

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Argumentative Structure Of Some Persuasive Appeal Variations



## 1. Introduction

Substantial experimental social-scientific research has been conducted concerning the relative persuasiveness of alternative versions of a given message. This research has obvious practical value for informing the design of effective persuasive messages, and it can also contribute to larger theoretical enterprises by establishing dependable general differences in message effectiveness (differences that require explanation).

But this research suffers from two problems. One is the undertheorization of message properties, that is, insufficient analytic attention to the nature of the message variations under examination (for some discussion, see O'Keefe 2003). The second - related - problem is inattention to the conceptual relationships *between* different lines of research. The consequence of this second problem is that the research landscape consists of isolated pockets of apparently-unrelated research findings, with little exploration of possible underlying connections.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the conceptual relationships among the argument forms embodied in a number of message variations that have figured prominently in persuasion research. The central claim is that one relatively simple argumentative contrast underlies a great many of the - seemingly different - message variations that have been studied by persuasion researchers. This underlying unity has been obscured, however, precisely because persuasion researchers have not been attentive to the fundamental argumentative structures of the messages under investigation.

The persuasion research of central interest for the present paper turns out to involve studies of different kinds of appeals based on consequences or outcomes. This is unsurprising because, as has been widely noted, one of the most basic kinds of argument for supporting a recommended action (policy, behavior, etc.) is a conditional that links the advocated action as the antecedent with some

desirable outcome as the consequent. The abstract form is “If the advocated action A is undertaken, then desirable consequence D will occur.” Sometimes the conditional is expressed relatively explicitly (“If you wear sunscreen, you’ll have attractive skin when you’re older”; “if our city creates dedicated bicycle lanes, the number of traffic accidents will be reduced”), sometimes not (“My proposed economic program will increase employment”; “this automobile gets great gas mileage”), but the underlying form of the appeal is the same.

This kind of argument has been recognized as distinctive in various treatments by argumentation scholars. Perelman (1959, p. 18) called this appeal form a “pragmatic argument,” an argument that “consists in estimating an action, or any event, or a rule, or whatever it may be, in terms of its favourable or unfavourable consequences.” Walton (1996, p. 75) labeled it “argument from consequences,” describing it as “a species of practical reasoning where a contemplated policy or course of action is positively supported by citing the good consequences of it. In the negative form, a contemplated action is rejected on the grounds that it will have bad consequences.” And this sort of argument is a recognizably familiar kind of justification. For example, Schellens and de Jong (2004) reported that all 20 of the public information brochures they examined invoked arguments from consequences, whereas (for example) only six used authority-based appeals.

Although not anywhere explicitly acknowledged previously, a good deal of social-scientific persuasion research has addressed the question of the relative persuasiveness of different forms of consequence-based arguments. In particular, considerable research has addressed the differential persuasive effects of variation in the evaluative extremity of the consequences invoked by such arguments. This is not the only sort of variation in consequence-based argument that persuasion researchers have studied, but analyzing other more complex forms will require first having a clear picture of this simpler form.

So this paper focuses on research that examines how variations in the evaluative extremity of depicted consequences influences the persuasiveness of arguments. To describe this work clearly, however, requires distinguishing two forms that such evaluative-extremity variations can take: variation in the desirability of the depicted consequences of adopting the advocated action and variation in the undesirability of the depicted consequences of failing to adopt the advocated action. In what follows, each of these forms is discussed separately; a concluding section links these together and identifies questions for future work.

## 2. Variation in the desirability of the depicted consequences of adopting the advocated action

One recurring research question in persuasion effects research has - implicitly - been whether in consequence-based arguments, the persuasiveness of the argument is influenced by the *desirability* of the claimed consequence (or more carefully: whether the persuasiveness of the argument is influenced by the audience's perception of the desirability of the claimed consequence.) Abstractly put, the experimental contrast here is between arguments of the form "If advocated action A is undertaken, then relatively *more* desirable consequence D1 will occur" and "If advocated action A is undertaken, then relatively *less* desirable consequence D2 will occur."

Now one might think that this question would be too obvious to bother investigating. *Of course* appeals that invoke more desirable consequences will be more persuasive than those invoking less desirable consequences. However, the overt research question has not been expressed quite this baldly, but instead has been couched in other terms. For example, many studies have examined a question of the form "do people who differ with respect to characteristic X differ in their responsiveness to corresponding kinds of persuasive appeals?" - where characteristic X is actually a proxy for variations in what people value. This section of the paper reviews such research concerning four different personal characteristics: self-monitoring, consideration of future consequences, regulatory focus, and individualism-collectivism.

### 2.1. Self-monitoring and consumer advertising appeals

Considerable research attention has been given to the role of the personality variable of self-monitoring in influencing the relative persuasiveness of consumer advertising messages that deploy either image-oriented appeals or product-quality-oriented appeals. Self-monitoring refers to the control or regulation (monitoring) of one's self-presentation (see Gangestad & Snyder 2000, for a useful review paper). High self-monitors are concerned about the image they project to others, and tailor their conduct to fit the situation at hand. Low self-monitors are less concerned about their projected image, and mold their behavior to fit their attitudes and values rather than external circumstances.

