Analysing opposition–government blame games: argument models and strategic maneuvering

Sten Hansson

To cite this article: Sten Hansson (2017): Analysing opposition–government blame games: argument models and strategic maneuvering, Critical Discourse Studies, DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2017.1405051

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1405051

Published online: 21 Nov 2017.
Analysing opposition–government blame games: argument models and strategic maneuvering

Sten Hansson

Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

ABSTRACT
Modern executive politics is characterised by blame games – offensive and defensive symbolic performances by various individual or collective social actors. In this article, I propose a discursive approach to analysing opposition–government blame games where top politicians try to persuade mass audiences to side with them in disputes over government’s culpability by using carefully crafted written texts. Drawing insights and concepts from the tradition of discourse-historical studies into political communication as well as the recent literature on blame avoidance in government, I analyse conflicting opinion pieces published by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the UK in the wake of the global financial crisis that developed since 2007. I present a basic functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame, reconstruct the competing argumentation schemes that help us interpret public debates over the crisis, and show how blame is attached or deflected using various persuasive discursive devices, such as metaphors, lexical cohesion, and ways of framing and positioning, that underlie particular attacks, justifications, or excuses. In conclusion, I emphasise the importance of looking beyond the formal structure of the arguments to identify the more subtle emotional appeals used in government-related blame games.

1. Introduction

In modern Western democracies, the politicians who are campaigning for power – leaders of opposition parties and members of shadow cabinets – are generally engaged in blaming the incumbent government and its individual officeholders (Weaver, 1986). Opposition’s goal is to erode the credibility of those in power by drawing public attention to stories about how rulers’ bad deeds and bad character has caused some harm, loss, or failure, or would increase the possibility of such negative occurrences. They are usually ‘on attack’ as they attempt to change the status quo and gain power. Accordingly, the officeholders who are in power, including prime ministers and members of their cabinets, are predominantly engaged in blame avoidance. Their goal is to maintain a reasonable level of public trust and credibility by justifying and explaining their (in)actions and
fending off attributions of bad character. They are often ‘on defence’ as they attempt to sustain their power and maintain the status quo.

Such opposition–government blame games may revolve around specific instances of personal transgression, such as an executive officeholder’s abuse of power, financial or sexual misconduct, or her inappropriate speech act. However, blame games could also be understood as dramaturgical performances, staged for particular audiences, where particular actors – blame makers and blame takers – present and defend their strategic definitions of what constitutes ‘a good way of governing’, ‘a good policy’, ‘a policy failure’, or ‘a crisis’. Government blame games often involve much more than mere personal attacks and defences. They have broader political functions. Stories and arguments about blame can be used to ‘challenge or protect an existing social order’, ‘legitimise and empower particular actors as “fixers” of the problem’, and ‘create new political alliances’ (Stone, 2012, p. 224).

There is a growing body of political science literature on blame avoidance in government (Hering, 2008; Hinterleitner, 2017; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Hood, 2002, 2011, 2014; Hood, Jennings, & Copeland, 2016; Howlett, 2012; Leong & Howlett, 2017; Vis, 2016; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2016) and several discourse analysts have focused their studies on blaming or blame-deflecting language use in politics (e.g. Hansson, 2015a, 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Hart, 2016; Whittle & Mueller, 2016; Wodak, 2006, 2015). In this article, I contribute to this stream of scholarship by presenting and illustrating a discourse-analytical device – a basic functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame – that can be used to reconstruct and juxtapose the competing argumentation schemes at the basis of public debates over blame, such as opposition–government blame games. I use this model to analyse opinion pieces published by the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister in the UK in the wake of the global financial crisis that developed since 2007.

2. Background: opposition–government blame game in the UK over the banking crisis

On 14 September 2007, Northern Rock, one of the UK’s largest mortgage lenders, suffered from the biggest run on a British bank in more than a century. Panicking depositors withdraw £1 billion after the BBC revealed that Northern Rock had asked for emergency financial support from the Bank of England. In the UK context, this can be regarded as the ‘materialising’ of the emerging financial crisis, because up until then the reported sub-prime mortgage market problems in the United States had not been perceived as a threat to the UK (Koller & Farrelly, 2010).

Two days after the collapse of Northern Rock, David Cameron, the then opposition leader and the head of the Conservative Party, published an article in Sunday Telegraph, titled ‘These are the Fruits of a Reckless “Prudence”’, in which he argued that the Labour government that had been in power for ten consecutive years by that time, should be blamed for the damage caused by the crisis in the UK (Cameron, 2007). From then on, as the financial crisis evolved in the UK, the members of the Conservative opposition systematically talked and wrote about the crisis as the ‘Labour’s debt crisis’ – and this usage persisted after the Conservatives took over the leadership of the UK government

The global turmoil in the financial industry in the late 2000s engendered a multiplicity of competing blame narratives. For example, the British economist Howard Davies identified 38 different strands of explanations regarding potential culprits in the blame game related to the financial crisis. He observed that the imperative of blame avoidance accounted for the proliferation of various accounts.

