# ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Dissociation: Between Rhetorical Success And Dialectical Soundness

1. *Dissociation and strategic maneuvering*

As van Eemeren en Houtlosser (1997) have argued, discussants not only aim at resolving their differences of opinion in a rational fashion, but also in their own favor. To that purpose they carry out all kinds of strategic maneuvers, not the least of which is to represent the state of affairs in such a way that their own position is strengthened.

Zarefsky (1997, 2004) treats a number of techniques a speaker can use to represent matters in a particular way, or, as he calls it, to define the situation. One of the instruments that a speaker can deploy to do so, is the technique that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca term *dissociation,* in which a concept that is considered by the audience as a unitary whole is split up in two new concepts that are placed on opposite positions on a value-scale of appearance *versus* reality. When Maria Montessori's granddaughter defends her grandmother against the criticism that she was vain by replying that her grandmother merely had a love of beautiful clothes, but was not vain (*De Volkskrant* 5-1-1999), with this dissociation between the physical and the mental aspects of vanity, she paints a considerably prettier picture of Maria Montessori than her critics did.

An additional advantage of using this technique is that dissociation often is shaped as a categorical statement like "x is something completely different from y''. In this way, a factual state of affairs is posited that it is hard to question. Former Minister of Transport Jorritsma defended her decision to once again allow a violation of the noise limits for Schiphol Airport, notwithstanding an agreement to end the past policy of tolerance, with the powerful assertion "tolerating is something completely different from anticipating on a change of law which everybody thinks should be put into effect.' (*De Volkskrant* 22-01-1998). Allowing a violation of legal rules (in anticipation of a desirable change of law) here is declared with preemptory firmness to be something completely different from a policy of tolerance.

And, last but not least, a speaker can use dissociation to evade a potential

accusation of inconsistency. Former Minister of Education Ritzen, for example, tried to cover up a contradiction in his position by introducing a dissociation between students taking part in the university administration (which he earlier opposed), and students participating in the university administration (which he later approved). Only in the latter case, he argued, students participating in the university administration were responsible only to the Dean and not to the student population.

Apart from these general effects, dissociation has various rhetorical effects that depend on the place in the dialectical profile in which the technique is used (van Eemeren, Houtlosser en Snoeck Henkemans 2000). For example, speakers who in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion bring forward an opposite standpoint against a standpoint brought forward earlier, can through a dissociation make a concession on an innocuous or minor interpretation of the standpoint they reject, and in that way present their own standpoint with all the more force. This is what Maria Montessori's granddaughter does when she replies to her grandmother's critics with her claim that her grandmother loved beautiful clothes but was not vain. By way of the dissociation, she gives the impression that her opponents are mistaken, and she lends her own standpoint the status of the better, if not the last, word.

In evaluating strategic maneuvers in the context of a critical discussion, the central question is whether these maneuvers can stand the test of reasonableness. Such an assessment can only take place in a clearly and precisely formulated normative framework. One such framework is offered by the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1982, 1992, 2004), against the background of which the concept of strategic maneuvering has been developed. The application of this framework enables the analyst to indicate exactly when and why a strategic maneuver by way of a dissociation transgresses the bounds of reasonableness.

In this paper, I consider various answers to the question when and why strategic maneuvering with dissociation is sound and when it transgresses the bounds of reasonableness. First, I look at how a number of scholars outside Pragma-Dialectics have approached this question, and then I look at how it is answered in Pragma-Dialectics. At the end of this paper, I reflect on the merits of these various answers.

## 2. *Other approaches*

So far, among argumentation scholars, not much attention has been paid to the question of whether and when dissociation is a sound argumentative technique. The only author who has written at some length about this topic is Schiappa (1985, 1993). Schiappa is of the opinion that dissociation is always unsound, because dissociation involves a real definition, in which one of the split-off terms is presented as the true or essential interpretation of the concept that is expressed by the original term. And real definitions are unsound, because they are essentialistic. I agree with Schiappa that dissociation always involves a definition, and also that dissociation always invokes the opposition between appearance and reality. However, I do not agree that the latter necessarily is a consequence of the definition being a real or essentialistic one.

First of all, it is quite possible that the definition that is involved in a dissociation is preferred by the speaker merely for 'methodological' reasons (Crawshay-Williams 1957), without the speaker having the pretense to present a real definition or a description of the essence of the *definiendum*. Only in a definition that the speaker expressly presents as real, such as in 'Real peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice' (pronounced by Harrison Ford in the role of the President of the United States in the movie *Air Force One*), we can be sure that we have to do with an essentialistic definition.