Hence in the realm of consumer products, high self-monitors are likely to stress the image-related aspects of products, whereas low self-monitors are more likely to be concerned with whether the product's intrinsic properties match the

person's criteria for such products. Correspondingly, high and low self-monitors are expected to differ in their reactions to different kinds of consumer advertising, and specifically are expected to differentially react to appeals emphasizing the image of the product or its users and appeals emphasizing the intrinsic quality of the product (see, e.g., Snyder & DeBono 1987).

Consistent with this analysis, across a large number of studies, high self-monitors have been found to react more favorably to image-oriented advertisements than to product-quality-oriented ads, whereas the opposite effect is found for low self-monitors (for a summary of this work, see O'Keefe 2002, pp. 37-40). Parallel differences between high and low self-monitors have been found with related appeal variations outside the realm of consumer-product advertising (e.g., Lavine & Snyder, 1996).

Although these effects are conventionally described as a matter of high and low self-monitors having different "attitude functions" to which messages are adapted (e.g., DeBono, 1987), a more parsimonious account is that these effects reflect differential evaluation of consequences (for a fuller rendition of this argument, see O'Keefe 2002, pp. 46-48). High and low self-monitors do characteristically differ in their evaluations of various outcomes and object attributes; for instance, high self-monitors place a higher value on aspects of self-image presentation. Given this difference in evaluation, it is entirely unsurprising that high self-monitors find image-oriented appeals to be especially persuasive in comparison to appeals emphasizing product attributes that are, in their eyes, not so desirable (e.g., DeBono, 1987; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). That is, product-quality appeals and image-oriented appeals are differentially persuasive to high self-monitors because the appeals invoke differentially desirable consequences. And the same reasoning applies to low self-monitors: they value the sorts of product attributes mentioned in the product-quality-oriented appeals more than they do those mentioned in the image-oriented appeals - and so naturally are more persuaded by the former than by the latter.

So although this research masquerades as a question about the role of a personality variable in attitude function and persuasion, what the research shows is that for a given message recipient, appeals will be more persuasive if they offer the prospect of consequences the recipient finds relatively more desirable than if they offer the prospect of consequences the recipient finds relatively less desirable. Because high and low self-monitors differ in their relative evaluation of

image-oriented and product-quality-oriented consequences, appeals that invoke different kinds of consequences correspondingly vary in persuasiveness.

None of this should be taken to denigrate the usefulness of research on self-monitoring and persuasive appeals. It is valuable to know that people systematically differ in their relative evaluations of (specifically) the image-oriented characteristics and the product-quality-oriented characteristics of consumer products, and hence that image-oriented advertising and product-quality-oriented advertising will be differentially persuasive depending on the audience's level of self-monitoring.

But what underlies these findings is a rather more general phenomenon, namely, the greater persuasiveness of arguments that emphasize outcomes deemed especially desirable by the audience. At least when it comes to the consequences invoked by the arguments in these studies' messages, self-monitoring variations go proxy for value variations - and hence these effects of self-monitoring variations on the persuasiveness of different appeals can be straightforwardly ascribed to the underlying variation in evaluations.

## *2.2. Consideration of future consequences (CFC) and corresponding appeal variations*

An example entirely parallel to that of self-monitoring is provided by research concerning the individual-difference variable known as "consideration of future consequences" (CFC; Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards 1994). As the name suggests, this refers to differences in the degree to which people consider temporally distant (future) as opposed to temporally proximate (immediate) consequences of contemplated behaviors.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, persons differing in CFC respond differently to persuasive messages depending on whether the message's arguments emphasize immediate consequences (more persuasive for those low in CFC) or long-term consequences (more persuasive for those high in CFC). For example, Orbell and Hagger (2006) presented participants with one of two messages describing both positive and negative consequences of participating in a diabetes screening program. Participants low in CFC were more persuaded when the message described short-term positive consequences and long-term negative consequences; participants high in CFC were more persuaded by the message that described short-term negative consequences and long-term positive

consequences. (Similarly, see Orbell & Kyriakaki 2008.)

As with the self-monitoring research, these findings - even if unsurprising - do represent a genuine contribution. If nothing else, such research underscores the importance of persuaders' thinking about whether the consequences they intend to emphasize are long-term or short-term, and how that connects to their audience's likely dispositions. That is, one important substantive dimension of variation in consequences is their temporal immediacy, and attending to that dimension can thus be important for successful advocacy.

But, as with self-monitoring, what underlies these findings is the general phenomenon of heightened persuasiveness of arguments-from-consequences that emphasize more desirable consequences of the advocated viewpoint. At least when it comes to the consequences invoked by the arguments in these studies' messages, CFC variations go proxy for value variations - and hence the effects of CFC variations on the persuasiveness of different appeals can be straightforwardly ascribed to the underlying variation in evaluations.