It is perhaps not surprising that such a plethora of explanations should have been articulated. We are all influenced by our perceptions, prejudices and interests. Central bankers are not likely to volunteer that weak monetary policy was at the heart of the problem. Politicians are not likely to say that they were guilty of fuelling the fire with ill-considered social interventions. Regulators rarely confess to having been asleep at wheel. Bankers are unlikely to put their hands up and acknowledge that it was their short-term greed and recklessness which was to blame. (Davies, 2010, p. 5)

It is not surprising that David Cameron chose to use the bank run as an opportunity to place blame for the crisis particularly on the Labour government and not on anyone else. Opposition politicians tend to employ widely reported social and economic problems as ‘ammunition’ to attack the government (Thesen, 2013). Consequently, governments’ motivation for focusing on self-preservation becomes particularly salient during the times of economic recessions because incumbent parties face an increased risk of being punished by disgruntled voters at the next elections (Weaver, 1986). In 2008, the financial crisis in the UK became more and more acute. On 8 October 2008, the Labour government announced a major package to support the banking sector, up to an aggregate total of £500 billion in loans and guarantees. Two days later, the Prime Minister and Labour Party leader Gordon Brown published an opinion piece, titled ‘We Must Lead the World to Financial Stability’, in The Times, where he not only justified the bank rescue plan of his government, but also defended it against blame by suggesting that his government has limited capacity to alleviate the financial instability in the long run due to the global nature of the crisis (Brown, 2008). Brown’s defensive stance may have been justified, because the financial crisis started in the United States, the UK was interdependent with the United States in terms of both finance and trade, and the fragility of the UK economy predated the rule of the Labour government (Hay, 2010, 2013; Hay & Wincott, 2012).

Opinion pieces in newspapers can be used by government officeholders as genres of blame avoidance. Using such a newspaper genre enables them to present and develop their persuasive arguments more substantially and independently from an immanent external interference by political opponents, interviewers, or editors (as would be the case if they were presenting their messages, for instance, during the Question Time in the Parliament, via TV interviews or journalistic articles). However, the genre of an opinion piece also has important limitations: The performers of such written discourses cannot use non-textual rhetorical devices like intonation or body language to elicit particular audience effects (unlike in political genres that use sound and images, such as podcasts or posters). Neither can they receive instant audience feedback and use it for their advantage (this could be the case in live public speaking situations, e.g. an orator can enjoy a long applause). Moreover, the audience of these pieces can take their time to read and re-read the article, and pay more attention to the logical appeal and consistency of the
argument. Thus it seems reasonable to focus my analysis on the strategies of argumentation used in such articles.

Below, I attempt to reconstruct Gordon Brown’s defensive argument, published at the peak of the crisis, in more detail, and juxtapose this with an opposing offensive argument presented in an earlier opinion piece by the Leader of the Opposition David Cameron. I seek to identify and interpret the defensive discursive moves used by the Prime Minister in response to blame making of the opposition in the context of escalating economic problems and the falling public support to the government.

3. The argument model of the blame game

The basic goal of the government blame game is to persuade an audience (e.g. the readers of a newspaper) that someone in question, such as a government or a concrete officeholder, either should or should not be blamed. Presenting arguments is one of the possible ways of achieving this. Argumentation can be defined as a linguistic/cognitive action pattern of problem-solving that is characterised by a sequence of speech acts (e.g. expressive, declarative, assertive, commissive, interrogative, directive) that are used to convince somebody of the acceptability of a standpoint by challenging or justifying controversial validity claims about truth and normative rightness, that is, questions of knowledge and questions of what should or should not be done (Reisigl, 2014).

From the argumentation analytic perspective, both blame makers and blame takers may use argumentative moves to manipulate the audience’s perception of a possibly negative event and the perception of agency for a negative event (i.e. what is true), and convince the audience that a particular agent should or should not be blamed (i.e. what is normatively right to do). For example, a blame maker may claim that a particular event (e.g. a bank run) was negative, and that the incumbent government deserves blame, because it did not take any action despite having both an obligation and capacity to prevent this event. On the other hand, an officeholder who avoids blame may claim that there is actually no reason to blame anyone because little or no harm has been done, or that the negative event has been caused unintentionally or by someone else, or that the event was unpredictable.

