed that it was urgent and essential for the government to take measures to protect people from being infected by the virus and aid in the teachers, the people who have been on the front lines, the small business, the working class who lost their jobs, etc. In view of such situation, Biden progressed his argument from Circumstance, which successfully unfolded his implied idea that the people mentioned above deserved more attention in difficult times, instead of blindly investing in Trump's so-called market.

### **3.2 A Contrastive Analysis of Trump's and Biden's Ideologies**

Obviously, the enthymematic arguments constructed by *topoi* concerning economic recovery and tax in America provided by Trump and Biden embody their different policies and ideologies. As shown in the following Table III, those key arguments summarized in Table I and II reveal the candidates' different political ideas and then deliver their different ideologies.

**Table III**  
***Trump’s and Biden’s Ideologies***

	Enthymematic arguments	Ideologies
Trump	We closed it down because of the <u>China plague</u> .	Racial discrimination
	Lower tax will bring the boom of stock markets	Keep America Great; Reinvigorate the American power; Advocate the benefit of the rich
Biden	Giving teachers and school students masks, and helping small business should be regarded as national emergencies	People’s livelihood and social welfare are of significant importance
	Invest in the people who in fact need the help	
	Improve the tax of the rich and major corporations	Focus on social equality

• **Conclusion**

The relationship between *topos* and enthymeme discussed from the explorations of Aristotle and modern scholarship in the first half of this article evidently manifest that close connection exists between these two notions. For *topos* functions both in generating lines of enthymematic argument and providing strategy warranting the movement from the premise to the conclusion in rhetorical syllogism. Due to the paucity of research on how *topos* can be incorporated into enthymeme in discourse, the inquiry initiated in this study reveals that *topos* plays a crucial part in providing argumentative premise or conclusion for the construction of enthymemes in the first 2020 presidential debate. Via investigating the economic arguments of Trump and Biden, this exploration has three major findings.

Firstly, Trump and Biden mainly make use of four general *topoi*/topics or its subtopos — Definition, Relationship (cause and effect, antecedent and consequence, opposite), Comparison (similarity, more/less), and Circumstance — to establish their enthymemes, among which Definition and Circumstance are only employed by Biden, manifesting his focus on the fact and situation. Second, as both Trump and Biden successfully build their enthymemes conforming to the two features — incompleteness and probability, it is interesting to see that the major premise and conclusion are the places where *topos* appears most frequently. When the proposition containing *topos* appears in the major premise, it is always implied, while in the conclusion, it can be both implied and expressed. In addition, from the above analysis, an enthymeme can be constructed through one or two

*topoi*. For example, with regard to Biden's first enthymeme concerning economic recovery, the major premise is built from the *topos* of Relationship, while the conclusion is from Circumstance. Or his enthymeme concerning tax, the major premise is a Comparison *topos*, while the conclusion is a Relationship proposition. Third, a deep examination of the argumentative premises provided by *topos* uncovers different beliefs or values of Trump and Biden. In contrast to Trump's focus on the reinvigoration of American power, the benefit of the rich, and the investment in market, Biden lays more emphasis on social equality, welfare, and people's livelihood. With six topics in the first presidential debate on top of economy, whether different *topos* is utilized to construct enthymemes in other issues, what part it plays in enthymeme, and what ideologies it conveys are to be tested in future explorations.

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