### *2.3. Regulatory focus and corresponding appeal variations*

Yet another parallel example is provided by research concerning individual differences in "regulatory focus" (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Briefly, regulatory-focus variations reflect broad differences in people's motivational goals, and specifically a difference between a promotion focus, which emphasizes obtaining desirable outcomes (and hence involves a focus on accomplishments, aspirations, etc.), and a prevention focus, which emphasizes avoiding undesirable outcomes (and hence involves a focus on safety, security, etc.). This individual difference obviously affords a possible basis for adaptation of persuasive messages.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, persons differing in regulatory focus respond differently to persuasive messages depending on whether the message's arguments emphasize promotion-oriented outcomes or prevention-oriented outcomes. For example, Cesario, Grant, and Higgins (2004, Study 2) presented participants with messages advocating a new after-school program for elementary and high school students, with the supporting arguments expressed either in promotion-oriented ways ("The primary reason for supporting this program is because it will advance children's education and support more children to succeed") or in prevention-oriented ways ("The primary reason for supporting this program is because it will secure children's education and prevent more children from failing"; p. 393). As

one might expect, participants tended to be more persuaded by appeals that matched their motivational orientation. (For a general review of such research, see Lee & Higgins 2009.) [Notice that an alternative description of this appeal variation is to say that what varies here is whether the desirable consequences of the advocated action are expressed as the obtaining of some good state (more persuasive for promotion-oriented audiences) or as the avoidance of some bad state (more persuasive for prevention-oriented audiences).]

As with research concerning self-monitoring and CFC, this work identifies another substantive dimension of variation in the consequences associated with the advocated behavior, namely, whether the consequences concern prevention or promotion. This finding is useful, as it can emphasize to persuaders that, depending on the receiver's regulatory focus, advocates might prefer to emphasize either prevention-related or promotion-related outcomes.

But, as with self-monitoring and CFC, what underlies these findings is the general phenomenon of the greater persuasiveness of arguments-from-consequences that invoke more desirable consequences of the advocated action. At least when it comes to the consequences invoked by the arguments in these studies' messages, regulatory focus variations go proxy for value variations - and hence the effects of regulatory focus variations on the persuasiveness of different appeals can be straightforwardly ascribed to the underlying variation in evaluations. (For research linking regulatory-focus variations with variations in more abstract personal values, see Leikas, Lonnqvist, Verkasalo, & Lindeman 2009.)

#### *2.4. Individualism-collectivism and corresponding appeal variations*

A final parallel example is provided by research on "individualism-collectivism," which refers to the degree to which individualist values (e.g., independence) are prioritized as opposed to collectivist values (e.g., interdependence). Although there is variation from person to person in individualism-collectivism, this dimension of difference has commonly been studied as one element of larger cultural orientations (see Hofstede 1980, 2001). So, for example, Americans are likely to be relatively individualistic whereas (say) Koreans are more likely to be collectivistic. This variation in cultural values obviously affords a possible basis for adaptation of persuasive messages.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, persons from cultures differing in individualism-collectivism respond differently to persuasive messages depending on whether

the message's appeals emphasize individualistic or collectivistic outcomes (for a review, see Hornikx & O'Keefe 2009). For example, advertisements for consumer goods are more persuasive for American audiences when the ads emphasize individualistic outcomes ("this watch will help you stand out") rather than collectivistic ones ("this watch will help you fit in"), with the reverse being true for Chinese audiences (e.g., Aaker & Schmitt 2001). This effect plainly reflects underlying value differences - differences in the evaluation of various attributes of consumer products.

Thus, as with self-monitoring, CFC, and regulatory focus, these effects derive from the general phenomenon of the greater persuasiveness of consequence-based arguments that invoke more desirable consequences of the advocated action. At least when it comes to the consequences invoked by the arguments in these studies' messages, individualism-collectivism variations go proxy for value variations - and hence these effects of individualism-collectivism variations on the persuasiveness of different appeals can be straightforwardly ascribed to the underlying variation in evaluations.

### *2.5. The argument thus far*

To summarize the argument to this point: Consequence-based appeals are more persuasive when they invoke consequences of the advocated view that are (taken by the audience to be) relatively more desirable than when they invoke consequences that the audience doesn't value so highly. Individuals can vary in their evaluations of consequences of an action, and so matching appeals to the audience's evaluations is important for persuasive success. Individual variations in the evaluation of particular sorts of consequences can be indexed in a great many different ways - by differences in self-monitoring, or in individualistic-collectivistic orientations, or in regulatory focus, or in consideration of future consequences - but these all reflect underlying variation in the evaluations of consequences.

So what might seem on the surface to be a crazy quilt of isolated research findings - about self-monitoring, regulatory focus, and so forth - in fact represents the repeated confirmation of a fundamental truth about what makes consequence-based arguments persuasive: Arguments-from-consequences are more persuasive to the extent that they emphasize how the advocated view yields outcomes thought by the audience to be relatively more (rather than less) desirable.



## *2.6. Argument quality variations in elaboration likelihood model research*

The four lines of research discussed to this point have all involved differences between people (either individual or cultural differences). The general idea has been that persons differ on some variable (e.g., self-monitoring), and that persuasive appeals matched to the audience's level of that variable will be more persuasive than mismatched appeals. But these variables all turn out to be associated with systematic underlying variation in the evaluation of the consequences of the advocated action, and what makes a persuasive appeal matched or mismatched turns out to depend on whether the appeal emphasizes relatively more or relatively less desirable consequences (the former representing matched appeals, the latter mismatched).