The basic elements of arguments that underlie such claims can be delineated based on Toulmin’s (2003) functional model for analysing arguments.2 Within his model of argument,

- **claim** is contestable statement that has to be justified,
- **data** are facts, evidence, or reasons given to support a particular claim,
- **warrant** connects particular claims and data; it is often based on values that are assumed to be shared with the listener and is not always expressed explicitly; it can be explicated in the form ‘if x, then y’ or ‘y, because x’;
- **backing** is a statement that is used to give additional support to the warrant,
- **qualifier** is a phrase that may be added to the claim to indicate its strength (e.g. ‘usually’, ‘sometimes’, ‘under these conditions’), and
- **rebuttal** is a counter-argument or exception to the claim.

Each argument must contain at least the first three of these elements, even though sometimes any of these elements may remain unexpressed (Kienpointner, 1996). In arguments
over blame, the claims are typically made about the harmfulness (or more broadly – negativity) of an event, the cause(s) of the event, and the (degree of) blameworthiness or otherwise of an actor, such as a government or a concrete officeholder. Data, accordingly, are evidence presented to support such claims. For example, this may include evidence of whether or not a negative event took place, how much harm was caused, whether or not a causal link exists between the negative event and the blame taker, whether or not the blame taker had an intention to cause the negative event, and whether or not the blame taker had the capacity and obligation to avoid the negative event from occurring. I present a simplified functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame in Figure 1.

Even though this layout of an argument seems simple, the actual arguments used in blame games, either in opinion articles or other genres, may be rather complex and thus difficult to unpack. There are at least two reasons for this.

First, the elements in the argument are often left implicit, as the arguer expects the audience to ‘fill in the gaps’ based on an assumed common ground. For example, a blame maker may say that the government should be blamed (claim), because whenever a policy fails, the government deserves blame (warrant). In this case, the blame maker does not provide any data and expects the audience to be able to infer (or perhaps make up) the evidence that would support the claim in this particular case. To bring another hypothetical example, an officeholder may say in response to an accusation...

---

**Figure 1.** The basic functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame.

- **Data**
  - Evidence that supports the claim of someone’s blameworthiness or otherwise
  - E.g. evidence of:
    - existence or non-existence of a negative event;
    - great or small magnitude of the negative event;
    - existence or non-existence of a causal link between the negative event and the blame taker;
    - intention of the blame taker to cause the negative event;
    - capacity and obligation of the blame taker to avoid the negative event from occurring

- **Claim**
  - Statement that someone in question should or should not be blamed

- **Warrant**
  - A conclusion rule that is used to connect data to the claim
  - E.g. “In principle, if a negative event occurred, X caused it, intended to cause it, and had the capacity and obligation to prevent it from occurring, then X should be blamed”
that she did not intend to cause any harm (data). In this case, the officeholder makes neither the warrant nor the claim explicit. She expects the audience to supply both the conclusion rule (‘if an actor causes harm unintentionally, then she does not deserve blame’) as well as the conclusion (‘therefore this officeholder should not be blamed’). Moreover, arguments may involve allusions, that is, indirect references to presumably shared experiences and understandings that invite the audience to assign a particular meaning to an actor or an event. Hence, analysts may need a lot of non-linguistic contextual knowledge to grasp what kind of common ground with the audience at hand the arguer presumes, and how this knowledge can be exploited for the purposes of persuasion.

The second complicating factor for analysts of arguments over blame is that the claim that someone deserves or does not deserve blame may be supported by a chain of arguments. For example, a blame maker may treat data about the magnitude of a negative act and data about the causal link between the negative event and the government as separate claims that need to be supported first, and construct separate sub-arguments to support each of these (using certain sub-data and sub-warrants). Only after these data have been supported, the blame maker may move on to make the main claim: the government should be blamed for causing the negative event. To put it differently, both blame making and blame avoiding may involve, in the first instance, defending epistemic propositions about what is or is not true, and only thereafter normative propositions about what should or should not be done. When the players in the blame game provide many sub-arguments, the complexity of the argument structure increases accordingly.

Argumentation is always related to a particular topic. Hence, it is necessary for discourse analysts to look beyond general (functional, formal, abstract) aspects of argument and try to discover the topic-related argumentation schemes (Reisigl, 2014). Following the discourse-historical approach to analysing political argumentation (Reisigl, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), I pay particular attention to the use of topic-specific warrants or topoi in blame games. Topoi can be seen as quasi-argumentative shortcuts, content-related conclusion rules that connect argument(s) with the claim, but whose plausibility can be relatively easily questioned (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 74–80; Reisigl, 2014, pp. 77–79). To unpack such condensed arguments, one has to specifically look for the use of (presumably) collectively shared context-specific symbols – something that is already accepted by the target audience. For instance, if a person defending a claim presents a lot of statistical figures (disregarding their actual truth validity) then the warrant may be interpreted as the topos of numbers: sufficient numerical evidence is taken by the particular audience to mean that the claim has been ‘demonstrated’ to be true.

