ISSA Proceedings 2014 – Self-Argumentative Words: The Case Of Nature And Natural

Abstract: The words nature and natural operate in a specific way while used in an argumentation. Observation confirms that these words are never used with a negative argumentative orientation. This functioning will be illustrated on a corpus of sequences of public debate about same sex marriage. The hypothesis according to which this fact is due to the intrinsic semantic properties of these words will be examined.

Keywords: nature / natural, point of view, semantics, argumentative potential

1. *Introduction*
Several words seem to be arguments in themselves: the choice of those words tend to determine a statement's argumentative potential. This idea, far from being new, has been sustained for a long time by various branches of *Argumentation Within Language*, a semantic theory developed by the French scholars Ducrot and Anscombre (1983). Its basic thesis consists in the claim that any sentence in any language can be used as an argument for some (but not any!) conclusion (Raccah, 2002). Consequently, this argumentational potentiality ought to be taken into account while semantic descriptions of sentences, and their components, are carried out. This potentiality can be described after shrewd observation of language use and a generalization of the observations results. That also means that observation of language use, in this framework, is not a purpose but a way towards abstraction.

It will be shown that in a debate, *nature* or *natural* are of the kind of words that influence consistently the outcome of an argument. Through the analysis of sequences of public debate on topics such as, for example, same sex marriage, we can observe that the inherent argumentative power of these words is independent of their relevance to reality and, in some cases, prevail over the argumentative power of ideas.

Incidentally, a few theoretical issues will be addressed, among which the instability of words intrinsic value judgments through language evolution, and the

relevance of the traditional distinction between connotation and denotation. Indeed, an examination of the words used in this study illustrates the position that, in at least some cases, properties that are usually relegated to the space of connotation are objectively describable semantic instructions, while denotation could only be described in vague terms.

2. *Words as arguments*

It is commonly admitted that the possible conclusions of argumentations are determined by several situational or contextual factors, but also restricted by their linguistic components. For example, any sentence containing the word but follows the same argumentative structure**[i]**. Many other examples could be listed of this kind of structural constraints triggered by connectives or operators.

It has been shown in Bruxelles & al. (1995) that some simple sentences (i.e. sentences without connectives or operators) can also be used in argumentations in a restricted way. This fact is due to the presence of words that crystallize widespread ideas in the language. Thus, said in a schematic way, peoples' ideas affect languages and languages affect peoples' ideas... This matter is abundantly discussed in Ducrot's and his followers' works, especially in those that deal with the Theory of Topoi. It is not the aim of this paper to repeat those demonstrations. However, the analysis of the words *nature* and *natural* and of their argumentative behaviour in the selected discourse sequences will illustrate and fully corroborate these findings.

2.1. *Examples*

The following examples have been selected with the aim of giving an insight of the way speakers use the words nature and natural in actual argumentations. This is a token corpus**[ii]**, picked out from English speaking web articles, and their comments, about same sex marriage. The close context of the words under study is highlighted. There are arguments of both pro-gay-marriage and anti-gay-marriage.

(1)
If you plant a tomato seed, or a human seed and nourish them, they will grow naturally to bear fruit in the form of luscious tomatoes or a beautiful child. That's nature at work. If you destroy the tomato and the human seeds in their gestation period, you violate Natural Law. If you condone and allow the marriage of two homosexuals, that's also a *violation of natural law.*

Comments of Internet users on (1):

(1.1)
I think it would be considered more *"natural" to be with the person you fell in love with*, rather than choosing a partner someone else told you to be with. Should my wife and I utilize any particular position in bed, or should we wait until you approve it first?

(1.2)
I was unaware that tomato plants marry. Also, if humans intervene in the natural activity of something, it is not really breaking a "law" any more than, say, a lion interrupting zebras mid-coitus to eat one of them. Zebras and lions also do not marry. They gravitate together in a family unit, true, but humans are the only species that require someone else to approve and bless their "natural" union. You might say that "marriage" is a violation of natural law because man is interfering with the natural act of reproduction. How, then, is a church's mandate against pre-marital sex any different than your assertion that stomping down a tomato's right to reproduce is a violation of "natural law"? *If you are a proponent of "natural" law* then I suggest abolishing marriage as it limits what a man and woman can do with their sexual drives and relationships. Marriage is not a "natural" condition but a social contract developed by people to regulate who has sex, when, and why. You can make it whatever you want it to be. Be fruitful and multiply. Some marry without the desire or ability to bring children into the world. Is that interpretation of the word "unnatural"?