However, the same basic phenomenon can be detected in an area of persuasion research not involving individual differences, namely the effects of variation in "argument quality." Argument-quality variations have figured prominently in research on Petty and Cacioppo's well-known elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

ELM researchers have used variations in (what has been called) argument quality (or argument strength) as a device for assessing the degree to which message recipients closely attended to message contents. For example, Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) varied argument quality, source expertise, and the audience's involvement with the persuasive issue (that is, the personal relevance of the issue). Under conditions of low involvement, the persuasiveness of the message was more influenced by variations in expertise than by variations in argument quality; under conditions of high involvement, the reverse pattern obtained. The implication is that under conditions of higher involvement, audiences were more closely processing the message and so were more attentive to argument quality variations.

In such ELM research, "argument quality" has been defined in terms of persuasive effects. That is, a high-quality argument is one that, in pretesting, is relatively more persuasive (compared to a low-quality argument) under conditions of high elaboration (close message processing). But what makes those high-quality arguments more persuasive?

ELM researchers have not been very interested in identifying exactly what makes their "strong" and "weak" arguments vary in effectiveness. From the perspective

of ELM researchers, argument quality variations have been used “primarily as a methodological tool to examine whether some other variable increases or decreases message scrutiny, not to examine the determinants of argument cogency per se” (Petty & Wegener, 1998, p. 352).

But other researchers have naturally been concerned to identify the “active ingredient” in these ELM manipulations. And although the picture is not yet entirely clear, there is good reason to suppose that a – if not the – key ingredient in ELM argument quality variations is precisely variation in the evaluation of the consequences invoked by the arguments. (For some empirical evidence on this matter, see Areni & Lutz 1988; van Enschot-van Dijk, Hustinx, & Hoeken 2003; Hustinx, van Enschot, & Hoeken 2007; see also Johnson, Smith-McLallen, Killeya, & Levin 2004.) That is, it now looks likely that the kinds of “argument quality” variations used in ELM research reflect underlying variations in the desirability of claimed consequences – the “strong argument” messages used consequence-based arguments with highly desirable outcomes, whereas the “weak argument” messages used consequence-based arguments with less desirable outcomes. Small wonder, then, that the strong arguments should turn out to generally be more persuasive than the weak arguments (see Park, Levine, Westermann, Orfgen, & Foregger 2007, p. 94).

To illustrate this point concretely: One much-studied message topic in ELM research has been a proposal to mandate university senior comprehensive examinations as a graduation requirement. In studies with undergraduates as research participants, the “strong argument” messages used arguments such as “with mandatory senior comprehensive exams at our university, graduates would have better employment opportunities and higher starting salaries,” whereas the “weak argument” messages had arguments such as “with mandatory senior comprehensive exams at our university, enrollment would increase” (see Petty & Cacioppo 1986, pp. 54-59, for examples of such arguments). It’s not surprising that, at least under conditions of relatively high elaboration (that is, close attention to message content), the “strong argument” messages would be more persuasive than the “weak argument” messages, because the messages almost certainly varied in the perceived desirability of the claimed outcomes.

So here is yet another empirical confirmation of the general point that consequence-based arguments become more persuasive with greater perceived desirability of the claimed consequences of the advocated view. This argument-

quality research offers a slightly different kind of evidentiary support than that represented by the previously-discussed individual-difference research (self-monitoring and so on), because here there likely is relative uniformity across audience members in the comparative evaluations of the consequences under discussion. That is, among the message recipients in the ELM studies, there was presumably general agreement that (for example) enhanced employment opportunities is a more desirable consequence (of the proposed examinations) than is increased university enrollment, whereas the individual-difference studies focused on circumstances in which study participants varied in their evaluations. (Of course, within a given condition - such as among high self-monitors - there would be relative homogeneity of evaluations.)

### *2.7. Summary: Variation in the desirability of the consequences of the advocated action*

The effects observed in a number of distinct lines of persuasion research appear to all be driven by one fundamental underlying phenomenon, namely, that the persuasiveness of consequence-based arguments is influenced by the desirability of the depicted consequences of the advocated view: As the desirability of those consequences increases, the persuasiveness of the arguments is enhanced. This commonality has not been so apparent as it might have been, because persuasion researchers have not been attentive to the argumentative structure of the appeals used in their experimental messages. But once it is seen that these various lines of research all involve arguments based on consequences, and once it is seen that the experimental messages vary with respect to the desirability of the consequences invoked, then it becomes apparent that one basic process gives rise to all these apparently unrelated effects.

Indeed, this may justifiably be thought of as perhaps the single best-supported empirical generalization about persuasion that can be described to date. Findings from a variety of different lines of research - self-monitoring, consideration of future consequences, regulatory focus, individualism-collectivism, argument quality - all buttress the conclusion that consequence-based arguments emphasizing relatively more desirable consequences of the advocated action are likely to be more persuasive than are arguments emphasizing relatively less desirable consequences.