From a normative point of view, certain uses of arguments in political blame games may be considered to be fallacious when these do not meet the pragma-dialectical criteria for rational dispute (Reisigl, 2014; van Eemeren, 2010; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992). Admittedly, it may be very difficult to distinguish between sound and fallacious arguments, because doing so requires considerable topic- and field-related knowledge, for instance, about the intentions, capacities, and obligations of a particular blame taker in particular socio-historical and institutional settings. Certain argumentative moves in blame games could be interpreted as manifestations of strategic maneuvering (van Eemeren, 2010) – attempts by the producers of argumentative discourse to attain their strategic goals by combining sound logical reasoning with the use of various persuasive
presentational devices that are adapted to the demands and emotions of a particular audience. With regard to government, some of the recent argumentation theoretical case studies of strategic maneuvering have investigated the Presidential speeches and debates in the United States (Kienpointner, 2013; Zarefsky, 2008), the Prime Minister’s oral answers given at the British Parliament (Mohammed, 2008), news interviews given by the members of the British government (Andone, 2013), and a press conference given by the Prime Minister of Turkey (Demir, 2016). In many instances, the strategic maneuvers used by the political actors could be seen as falling somewhere in the middle of ‘the sound– fallacious continuum’ (van Eemeren & Snoeck Henkemans, 2017, p. 144) rather than being clearly sound or clearly fallacious.

Evaluation based on pragma-dialectical rules may seem inadequate if players in the blame game regard their interaction primarily as an eristic dialogue, that is,

a combative kind of verbal exchange in which two parties are allowed to bring out their strongest arguments to attack the opponent by any means, and have a kind of protracted verbal battle to see which side can triumph and defeat or even humiliate the other side (Walton, 1998, p. 181; see also Walton, 1992, pp. 123–160).

Arguing for the sake of conflict, instead of resolving a conflict and reaching a consensus with the incumbent, may seem like an essential modus operandi for the opposition. Members of the opposition may regard defeating or humiliating the incumbent in a blame game as a necessary strategic step towards the resignation of an officeholder or the whole government (perhaps via a motion of no confidence following a scandal), or the defeat of the ruling parties at the next elections. In a similar vein, members of the government may not be interested in having a rational debate with the opposition, but rather choose to systematically ignore or cast doubt on opposition’s standpoints, perhaps by claiming that these merely express the incompetence and bad intentions of the members of the opposition. However, not every member of the public – the audience of the blame game – may agree with such an eristic view of politics. And analysts who are committed to a deliberative ideal of democracy may rightfully seek to reveal the ways in which a given political exchange falls short of that ideal they take as a starting point.

In the next sections, I will present the diagrams of the arguments put forward by David Cameron and Gordon Brown in their newspaper articles, and explain what kind of warrants (or topoi) the former uses to attach, and the latter to deflect blame for the financial crisis in the UK.⁴

4. The opposition leader’s argument: the government deserves blame

The opposition leader David Cameron uses a chain of arguments that support the claim that the UK government should be blamed for the ongoing crisis. I will first lay out his central epistemic sub-argument: that the UK economy has become vulnerable to the crisis because of ‘a huge expansion of public and private debt’ over the past decade (Figure 2).

Cameron writes:

56 This Government has presided over a huge expansion of public and private debt

57 without showing awareness of the risks involved.
Though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US, over the past decade the gun has been loaded at home. Under Labour our economic growth has been built on a mountain of debt. And as any family with debts knows, higher debt makes us more vulnerable to the unexpected. In short, the increases in debt in the UK have added a new risk to economic stability.

Here, the relationship between claim and data is causal: a particular negative situation that is argued to exist (a country’s vulnerability to the crisis) is the result of a particular factor (expansion of public and private debt in the country). The warrant is based on analogy, as it is backed up by an assumption that if debt makes a family vulnerable, it also makes a country vulnerable. Cameron suggests that every person who has (had) debt in their family should also understand the risks related to debt on the state level. Debt on a micro-economic (family) level and debt on macro-economic (state) level are presented as essentially similar and easily comparable.