(1.3)
He should have noted that he supports *Christian Natural Law* as opposed to the classical liberal believe of natural law as put forth by thinkers such as Cicero and Rothbard. *Natural law simply states that through our creation we are born free and that our actions should not interfere with the freedom of others.* Homosexuals who wish to marry do not interfere with the actions of anyone and cause no harm to anyone except the perceived harm inflicted on Gerard and his ilk. Under the belief that because homosexuals cannot produce offspring as a direct result of their union sets a dangerous precedent. There are numerous traditional unions of heterosexuals that cannot or will not produce offspring. Are you to say now that

barren couple of child bearing age or couples past their child bearing age should not marry?

(1.4)
Just because one's own religious texts mislabel the diction concerning effeminate men as spunk pockets (the texts that say "homosexuality" is referring to debasing weaker men sexually, not entering into a whole, meaningful, lifelong relationship), doesn't make it against *natural law, especially considering that natural law actually has a rather set place for homosexual unions in all species.*

(2)
Much of the anti-gay-marriage argument rests on two commonly held assumptions: Life-long exclusive mate-bonding for purposes of rearing joint offspring is natural, and homosexuality is unnatural. Both assumptions have little basis in fact. Homosexual acts have, in fact, now been widely documented across a range of mammal species (that's right – we're 'outing' mammals!), including our closest relatives, apes and monkeys. […] Meanwhile, there seems to be *nothing particularly 'natural' about marriage.* Only about 3% of mammal species are monogamous – meaning they cohabitate – and few of these species mate for life. And nearly each partner in these 'animal marriages' engage in extra-pair mating. Lifelong sexual loyalty in nature is, it turns out, a vanishingly rare commodity.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-j-zak/gay-marriage-is-natural_b_112256.html

(3)
Natural law's most elementary precept is that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." By his natural reason, man can perceive what is morally good or bad for him. Thus, he can know the end or purpose of each of his acts and how it is morally wrong to transform the means that help him accomplish an act into the act's purpose. Any situation which institutionalizes the circumvention of the purpose of the sexual act *violates natural law* and the objective norm of morality. Being rooted in human nature, *natural law is universal and immutable.* It applies to the entire human race, equally. It commands and forbids consistently, everywhere and always.
http://www.tfpstudentaction.org/politically-incorrect/homosexuality/10-reasons-why-homosexual-marriage-is-harmful-and-must-be-opposed.html

(4)
Is gay marriage also contrary to natural law? Many argue that it is, but there's no

obvious reason to think so. The Vatican states that "marriage exists solely between a man and a woman", but even a cursory look at the history of marriage reveals that that isn't always the case. Marriages with multiple partners, for example, have been very common and same-sex unions have existed in one form or another in many cultures. Catholic teaching also says that the natural purpose of marriage and sex is procreation; thus, any union or sexual act where procreation isn't theoretically possible *isn't in accordance with natural law and is intrinsically immoral.* Curiously, only gay marriages are typically cited as examples of "naturally sterile" unions. Are they the only sort that exists? Of course not – but they are the only sort the Catholic Church wants banned by law. Unfortunately for the Vatican, however, most people today no longer consider procreation the necessary and intrinsic purpose of either sex or marriage. http://atheism.about.com/od/gaymarriage/a/GaysUnnatural.htm

(5)
Comment of an Internet user on http://guardianlv.com/2014/03/same-sex-marriage-ban-violates-natural-law/
The natural law is what is in keeping with biology. *Same sex revulsion is natural, cause it is a species survival instinct.*

(6)
Marriage in general is unnatural. A romantic union recognised in law and based in a traditional ceremony isn't something non-humans have much time for. A lion does not fill out extensive legal documents whenever he mates with a lioness […]. http://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2013/may/29/scientific-reasons-oppose-gay-marriage

Comments of Internet users on (6):

(6.1)
The article argues against the point that same-sex sexual interaction is unnatural by claiming that animals don't have marriage ceremonies. The author could have pointed out that some animals accidentally engage in same-sex interaction, but instead makes the pointless comment that animals don't have marriage ceremonies. *That's like saying all deaths are natural because animals don't have funerals.*

(6.2)

[…] when one looks at the laws of nature there is not a gay couple on the face of the earth that can reproduce between themselves. This by itself should tell us that a gay marriage and a heterosexual marriage are not equal.

(6.3)
Marriage is a natural mating habit for humans of opposite sexes and has been for millennia. It is also an expression of their reason which distinguishes them from animals. End of science lesson.

(6.4)
It's funny how they make a conclusion that homosexualism (*sic!*) in humans is natural based on some examples from animal world. I know about some frogs and fish which can change their sex in absence of the opposite sex. Can humans do the same (without any surgeries, etc.)? So how applicable are those comparisons to frogs, birds, and other creatures? It's just ridiculous.