More important is the fact that the opposition between appearance and reality in many cases does not play a role on the level of the definition at all, but rather on the level of the subject matter that is being discussed. On the level of that subject mater, entities are assigned to the categories distinguished in the dissociation, and what is at issue is whether they really belong there or only in appearance. For example, in defending her grandmother against her critics who called her vain, the granddaughter of Maria Montessori categorizes her grandmother as someone who was not really vain, but only had a love of beautiful clothes. Although at the bottom of this categorization lies a particular definition of the term 'vain', limiting the meaning of the term to the mental aspects of this quality, there is no pretense that this is the one and only true definition. What is at issue is that, against the background of this definition, Montessori merely appears to be vain, but cannot be called so in reality.

Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, there certainly are cases in which dissociation involves a real, essentialistic definition. But why the dissociation in these cases should be considered unsound, Schiappa does not plausibly explain. Schiappa contends that definitions are not descriptions of reality, but methodological

constructions, based on a particular theoretical perspective and serving particular aims, and that therefore it is misleading to present a definition with the pretense that one is making an objective claim about how things are. However, this argument meets with various objections.

First of all, by saying definition is a methodological construction, Schiappa himself seems to apply an essentialistic definition of definition and neglects the fact that we merely can speak of different *conceptions of* definition. In the second place, in using the term *misleading*, which presupposes a conscious intention on the part of the speaker, Schiappa employs a psychologizing approach. But psychologizing does not provide a good starting point for the study of argumentation as a verbal activity (van Eemeren en Grootendorst 1982). And finally, through this terminology, Schiappa takes a moral stance: misleading is bad. But just as it is not the province of the argumentation scholar to give a judgment on the truth of assertions (Hamblin 1970), it is not up to him to assume the role of moral arbiter.
More than to the soundness of dissociation, argumentation scholars have given attention to a related concept, the soundness of persuasive definitions. According to Stevenson (1944), who introduced the term, in a persuasive definition, the descriptive meaning of a term is altered, while the emotive meaning is kept unchanged, with the aim of influencing the attitude of the audience. Dissociation often involves a persuasive definition. In Stevenson's original example of a persuasive definition, for instance, the speaker accuses his opponent, who uses 'culture' more or less as a term for literacy, of emphasizing merely the outer shape, the empty shell of culture: 'In the true and full sense of the term, "culture" means *imaginative sensitivity* and *originality*'. Through this persuasive definition, clearly essentialistically phrased, by the way, in which the descriptive meaning of the term culture is altered, while the positive emotional meaning is preserved, a dissociation is introduced between real, inner, and merely apparent, outer, culture.

Logic textbooks, such as Copi & Cohen (1998), warn against persuasive definitions. Allegedly, these definitions are misleading, for they appear to give an objective description of the meaning of the word, while surreptitiously an emotional meaning is smuggled in. Moreover, the listener is not aware that the meaning of the word has been changed. Here, then, just like we saw earlier with dissociation, persuasive definitions are rejected on the basis of their

deceptiveness. Moreover, now a second psychologizing element is introduced, whether the listener is or is not aware of the change in meaning.
Fortunately, there are other voices. Walton (2001, 2005) places the issue in the framework of his theory of the various kinds of dialogues. For him it depends on the type of dialogue in which the persuasive definition occurs, what the criteria are on which the soundness of a persuasive definition must be judged. At first sight, this seems to result in a rather heterogeneous set, applied *ad hoc*, and with the same moralizing and psychologizing stance that we saw others take before. For example, Walton considers a particular persuasive definition in a persuasive dialogue to be quite harmless, because it is clear what the speaker intends. For that same reason, he judges a persuasive definition from a political context in which the audience was not aware of the change of meaning unsound, for being deceptive. But another persuasive definition from a political context, in which there is a similar subtle, covert shift of meaning, he does not reject, this time on the consideration that ambiguity and subtle shifts of meaning are normal in this context. In the end, though, Walton arrives at a clear and simple dialectical position: persuasive definitions must be considered as 'open to critical questioning and to the posing of counter definitions' and as 'having a burden of proof attached'.

The idea that persuasive definitions must be submitted to critical questioning and must be defended has also been proposed by Aberdein (1998). Responding to Burgess-Jackson (1995), Aberdein argues for concentrating on the role that the definition plays in the discussion. More specifically, the opponent should be allowed to have a difference of opinion with the speaker about the definition. Persuasive definitions that are not put up for discussion and for which no arguments or theoretical foundation are given, are unsound. In addition, Aberdein requires the core meaning of the term to be preserved. Although I think that Aberdein's criteria are a big step in the right direction (for reasons that will be become clear presently), still he does not really clarify their basis. Why is it necessary for the definition to be put up for discussion, and why should the core meaning be preserved? Aberdein, too, seems to take a moralizing and psychologizing stance: 'Otherwise, (…) the persuasive definition can only serve to mislead'.