### *3. Variation in the undesirability of the depicted consequences of not adopting the advocated action*

The just-discussed appeal variation involves variations in the consequent of a conditional in which the antecedent was adoption of the communicator's recommendation ("If advocated action A is undertaken"). But a parallel appeal variation can be identified in which the antecedent is a failure to adopt the recommended action ("If advocated action A is *not* undertaken") and the *undesirability* of the consequence varies. Abstractly put, the contrast here is between arguments of the form "If advocated action A is not undertaken, then *slightly* undesirable consequence U1 will occur" and "If advocated action A is not undertaken, then *very* undesirable consequence U2 will occur." And the research question is: which of these will be more persuasive?

Again, one might think that this question too obvious to merit study. *Of course* appeals that invoke very undesirable consequences will be more persuasive than those invoking mildly undesirable consequences. Nonetheless, this turns out to have been the object of considerable empirical research - but, as above, the research question has not been stated quite this plainly.

The work of interest here is research on "fear appeals," which are messages that invoke the specter of undesirable consequences from failing to follow the communicator's recommendations. Fear appeal research has addressed a number of different questions concerning the invocation of fear-arousing consequences as a means of persuasion, but one substantial line of work in this area has implicitly addressed the appeal variation of interest here. Specifically, considerable research has manipulated fear-arousal messages so as to vary the depicted undesirability of the consequences. In theoretical frameworks such as protection motivation theory (Rogers & Prentice-Dunn 1997), this is represented as variation in "threat severity." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the general research finding has been that threats perceived as more severe (i.e., more undesirable) make for more effective persuasive appeals than do threats perceived as less severe (less undesirable); see, for example, the meta-analytic reviews of Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, and Rogers (2000) and Witte and Allen (2000).

This appeal variation - where the consequences of not adopting the advocated action differ in their undesirability - can be housed together with the previously-discussed variations involving different desirability of the claimed consequences of adoption. Abstractly put, these comparisons consider variations in the extremity of evaluation of claimed outcomes (the degree of desirability of the consequences of adoption, or the degree of undesirability of the consequences of

nonadoption). Unsurprisingly, consequences that are evaluated more extremely (more desirable consequences of adopting the advocated action, or more undesirable consequences of failing to adopt the advocated action) make for more persuasive appeals than do consequences that are less extremely evaluated.

Thus, as with self-monitoring, CFC, regulatory focus, individualism-collectivism, and argument quality, what produces these fear appeal threat-severity effects is the general phenomenon of the greater persuasiveness of consequence-based arguments that invoke more extremely evaluated consequences. Variations in perceived threat severity plainly represent variations in the evaluative extremity of potential outcomes—and hence these effects of variations in depicted threat severity can be straightforwardly ascribed to the underlying variation in evaluations.

#### *4. Conclusion*

Any persuasive circumstance that permits identification of systematic variation across individuals in the extremity of the evaluation of consequences is one that permits corresponding adaptation of persuasive appeals. If people of kind X and people of kind Y generally vary in their evaluation of the outcomes of a given action, then a persuader will want to craft different appeals to type X audiences and to type Y audiences. As discussed above, such systematic value variations are associated with self-monitoring differences, variations in cultural background, variations in “consideration of future consequences,” and variations in regulatory focus - and hence each of these individual-difference variations provides a basis for corresponding appeal adaptation.

Similarly, any persuasive circumstance in which there is relative uniformity (in a given audience) of the evaluation of particular consequences is a circumstance that permits corresponding construction of appeals in ways likely to maximize the chances of persuasive success. When describing the consequences of adoption of the advocated course of action, advocates will naturally want to emphasize those consequences the audience thinks most desirable (as ELM research on argument quality suggests). When describing the consequences of failing to adopt the advocated action, advocates will naturally want to emphasize those consequences the audiences thinks most undesirable (as fear appeal research on threat severity suggests).

But, as will be apparent by now, the underlying phenomenon is exactly the same

in all these different lines of research. That may not have been easy to see without closely considering the underlying argumentative structure of these appeals - but once seen, the common thread is obvious: Persuasion researchers have confirmed, over and over again, that the persuasiveness of consequence-based arguments is affected by the evaluative extremity of the depicted consequences.

Now the research to date does add something beyond this broad generalization, because it identifies various substantively different kinds of outcomes whose evaluations might vary. To express this in concrete message-design terms: An advocate can, in addition to thinking abstractly about the audience's perceived desirability of various consequences, also think concretely about some more specific substantive aspects of the contemplated arguments. For example: Do the contemplated appeals mostly emphasize long-term rather than short-term consequences, and are consequences of that sort likely to appeal to the audience? Do the contemplated appeals mostly emphasize promotion-oriented rather than prevention-oriented consequences, and are consequences of that sort likely to appeal to the audience? And so forth. Still, what makes these substantive variations of interest is precisely that they correspond to underlying systematic differences in evaluation - and the underlying evaluative differences are what's crucial.

#### *4.1. Questions for future research*

The present analysis invites three questions for future exploration: (1) What is the size of the persuasive advantage conferred by invoking evaluatively more extreme consequences? (2) Might consequence-based arguments vary in other ways (besides the evaluative extremity of the consequences) that affect persuasive success? (3) Can this analysis be extended so as to encompass and illuminate other lines of persuasion research?