3. *The conception of instructional semantics*
Argumentation Within Language and the *Semantics of Points of View*, a theoretical model arose from the latter, which is the framework of this paper, belong to the so-called *instructional* branch of semantics. This type of semantics aims at describing the *modus operandi* of linguistic units, thus, the instructions that words (or linguistic structures) supply to their own interpretation. In order to understand the conception of semantics of this approach, an important conceptual distinction between sense and (word) meaning needs to be clarified.

According to this branch of semantics, *sense* concerns *utterances*; hence it is *variable* (with respect to language units), depending on the situation of utterance and other extra-linguistic elements. It is *subjective. Meaning (or sentence meaning)* concerns linguistic units, is stable in every situation of utterance and, therefore, is *objectively describable.*

The understanding of an utterance implies a process of interpretation. According to Raccah (2005, pp. 208-210, 2006, pp. 125,130,), the sense of an utterance is not transmitted from the speaker to the hearer but *constructed* by the hearer, by means of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. These different inputs to the construction of sense work as *instructions*: each of them demarcates more or less precisely the ways one can, or cannot understand the utterance (if there were no such constraints, there would not be any possibility of understanding each other).

Extra-linguistic instruction can be difficult, sometimes even impossible to objectivize, while linguistic instructions – the ones that interest us – constrain the construction of sense in a systematic manner. The latter constitute *sentence meaning*, and is the object of *semantics* as a discipline.

3.1 *Lexicalized points of view*

With regard to the crystallized ideas in language, the Semantics of Points of View maintains that widespread ideologies, value judgements, etc (called in a more neutral way *points of view*) can be carried by words. These points of view become stable semantic instructions, thus, they are part of the *meaning* of these word. According to Raccah,

The points of view carried by words, which combine the yield to the argumentation of utterances are *implicit*: they are not the object of the discourse, but are necessary to accept (perhaps very provisionally) in order to *understand* the utterance. (Raccah, 2011, p. 1600).

The most simple of these points of view are the positive or negative value judgements. The words that carry these points of view are called *euphorical* (for the positive judgements) or *dysphorical* words (for the negative judgements). The positive (respectively negative) points of view that these words trigger are part of their *meaning*. Thus, they are independent of the situations of utterance. This is the case of words like *beautiful, honest, improve… / horror, spoil, ugly…* An important consequence of the stability of these points of view is that euphorical words cannot be used negatively, and dysphorical words cannot be used positively in argumentations (unless in specifically marked discourses).

3.2. *Nature / natural: euphorical words?*

The hypothesis according to which *nature* and *natural* belong to the euphorical category**[iii]** is likely to explain the above observed phenomenon. In fact, if these words cannot be used negatively in argumentations because their semantic properties do not allow it, it is not surprising that both sides in the debate appropriate the "nature"-argument. It is a simple explanation but it has to be examined and tested before we accept it.

First of all, we have to determine if *nature* and *natural* are euphorical words. Yet, at first sight, they seem to be absolutely neutral, neither positive, nor negative. The hypothesis has to be tested: if it is possible to use these words in a negative

way in an argumentation, the hypothesis falls naturally. One single example is sufficient to illustrate the difficulty in using them negatively:

*Ex. * This juice is natural but it is really tasty.*

The oddness of this utterance indicates that a semantic constraint proscribes such an argumentative orientation. Many other examples can be found or invented, but this oddness remains in all cases. As it has been already said, the euphorical (or dysphorical) character of the words does not completely prevent the negative (or positive) argumentations: anything is *possible* in specifically marked discourses (literature, irony, etc). But if so, the oddness of this kind of argumentation is part of the effect of these discourses. So, unless the contrary is proved, we can consider that nature and natural belong to the category of euphorical words. One could object that the fact that the "nature"-argument is used positively is not necessarily bound to the semantic properties of these words but simply to the commonly accepted idea that "natural is good". Indeed, the commonly accepted idea is definitely the origin of its crystallization in the English language. But it could not explain the systematic character of the positive use of this argument. Every reasonable person knows that not everything that is natural is good. Firstly, philosophers have since long time acquired the painful conviction that there is no possible definition to the concept of nature. And yet, the "natural" argument is ubiquitous in food or cosmetics marketing… and it works. Moreover, we know that diseases and death are natural, too; but the "natural"-argument still remains positive. If we say in an argumentation that death is a natural thing, we do it, for example, in order to relieve the pain a person could feel, facing someone's death.

In summary, the euphorical character of the words nature and natural is more likely to explain the argumentative performance of the utterances containing them than the supposition that people actually think that natural things are always better than others.