3. *The pragma-dialectical approach*

I will now contrast the approaches treated so far to that of Pragma-Dialectics. In a

pragma-dialectical perspective, the criteria for the evaluation of dissociation are systematically linked to the rules of critical discussion. For the evaluation of dissociation, rule 6, the starting-point rule, in particular is relevant. This is because, through a dissociation, one of the starting points of a critical discussion is changed. Within a concept that up till then in the discussion was considered a unitary whole, a new distinction is introduced, and a definition of a term that up till then in the discussion was accepted and applied is replaced by a new one. So an agreement reached in the opening stage of a critical discussion about the content of a concept and the meaning of a term is altered.

According to the ideal model of critical discussion, when an agreement reached in the opening stage is changed, first a side-discussion must be held about the acceptability of that change, before the main discussion can be continued. In this side-discussion the speaker who uses the dissociation presents a proposal to the antagonist for the change of the agreement at issue. If the antagonist does not right away accept this proposal, the protagonist must withdraw it or defend it.*[i]* The dissociation can be maintained in the main discussion only if the side-discussion results in the antagonist accepting the conceptual and definitional change inherent in the dissociation. If the antagonist does not accept this change, and the protagonist nevertheless uses the dissociation in the main discussion as if the changed concept and definition belong to the mutually accepted starting points of the discussion, the protagonist commits a violation of rule 6 in the main discussion: a party may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point.*[ii]* If the protagonist, however, puts the change up for discussion and the antagonist accepts it, the protagonist may use the dissociation without violating rule 6.

The two kinds of conditions for the soundness of dissociation mentioned here, can, following the distinction that van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2002) made between procedural and material starting-points, be referred to respectively as procedural and material conditions. If the protagonist puts up the change for discussion, the procedural condition has been fulfilled; if the antagonist accepts the change, the material condition has been fulfilled. In a dialectically sound dissociation, both kinds of conditions have been satisfied.

The procedural condition can be satisfied in two ways: the protagonist can bring forward as a standpoint his proposal for changing the starting-points, and he can give argumentation for that change. If the proposal for change has not been brought forward as a standpoint, adducing an argument for it will make it into a standpoint yet. The protagonist brings forward his proposal for changing the

starting-points as a standpoint by way of a recognizable performance of the speech act through which this change is introduced. By recognizably introducing a new conceptual distinction or a new terminological definition, the speaker makes the acceptability of his speech act into an issue. The performance of these speech acts is recognizable if they are performed explicitly, through the use of a performative formula, but also if they are performed implicitly, or even indirectly, the recognizability of these speech acts, even if they are performed implicitly and indirectly, being taken care of by the rules and conventions for the performance of speech acts.

However, in dissociation the speech acts of definition and distinction often are not performed as such, but presupposed. This happens, for example, when the dissociation merely involves classifying an entity in one of two dissociated categories, the existence of which is presupposed. I already mentioned an instance of this in the dissociation that Maria Montessori's granddaughter applies: she presupposes the distinction between people who are vain and people who love beautiful clothes, and groups her grandmother with the latter category. If the change in starting-points is not brought forward as a standpoint, but is presupposed, and there are no arguments given for it, the distinction or definition is not put up for discussion. In that case the dissociation is procedurally unsound.

The material condition is satisfied if the antagonist accepts the proposed change in starting-points that is put up for discussion. Although discussants in principle are completely free in drawing up a list of mutually accepted propositions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004), some general observations can be made about the criteria on which the antagonist may judge the acceptability of the distinction or definition inherent in the dissociation. These criteria are connected to the general and specific goals that are typical of these speech acts. Definition and distinction are language declaratives that have as a general purpose to clarify linguistic usage and concept formation and to solve demarcation problems (Viskil 1994).**[iii]** Specific to the language declaratives inherent in dissociation, moreover, is the goal to resolve a contradiction.