No actual evidence is provided to support the proposition that debt always has the same consequences, either for a family or a country’s economy. The backing – ‘as any

---

**Figure 2.** Cameron’s sub-argument that the UK economy has become vulnerable.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Sub-Claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK has seen “a huge expansion of public and private debt” during the past decade:</td>
<td>Over the past decade, the UK has become vulnerable to the financial crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) The level of personal debt has trebled to £1.3 trillion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) People in the UK owe more than the entire national income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Mortgage payments are at their highest for 15 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Insolvencies have quadrupled and are at record levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Someone goes bust in the UK every seven minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) The government is borrowing £35 billion a year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) The UK government is borrowing more than any other in Europe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Warrant**

Large public and private debt makes a country vulnerable to financial crises

**Backing**

“As any family with debts knows, higher debt makes us more vulnerable to the unexpected”
family with debts knows’ – underscores the writer’s presumption that this simplistic understanding of debt is shared by his audience.

The data that Cameron presents in support of the claim are mostly based on selected statistical evidence. The bulk of this evidence pertains to the increase in private debt (points 1–5 listed under Data in Figure 2); public debt receives somewhat less attention (points 6–7 listed under Data in Figure 2). All of these points are stated as unmodalised, categorical truths. The evidence is selected and presented in such a way that is most likely to evoke a sense of danger. The implicit conclusion rule could be reconstructed as an emotional appeal to fear: for example, ‘if we owe more than we earn then it makes us vulnerable’. The comparison of selected statistical indicators in the UK to those of other countries serves a strategic purpose: It helps Cameron to modulate the audience’s perception of the magnitude of a negative event and advance from a claim of debt-induced vulnerability to an (implied) call to blame and oust the government.

Cameron’s overall argument that blame for the crisis in the UK should be placed on the Labour government is sketched out in Figure 3. Cameron implies that the Labour government deserves blame on the grounds that the Labour government ‘has presided over a huge expansion of public and private debt without showing awareness of the risks involved’ (lines 56–57). The conclusion rule that leads to the attribution of blame to the government could be called the topos of government as a protector and explicated as follows: ‘A government that can, but does not limit a country’s vulnerability to a financial crisis, should be

![Figure 3](image_url). Cameron’s argument that the Labour government deserves blame.
blamed’. The use of this conclusion rule stands on the assumption that the audience shares the view that (a) governments have a particular capacity: they can limit public and private debt if they wish to do so, and (b) governments have a particular obligation: they should always limit (excessive) public and private debt. In other words, Cameron suggests that the government should be regarded as having full control over risk factors related to financial crises and could therefore be legitimately blamed for failing to take steps to anticipate and avoid crises. A comparison with other governments serves as a backing for his warrant: if other governments could borrow less money, then it must have been possible for the UK government too. Importantly, by doing so, Cameron narrows down the scope of the argument: he suggests that the financial turmoil should be understood as the ‘Labour’s debt crisis’ (see Hay, 2013) rather than a broader systemic problem that affects many countries. Moreover, it may be interpreted as an attempt to imply that the introduction of Conservative policies, such as sustained reductions in public spending and cuts in welfare state benefits, is an adequate solution to the crisis in the UK.

Cameron briefly mentions a possible counter-argument or a reservation to his standpoint that the Labour government should be held accountable for the financial crisis in the UK. He writes, ‘Though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US’ and then quickly dismisses this point by stating that ‘over the past decade the gun has been loaded at home.’ It seems that he does so mainly to represent the crisis metaphorically as a gunshot: ‘loading of a gun’ presumes intentional human action, and ‘at home’ stands for the UK, hence the use of this metaphor supports his overall claim of Labour government’s control and intentionality in relation to the crisis. This rebuttal here should be seen as a demonstration of irrelevance rather than an acknowledgement of some of the merits of a different view. Note the modality of this claim: ‘may’ functions as a qualifier that limits its strength, thus actually making the alternative claim – that the Labour government should be blamed for the crisis – seem more plausible.

5. The prime minister’s argument: the government does not deserve blame

Now, I will turn to an analysis of Gordon Brown’s article and show how he tries to avoid blame by arguing that his government has fulfilled its obligation to contain the crisis, but its capacity to solve the crisis in the UK is limited. This involves providing both justifications and excuses. Brown presents the crisis mainly in relation to a global ‘turmoil’ within the banking sector (unlike Cameron who emphasises the increasing public and private debt in the UK). Brown writes:

4 The banking system is fundamental to everything we do.

5 Every family and every business in Britain depends upon it.

6 That is why, when threatened by the global financial turmoil

7 that started in America and has now spread across the world,

8 we in Britain took action to secure our banks and financial system.