##### *4.1.1. The size of the persuasive advantage provided by invoking more extremely-evaluated consequences*

One question is that of the size of the persuasive advantage conferred by invoking relatively more extremely-evaluated consequences. That is, even though it seems plain that messages invoking evaluatively more extreme consequences are more persuasive, that leaves open the question of just how much more persuasive they are. In a few of the research areas discussed here, some meta-analytic work has been undertaken that speaks to this matter (e.g., Floyd et al. 2000; Hornikx &

O’Keefe 2009; Witte & Allen 2000), but additional such work – and comparative assessment that might indicate whether certain sorts of substantive variations are more consequential than others – would be valuable, both for practical reasons (as it would suggest what sorts of variations are worth special attention from advocates) and for larger theoretical reasons (because it will specify phenomena for explanation).

#### *4.1.2. Other features of consequence-based argument variation*

A second question to be addressed is whether there are other features of consequence-based argument variation (beyond those previously discussed) that are important for persuasive outcomes. This question has two facets. One is whether there are other identifiable substantive dimensions of variation (other than the previously-discussed ones – long-term versus short-term consequences, image-oriented versus product-quality-oriented, etc.) that can go proxy for evaluative variations. For example, one might wonder whether there is any general difference in persuasiveness between appeals that emphasize consequences for the message recipient as opposed to consequences for others (see, e.g., Kelly 2007; White & Peloza 2009). Similarly, one might consider whether expressing a given consequence of the advocated action as producing a desirable outcome (“if you exercise, you’ll feel energized later”) or as avoiding an undesirable outcome (“if you exercise, you’ll avoid feeling tired later”) – or the parallel of expressing the consequences of failing to engage in the advocated action as a foregone desirable outcome (“if you don’t exercise, you’ll miss out on feeling energized later”) or an obtained undesirable outcome (“if you don’t exercise, you’ll feel tired later”) – makes for any general difference in persuasiveness; it might be that “feeling energized later” and “avoiding feeling tired later” are differentially evaluated, either in general or by certain kinds of people. [This matter is related to the earlier discussion of regulatory focus. In studies of persuasive appeals and regulatory-focus variations, a common message contrast is between appeals emphasizing that the advocated action leads to some desirable outcome (a promotion-focused appeal) and appeals emphasizing that the advocated action leads to the avoidance of some undesirable outcome (a prevention-focused appeal).]

The second facet of this question is whether there are persuasiveness-relevant features of consequence-based argument variation other than the evaluative extremity of consequences. Perhaps most obviously, variations in the depicted

*likelihood* of consequences might be considered as potentially important for persuasion. The variation of interest here might be described as that reflected in the differences among “If the advocated action A is undertaken, then desirable consequence D will *certainly* occur” and “If the advocated action A is undertaken, then desirable consequence D will *probably* occur,” “If the advocated action A is undertaken, then desirable consequence D will *possibly* occur,” and so on. [And there’s the parallel set of variations for arguments focused on the consequences of failing to adopt the advocated view: “If advocated action A is not undertaken, then undesirable consequence U will certainly (or probably or possibly) occur.”]

Consequence-likelihood variation in consequence-based arguments seems to have received rather less empirical attention than consequence-evaluation variation. What relevant work does exist is scattered in separate lines of research, such as fear appeal research concerning effects of variations in depicted threat vulnerability (e.g., Floyd et al. 2000), research on belief strength and likelihood-based appeals (e.g., Hass, Bagley, & Rogers 1975; Smith-McLallen 2005), and so forth. Plainly, systematic and thorough consideration of the effects of such variations would be useful.

#### *4.1.3. Other lines of persuasion research*

One final question is whether the present analysis can be extended so as to encompass additional message variations that figure prominently in the persuasion research literature. For example, the contrast between gain-framed and loss-framed appeals (e.g., Meyerowitz & Chaiken 1987) looks to be the difference between two forms of consequence-based argument, namely, a consequences-of-compliance form (“If the advocated action A is undertaken, then desirable consequence D will occur”) and a consequences-of-noncompliance form (“If advocated action A is not undertaken, then undesirable consequence U will occur”).

As another example, fear appeal messages paradigmatically have two components. One is a fear-arousal component, meant to arouse fear or anxiety concerning possible undesirable events, and the other is a recommended-action component, meant to provide a course of action for avoiding those negative outcomes. But this seems to be a combination of two consequence-based arguments, one focused on the undesirable consequences of noncompliance (the fear-arousal element), one focused on the desirable consequences of compliance (the recommended-action element). Thus exemplary fear-appeal messages would



seem conceptually to be identical in argumentative structure to what elsewhere have sometimes been termed “mixed-frame” messages, that is, messages involving both gain-framed and loss-framed appeals (e.g., Latimer et al. 2008).

In short, it seems plausible that other areas of persuasion research might be usefully examined with an eye to considering similarities and differences in the underlying argumentative structure of the message variations involved.

#### *4.2. Coda: argumentation studies and persuasion research*

One way of describing the current project is to say that it seeks to bring the sensibilities of an argument analyst to bear on some of the message types that have figured prominently in persuasion research. The purpose has been to try to bring some greater clarity to that research, by identifying common argumentative forms (and variations) within seemingly different lines of empirical research. In addition to whatever value this has for illuminating persuasion research, perhaps it might also serve as an illustration that an ongoing dialogue between argumentation studies and persuasion research can continue to bear fruit.