To start with the latter: through a dissociation a speaker can resolve a contradiction, because, within a notion that was thus far regarded as a unified whole, he makes a distinction between term I and term II, and by virtue of this dissociation he can, without contradicting himself, maintain that a proposition containing term I or deduced from a proposition containing term I is tenable, while a proposition containing term II or deduced from a proposition containing

term II, is not. Given this specific goal, it is of crucial importance that the antagonist is indeed of the opinion that a distinction between term I and term II is valid. If the antagonist is of the opinion that the distinction between the two concepts is merely verbal or that the meaning of the two terms in actual fact comes down to the same thing, the contradiction cannot be resolved by the dissociation. This is one of the grounds, then, on which an antagonist may deem the change in starting-points brought about by a dissociation not acceptable. In spite of his adjuration that "It really is not a matter of just semantics", Former Minister of Education Ritzen, for example, could not convince members of Parliament of the validity of the distinction between students taking part in the university administration and students participating in the university administration: they accused him of merely trying to save face.

Also the general purposes of the language declaratives making a distinction and introducing a definition inherent in the dissociation must be achieved: these speech acts must contribute to linguistic and conceptual clarification and to the solution of demarcation problems. That means that they also should have some utility beyond the goal of solving a particular contradiction in the specific discussion at hand; in other words, the definition and the distinction should not be used merely *ad hoc*. The appropriateness with regard to this general purpose can serve as a second criterion for the antagonist in judging the acceptability of the proposed change in starting-points. For instance, an antagonist might prefer not to go along with the defense that was put up for the main sponsor of the Dutch skating team, an insurance company that congratulated the skaters in an advertisement on their victory, even though during the Olympic games sponsors are not allowed to use their sponsorship in their ads. This defense consisted of making a dissociation between real sponsors, who have lended support for an extended period, like the insurance company that stood under attack, and opportunist sponsors, the implication being that only the latter should be prohibited from using their sponsorship in their advertising. In this dissociation, the meaning of the word "sponsor" is limited to a person or organization that lends financial support *during an extended period*. It is conceivable that the business world might consider this limitation, the consequence of which is that a person or organization lending financial support for a short period in time may not be called a sponsor, rather impracticable.

4. *Discussion*

The pragma-dialectical approach sketched here has considerable advantages over the ones I treated earlier. In the first place, in Pragma-Dialectics, contrary to the other approaches, the criteria are systematically theoretically founded. They are derived from their functionality in the light of solving a difference of opinion, which in pragma-dialectics is considered as the primary aim of argumentative discourse. The change in starting points intrinsic to dissociation must be put up for discussion and be accepted, not because otherwise the dissociation would be deceitful or misleading, but because it is impossible to resolve the main difference of opinion if the starting-points for the discussion are not shared.

In the second place, as an important consequence of the first point, the argumentation theorist no longer is condemned to take upon himself the role of moral arbiter. The only thing that counts is whether the way in which a discussion is conducted contributes to the rational resolution of a difference of opinion or prevents or hinders the achievement of that goal. The analyst merely checks whether the dissociation does or does not violate the procedural rules for rational resolution. In the case of dissociation, an argumentative technique that brings about a change in the starting-points of the discussion, the main rule involved is rule 6.

Finally, the pragma-dialectical approach has the advantage that the acceptability of the proposal for a change in starting-points no longer is something that the argumentation theorist needs to judge. The theorist does not need to worry about whether a definition is good or a distinction tenable. That judgment is left to the participants themselves, who can start a discussion about that. The theorist can, however, help them conduct this discussion by proposing criteria that the discussants can use in their considerations.

What, then becomes of the essentialistic definitions that Schiappa and others warn against? A violation of rule 6 as set forth in this paper, unfortunately, is not the only thing that can go amiss with a dissociation. In the side-discussion about the proposed change in starting-points, everything that can go wrong in a discussion can go wrong; all the rules for critical discussion can be violated. Dissociation by means of a definition that is clearly presented as essentialistic is a case in point: with such a formulation, the protagonist immunizes his proposal against criticism. That comes down to a violation of rule 2, the obligation-to-defend rule, in the side-discussion about the acceptability of the proposed definition.

Strategic maneuvering travels between the poles of rhetorical effectiveness and dialectical reasonableness. Dissociation *par excellence* is a technique that can be

used in strategic maneuvering. The rhetorical gains of that technique I have sketched at the beginning of this paper. What about its dialectical reasonableness? As long as the dissociation is put up for discussion and, if not accepted at first hand, is conclusively defended, there is no problem. Then dissociation can contribute to creating clarity about standpoints, to generating shared starting-points for attacking and defending arguments, and to ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the discussion are optimally precise.

NOTES

**[i]** See van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Snoeck Henkemans (2005) for the dialectical profile of the opening stage of a critical discussion.

**[ii]** Grootendorst (1999), as well, considers the case of the 'fallacy of incorrect dissociation' analyzed by him as a violation of rule 6.

**[iii]** The term language declarative is introduced by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984).

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