The first two sentences of the article (lines 4 and 5) are presented as unmitigated facts, as common knowledge. Brown describes banks as essentially beneficial for the society as a
whole: The first person plural pronoun ‘we’ seems to include ‘every family and every business’ in the country. However, this ‘we’ simultaneously denotes the political leadership of the country: his fellow members of the Labour government who ‘took action’ by deciding to support the banks. To justify his government’s decision, Brown presents it as unquestionably necessary, using warrants that I have called the topos of threat to the banks (‘if banks are in trouble, everybody is’), and the topos of government as a protector (‘if banks are in trouble, the government should help the banks’). These implicit warrants seem to lead to the conclusion that the UK government has fulfilled its obligation to protect people. This in turn seems to imply that the government deserves praise for helping the banks (which is represented as equivalent to protecting people). A possible way of laying out this justificatory argument as a diagram is provided in Figure 4.

However, the bulk of Brown’s article contains arguments that imply that the UK government’s capacity to bring about a recovery from the crisis should not be overestimated (Figure 5). In other words, he argues that he and his government cannot take full responsibility for solving the crisis in the UK – and thus should not be blamed if the ‘turmoil’ continues and has further negative consequences for the people. By doing so, he constructs an understanding of the ongoing financial crisis that is at loggerheads with Cameron’s claims, and opens up the possibilities for explaining the crisis in other terms than ‘Labour’s debt’.

Brown uses the words ‘global’, ‘globe’ and ‘international’ repeatedly throughout his article to sustain the definition of the crisis as universal, complex, and not specific to the UK, thus suggesting that the UK government’s control over crisis management is necessarily limited (e.g. ‘But because this is a global problem, it requires a global solution. Indeed this now moves to a global stage … ’).
The final paragraph of Brown’s article is remarkable for its massive stacking of words and phrases that universalise the crisis, foreground it as ‘global’, and drive home the idea that the UK government can neither be blamed for causing the crisis nor expected to alleviate the crisis without fully orchestrated actions of innumerable external agents:

72 We must now act for the long term with co-ordinated national actions.
73 The resolve and purposefulness of governments and people across the world is being put to the test. But across the old frontiers we must now redouble our efforts internationally. For it is only through the boldest of co-ordinated actions across the globe that we will adequately support families and businesses in this global age.

Brown’s references to international meetings and his call to other governments to ‘lead the world to financial stability’ similarly support the standpoint that overcoming the crisis should not be seen as a matter that is entirely internal to the UK. The conclusion rules in work here could be perhaps called the topoi of the limited capacity of the government, which could be restated as ‘if global threats emerge, then no single government has the full capacity to alleviate these’ and ‘if a government does not have the full capacity to solve a crisis, then it does not deserve blame’.

What Brown presents here could be categorised as a ‘complexity story’ (Stone, 1989). In such a story,
images of complex cause are in some sense analogous to accidental or natural cause. They postulate a kind of innocence, in that no identifiable actor can exert control over the whole system or web of interactions. Without overarching control, there can be no purpose and no responsibility. (Stone, 1989, p. 289)

Another argumentative move of deflecting blame constitutes an excuse: Brown suggests that it was impossible for anyone to foresee the crisis and the particular actions the government had to take. For instance, he writes:

> 24 When I became Prime Minister I did not expect to make the decision, along with
> 25 Alistair Darling, for the Government to offer to take stakes in our high street banks,
> 26 just as nobody could have anticipated the action taken in America.

The shortcut to concluding that the UK government should not be blamed is a kind of *topos of ignorance* (‘If a threat is unforeseeable, then those who failed to foresee it and take precautions should not be blamed’). In this case, ignorance is used as a valuable asset that helps the potential blame taker to deny liability (McGoey, 2012).

To sum up, in Brown’s article the causes and solutions of the crisis are externalised: The crisis came from ‘America’ and the government lacks the capacity to deal with it on its own – the crisis can only be tackled by ‘co-ordinated actions across the globe’ (Figure 6).

6. Analysing debates over blame: argument models and beyond

Looking at the simplified argument diagrams sketched out above, it becomes clear that Cameron and Brown tell their audiences two different stories about the financial crisis. Importantly, the stories involve different understandings of the capacities and actions of the British government.
Cameron internalises the causes of and solutions to the crisis. He dismisses the point about the foreign origins of the problem (‘though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US …’) and presents mainly statistical data about the UK to support the claim that the country has become vulnerable to the financial crisis due to excessive debt. By presuming that every government can and should limit a country’s vulnerability to financial crises by reducing debt during their term, he leads the reader towards the conclusion that the Labour government has failed to fulfil its obligation to protect the people – and hence deserves blame.