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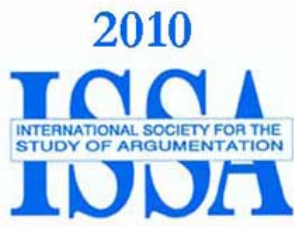
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# **ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Obama's Rhetorical Strategy In Presenting "A World Without Nuclear Weapons"**



*“[T]he peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”* was a vision held out by President Barack Obama in Prague on April 5, 2009.**[ii]** His vision inspired audiences, helped build momentum, and created a sense of importance and urgency to undertake future actions. He directed listeners toward the small actions they could take

immediately to help his cause, which was a shift of U.S. foreign policy from unilateralism to multilateralism. Obama called for a new roadmap to strengthen the international regime on nuclear non-proliferation. By committing the U.S. to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) anti-proliferation rule, Obama brought “a new climate in international politics” (King Jr. & Sonne 2009, p. A1; See also Gibbs 2009, p. A10). What rhetorical methods did Obama use to present U.S. policy actions in the post-September 11 world?

To build rapport and a strong sense of camaraderie, Obama made use of three rhetorical factors. First, Obama framed the circumstances or the situations to which the post-September 11 foreign policy responded (See Stuckey 1995, p. 215). This showed part of his effort to act on his interpretation of the information found in the executive branch. Second, metaphor is used to establish the defiant political reality that reflects Americans’ conceptions of themselves and their global responsibility. Obama attempted to present a combination of egalitarianism and pragmatism to a world that had fundamentally changed. In constructing “reality” based on “orientational metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 14), he eschewed Cold War premises of good versus evil. Third, Obama employed a dramatic perspective (See Hollihan 1986, p. 379). By focusing on a humanitarian mission, he reformulated central premises about the nature of national security. When addressing the risks people face, it helped to clearly identify the necessary goals. These three patterns are fundamental to a rhetorical strategy that tries to define and legitimate U.S. defense and foreign policy.

By focusing on these rhetorical patterns, this paper **[i]** shows how President Obama shifted foreign policy from Cold War antagonisms to a shared and rational understanding of mutual self-interest. As he personalized his address, his language resonated with the audience. With skillful use of pronouns - the “I,” “you,” and “we” connection, he created a greater sense of closeness and held out the promise of a more peaceful world than his predecessor, George W. Bush, who defined the post-September 11 order through war metaphors (Rasmussen 2006,

pp. 171-74). In presenting the nuclear arms race as remnants of the Cold War, Obama referred to the United States complicated relationship to the atomic bomb. In such a rhetorical shift from moral to practical commitment, he sought to redefine what and how U.S. engagement in world affairs should be.

### *1. The Nation's Storyteller*

Presidential rhetoric in the modern media requires the president to set the political agenda and show strong leadership. To secure popular support for presidential policy initiatives, Obama shaped the national mood through rhetoric and imagery. According to Mary E. Stuckey, the president "tells us stories about ourselves, and in so doing he tells us what sort of people we are, how we are constituted as a community" (1991, p. 1). Consequently, "we, the people of the United States" take from President Barack Obama not only the policies and programs he espouses but their own national self-identity. Thus, he must design appeals intended to increase personal support for himself.

In setting the vision of a nuclear-free world, Obama stressed "international cooperation" as a way of relating to his audience. Although the focus on international relations called for U.S. moral and spiritual superiority, he acknowledged the United States "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon." Along with his attitudes toward history, his remarks took on political significance in the recognition that "the United States has a moral responsibility to act" toward "a world without nuclear weapons." This acknowledgment brought to the United States - the world's leading nuclear power - the credibility necessary to build an international consensus to prevent proliferation. In self-legitimization, Obama identified a set of values to share a perception of what is right and wrong so as to form the basis for political action. Here the world meant a place of both hope and challenge, of opportunity and danger. Overall, his call to "prudent" actions was viewed as pragmatic with a principled foundation.

By pursuing the implications of nuclear weapons, Obama expressed the awareness that the "world could be erased in a single flash of light." He presented the past referring to scientific matters like the nuclear arms race, and then reinforced the U.S. moral and political stance. In reference to competition between the United States and Russia over military superiority, Obama associated "nuclear weapons" with such negative words as "catastrophic," "dangerous," "threat(s)" (4), "risk(s)" (2), "destruction," "fatalism," "deadly," "adversary" (2),

“inevitable” (2), “illegal,” “massive destruction,” and “unsecured.” These words signified that he was concerned about the circumstances the world was facing, remembered the details of those circumstances, and would be responsive to those issues (Leanne 2010, pp. 72-74). In fact, Obama expressed his willingness to talk to “rogue” nuclear-capable states such as North Korea and Iran, thereby marking a turning point in the U.S. diplomacy.