4. *Two additional objections of principle*
One can easily observe that the positive point of view conveyed by the words nature and natural is rather a recent phenomenon in history. Indeed, the idealization of nature has progressively come along with the evolution of civilization and languages (not only English) have crystallize this ideology. Which leads us to a first possible objection of principle: this fact seems to be contradictory with the above asserted stability of lexicalized points of view. To

answer this objection, it has to be clarified that the stability concerns the situations of utterance *at a given moment.* No stability in language history is claimed. On the contrary, it is interesting to observe that words can carry a specific point of view at a moment in time, and may lose them at some other moment. This fact makes pointless the efforts people can deploy to justify an actual use of a word by its etymology (for example: to pretend that calling someone a *Negro* is not insulting because this word means originally *black*…).

A second objection of principle has to be briefly examined. The introduction of the terms point of view, *euphorical / dysphorical* words may seem to be redundant, given the existence of the concept of *connotation,* which refers to the same kind of phenomenon. Simonffy (2010, pp. 308-310) carries out a detailed comparison between lexicalized points of view and connotation. The main difference is that connotation is seen as *secondary* to denotation, while the different branches of Argumentation Within Language have always claimed the opposite of this assertion. Ducrot's early works (1972, 1980…) contain efficient demonstrations of the primacy of argumentative values over informative ones. Lexicalized points of view, as we have seen, belong to the realm of argumentation and are not considered to be secondary to denotation.

5. *Conclusion*

This short study has aimed at showing how linguistic units can constitute constraints in actual argumentations. We could observe that, in a debate, both sides are likely to be "trapped" by words that impose a specific point of view. Falling in this linguistic trap is not inevitable. Even if it is not possible (and maybe not even necessary) to use nature or natural in a negative way, it is possible to get round the problem by contesting the general relevance of the "nature"-argument. To be fair to the participants of the public debate about same sex marriage, let us cite a few who did so:

(7)

Ultimately, the "homosexuality is unnatural" argument fails to support the case against same-sex marriage because there is no clear and convincing content to the concept of "unnatural" in the first place. Everything that is claimed to be "unnatural' is either arguably very natural, arguably irrelevant to what the laws should be, or is simply immaterial to what should be treated as moral and immoral. It's no coincidence that what is "unnatural" also happens to be condemned by the speaker's religious or cultural traditions. Just because some

trait or activity isn't the norm among *humans doesn't make it "unnatural" and therefore wrong.*
http://atheism.about.com/od/gaymarriage/a/GaysUnnatural.htm

(8)
The nice thing about natural law is that it doesn't appeal to sectarian or confessional doctrine to justify its conclusions but on what is determined through the use of "reason" to be "natural" to human beings as rational animals – though it *often requires belief in a divine creator as the source of natural law.* Principles or goods derived from natural law can be things as basic as the duty of self-preservation or the care of children. What it isn't, however, is looking at nature for examples of "good behaviour" – for example, monogamous pairing among bird species is not a natural law argument – or at least not a good one – for monogamous marriage among human beings. You can always find a counter-example in nature; same-sex sexual behavior, for example, is commonly observed among animals.
http://www.uscatholic.org/blog/201212/birds-and-bees-natural-law-and-same-sex-civil-marriage-26711

(9)
The first issue is the massive amount of ground that the naturalness argument concedes to the opponents of gay rights. It is understandable to want to rebut the 'being gay isn't natural' argument, but the way many gay-rights campaigners have chosen to do so commits the exact same error as their opponents: the mistaken idea that morality has anything to do with what's natural. Change the subject of the opening quote above to, say, cannibalism, and the idea that we should look to nature and animals as a guide to what humans should be doing becomes obviously absurd. *Being gay's unnatural? So what?*
http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/just_how_natural_is_homosexuality/13918#.U6_-UZR_vTp

The Semantics of Points of View supplies theoretical tools to the description of the semantic constraints that linguistic units trigger (cf. the concept of *lexical topical field*, Raccah 1990, Bruxelles & al. 1995). As discourse analysis has to deal with the linguistic elements that form texts and discourses, these tools can be used by discourse analysts. This lead has been explored several times, among others in Chmelik (2007), Várkonyi (2012).

NOTES

i. (i) […] the presence of but in a sentence requires that its utterances present the argumentative orientations of the utterances of the two halves of the sentence as opposed […].

(ii) […] the presence of but in a sentence produces the effect that its utterances are presented as arguments for the same conclusion as utterances of the second half of the sentence would be arguments for.

(iii) The presence of but in a sentence does not require an absolute choice of a particular argumentative orientation, nor does it produce any effect in this sense. (Raccah, 1990)

ii. The corpus is not the object, in the sense it could be the object of a sociolinguistic study or one of discourse analysis, but an illustration. Therefore, it has not been relevant to restrict their origin to a specific geographic area, or a particular period.

iii. Unless they are used as technical terms, as terms are supposed to be free from value judgements.

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