Brown, on the other hand, externalises the causes of and solutions to the crisis. He emphasises the proposition that the origins of the crisis are external (‘the global financial turmoil that started in America and has now spread across the world’) and presents data about the government’s actions to contain the external threat. Thereby he supports the implicit conclusion that the UK government has fulfilled its obligation to protect the interests of the country – and hence deserves praise. However, Brown also presents data to modify the expectations of the readers regarding the capacity of the UK government to foresee and solve the crisis. He represents the crisis as a global problem that was impossible for anyone to foresee, and that can only be dealt with at the international level, involving numerous actors. Brown expects the readers to conclude that if his government has not caused the crisis, and if it does not have the full capacity to solve a crisis, it does not deserve blame.

My analysis shows how certain argumentative devices can be used both to generate blame and to deflect blame.

- Even though both politicians deal with complex economic and political issues in their texts, their explicit appeals to presumed common ground are very simple – or even simplistic and hyperbolic – and thus possibly misleading: ‘As any family with debts knows, higher debt makes us more vulnerable to the unexpected’ (Cameron) and ‘The banking system is fundamental to everything we do’ (Brown). Indeed, such strategic complexity reduction is typical in crisis construals by policy makers who seek to influence the course of crisis management (Jessop, 2015).
- Both Cameron and Brown use appeals to fear. Cameron presents evidence of certain dangers that are internal to the UK so he could place blame on the government for causing these, while Brown talks of the external threats, so he could claim credit for fighting against these.
- Both Cameron and Brown present arguments that rely on the conclusion rule that I have called the topos of government as a protector: a supposedly commonsensical understanding that the government has the duty to protect people against (financial) crises. Cameron uses this content-specific warrant to conclude that the government has failed to fulfil its obligation, while Brown uses it to claim that his government is doing a good job.

Cameron generates blame in a relatively straightforward way: he describes a certain harm (UK’s increased vulnerability to financial crisis) and attributes the causal agency for bringing about this harm to a concrete Villain – the Labour government. Brown’s defensive argumentation is somewhat more complex as it involves maneuvering between forthright positive self-presentation (the government doing good work by protecting the banks and
the people) and somewhat self-deprecating foregrounding of various limitations to his knowledge, capacity, and obligation (the harm was unpredictable, his government alone is not able to bring the crisis to an end, the obligation for alleviating the problem is diffused globally).

Presuming that opinion pieces on serious policy issues in non-tabloid newspapers are fundamentally argumentative, I began writing this analysis with an intention to focus on the uses of particular patterns of argument and topic-specific warrants (topoi) for the purposes of placing or deflecting blame. However, as I proceeded with my work, I soon realised that by zooming in on the articles’ *logos* – their logical appeal – I was liable to miss some crucial aspects of their *pathos* – their emotional appeal – that may rise, for example, from the creative uses of metaphors, frames, and cohesive devices for the purpose of strategic maneuvering.

In Cameron’s article, for instance, the overall sense that the government deserves blame for the crisis arises partially from the metaphorical linking of the crisis with a premeditated gunshot (‘over the past decade the gun has been loaded at home’) and the idiomatic use of the word ‘fruit’. The headline of Cameron’s article, ‘These are the Fruits of a Reckless “Prudence”’, is presented in a form of an ambiguous causal claim; there are significant omissions: X has been caused by Y’s reckless ‘prudence’. The use of ‘fruits’ may allude to the idiomatic phrase ‘fruits of one’s labour’, which means the results of one’s work, and thus frame the crisis as a direct result of intentional human action rather than a natural or accidental occurrence. ‘Reckless prudence’ is an oxymoron, juxtaposition of words that seemingly contradict each other, evoking the sense of a problem or a conflict. The use of quotation marks indicates irony, thus foregrounding the idea that there is lack of prudence – a character trait which in the text of the article is attributed to the government. Hence, the readers are expected to fill in the gaps: they are to conclude that the crisis has been caused by the recklessness of the Labour government.

In Brown’s article, the overall sense that the crisis and its causes and solutions are external is elicited not only by his argumentation but also by his peculiar overlexicalisation: the notably repetitive use of words like ‘global’, ‘across the globe’, ‘across the world’, ‘international’, ‘cross-border’. In addition, by focusing solely on the logical appeal of his text, one may overlook Brown’s construction of dramatic frames (Us vs Them; Villain—Victim—Hero; see Hansson, 2015a) that position his government on the side of the British public, suggest that his government is a Hero (‘when threatened … we in Britain took action to secure our banks’), and hence may reduce the readers’ motivation to place blame on his government.

It is also notable how both politicians make normative statements that attribute obligation to certain actors, thereby possibly affecting the readers’ perception of whether the agency for dealing with the crisis is internal or external. Cameron makes such statements specifically about the Labour government, for example, ‘the Government should move quickly to answer the short term questions’ (line 18). Brown, however, targets similar command-like statements externally at various institutions outside of the UK, for instance, ‘every bank in every country must meet capital requirements that ensure confidence’ (line 34) and ‘the Financial Stability Forum and a reformed International Monetary Fund should play their part not just in crisis resolution but also in crisis prevention’ (lines 63–65). Besides providing support to an idea that the locus of blame is either internal or external, the use of normative statements or imperatives could be seen as an indicator of
the relatively greater power of the producer of the utterance. Such confrontational displays of power could perform several functions in government blame games. The members of the opposition may choose to do this to add authority to their blame attacks and present themselves as worthy rivals to the incumbents. The officeholders under attack may produce a lot of normative statements and commands based on the calculation that those who give orders to others are generally not perceived by the observers as blame takers.

7. Concluding remarks

I hope to have demonstrated that reconstructing the competing argumentation schemes can be a helpful step in interpreting public debates over complex issues of blame, such as opposition–government blame games in opinion articles about the causes of and solutions to certain social or economic problems. Doing so helps to explicate and compare the conflicting claims of blame makers and blame takers, as well as the data that they present to support the claims, and the topic-specific conclusion rules (topoi) that they hope would lead the audience to accept a particular conclusion. However, the analysts should also look beyond basic argumentation strategies and seek to understand, first of all, the broader context and specific political interests framing the debate, and second, how blame is attached or deflected using other kinds of persuasive devices, such as metaphors, lexical cohesion, and ways of framing and positioning, that underlie particular attacks, justifications, or excuses.

Notes

1. In the UK, the weekly session of the Prime Minister’s Questions at the House of Commons is a parliamentary institution which has increasingly become a rowdy verbal battle between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014). Broadcast interviews with politicians often involve aggressive questioning by journalists who seek celebrity status through showing adversarial stance towards powerful officeholders (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

2. There are many different tools and procedures that have been developed for diagramming and analysing arguments (see, e.g. Hitchcock & Wagemans, 2011; Rigotti & Morasso, 2010; van Eemeren & Snoek Henkemans, 2017; Walton, Reed, & Macagno, 2008), and probably any of these could be fruitfully employed for the purpose of reconstructing the argumentative features of blaming and blame avoidance in political life. Here, I focus on Toulmin’s model because it has been long adopted in public policy analysis (e.g. Dunn, 1981), but has not been widely applied to government blame games. The simplified Toulmin’s model has been also advanced as a useful analytic device by Kienpointner (1996), and employed by Forchtner (2013) and Reisigl (2014), among others, in discourse-historical studies that inform my current research.

3. Moreover, especially during prolonged arguments that unfold between adversarial parties over longer periods of time, the arguers may repeatedly alter any of the elements in their argument so that these would have a better ‘fit’ with other elements. For example, a blame maker may propose that the government deserves blame, but during the course of the debate realise that the data she can provide allows her to blame only a particular officeholder. So she may choose to revise her claim accordingly, that is, substitute the initial blame taker with a more ‘suitable’ one.

4. Even though the general comparison of the articles by Brown and Cameron is not really at issue in my analysis, it is worth pointing out some similarities in terms of their field of
action, genre, and medium. Both articles serve the function of formation of public attitudes, opinion, and will (for this distinction, see Reisigl & Wodak, 2015). Both articles are relatively lengthy opinion pieces: The length of Cameron’s article is 1062 words, and Brown's 945 words. And both articles were published in generalist, national, non-tabloid newspapers with similarly large readerships: the circulation figures were 644,828 for Sunday Telegraph (in September 2007) and 629,561 for The Times (in October 2008).

5. Notably, references to globalisation were relatively frequent in the rhetoric of the Labour Party even before the onset of the financial crisis. Based on her analysis of a 278,586-word corpus of various text collected from the Labour Party from 1994 to 2007, L’Hôte (2014) concludes that ‘while globalisation is framed as an agent of progress in discourse, its negative aspects are given significant representation in new Labour discourse’, and that these negative aspects ‘are used as a rhetorical threat in order to legitimate the party’s policy choices, domestically as well as internationally’ (p. 208). See also Atkins (2011) for a qualitative study of the justificatory arguments employed by New Labour leaders over the years.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Ruth Wodak for her helpful comments on earlier drafts, and I thank Bob Jessop and Doug Walton for useful suggestions at the outset of this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund and the programme Mobi- litas Pluss [grant number MOBJD4].

Notes on contributor

Sten Hansson is developing new frameworks for analysing government communication, with a particular focus on conflicts, scandals, and blame games. His work has been published in Discourse & Society, the Journal of Pragmatics, the Journal of Language and Politics, Social Semiotics, and the Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics.

References