The rhetorical focus on negotiation and compromise led Obama to describe the post-September 11 relationships as “constructive” in world affairs. With a mix of idealism and realpolitik that can change the world, he sought to reach a general consensus, which looks to peaceful cooperation within a given context for breaking the war mentality, in order “to secure benefits for the United States while avoiding conflict” (Stuckey 1995, p. 217). In this regard, a European model - balance of power - enabled him to approach the U.S. relationship with Russia in a more “realistic” way (Sarotte 2009, p. A31). Working with Russia along with its nuclear allies, the United Kingdom and France, as well as with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) changed “Cold War thinking” to “a new framework for civil... cooperation.” His remarks on “a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians” transformed the political competition between the United States and Russia into policy implementation based on “expertise.” Overall, Obama stressed a synthesis of negotiation and compromise over the traditional Cold War dualities underlying previous foreign policy rhetoric.

Obama also took on social knowledge as a persuasive means to constrain public deliberation in the framework of “prevailing conceptions of the public” (Farrell & Goodnight 1981, p. 299). While raising critical consciousness of the nuclear danger, Obama described and defined “nuclear power” as the ultimate modern technology. The shift of his focus from “nuclear weapons” to “nuclear energy,” characterized as “peaceful” (4), “new” (5), “civil,” “rigorous,” “sensitive,” and “durable,” enabled him to support programs in nuclear innovation. The motive of innovation went along with the vocabulary of scientism, embracing the technological developments in nuclear physics. This “power of nuclear energy” was shown to be a way “to combat climate change.” One solution for global warming became a “peace opportunity for all people” to renew nuclear programs. Such rhetorical dissociation from “the risks of proliferation” normalized extraordinary into ordinary technology.

In his call for nuclear disarmament, Obama shifted his focus from “nuclear

weapons” to “nuclear materials,” from “threat” to “risk,” and from “global nuclear war” to “nuclear attack.” Along with such rhetorical shift, he employed the bureaucratic words like a “Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty,” “the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty” (CTBT), “the U.N. Security Council,” “the Proliferation Security Initiative,” “the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism,” and “a Global Summit on Nuclear Security” to eliminate nuclear arsenals. In reflecting the same critical question of whether risk is a social construction or a rational response as a post-September 11 president’s rhetorical position on globalization, Obama’s call for nuclear control was more realistic than idealistic, so that it could serve to “build a stronger, global regime.”

In displacing political fears with technological uses of nuclear energy, Obama measured U.S. security issues in terms of the future. He created a distance from the “bear any burden” militancy of Cold War rhetoric by saying that “[w]e cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it.” While the principal features of the Cold War “world” faded in the post-September 11 world, yet its “world-view” remained in his reference to Article V of North Atlantic Treaty, “An attack on one is an attack on all.” In a skillful balance of national interest and national power, Obama prioritized a joint effort to establish a new international architecture, which can meet growing demands for nuclear energy while preventing the leaking and proliferation of nuclear technology. In minimizing risk to “America’s commitment,” he also sought to meet a global, open-ended promise supporting “the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the twenty-first century.”

Obama played down Manichean dualities underlying U.S. unilateralism by recurring use of the adjective “common” - “common history,” “common interests,” “common prosperity,” “common humanity,” “common security” (2), “common cause,” and “common concern.” In integrating American values and interests into common sense, he set up “terministic screens” for “a world without nuclear weapons.” While emphasizing the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play, Obama also extended rhetorical presidency from the national to the global dimension. On the whole, he took the initiative to control what would be understood as “real” and what attitudes towards this “reality” should be taken at home and abroad.

## *2. Orientational Metaphor*

In representing the post-September 11 world as “less divided,” “more



interconnected,” Obama made use of an “orientational metaphor,” that constructs “a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 14), to order political reality. Using such spatial orientations as “HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE IS UP,” “FORESEEABLE FUTURE EVENTS ARE UP (and AHEAD),” “VIRTUE IS UP,” and “RATIONAL IS UP” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp. 15-17), he symbolically structured a situation that favors a certain “orientation” over others or a way of coping with a difficult and complex problem. His foreign policy metaphors thus gave rhetorical interpretations of events that put the United States in a leadership role in pursuit of nuclear arms control vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

Since the choice of language is not neutral, but strategic to manage risks, Obama associated military means with political ends. In describing and defining the political and social conditions under which nuclear weapons could be used, he transferred the focus of responsibility from agency to agent. In the association of “terrorists” (4) like “al Qaeda” (2), “North Korea” (2) and “Iran” (7) with nuclear dangers, Obama presented these agents as responsible for “destruction” (2), “adversary” (2) and “[v]iolations.” The scene was framed in the formula - who did what - that terrorists and some countries broke the rules so as to be punished. Exhorting the audience to face such contingencies, he emphasized “a global non-proliferation regime” as the route to “peace and progress.” The emphasis on “a new international effort” entailed reconciliation in which an “UP orientation” led in the direction of moving ahead and/or forward to well-being.

Since “ordinary language is by itself the manifestation of agreements of a community of thought” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 153), Obama made use of everyday language to reconfirm the “friendship” between the U.S. and the Czech people. Following the parallelism “We are here today because...” (5), he repeated the passive voice “We are bound by shared values, shared history” (2) which strengthened the importance of “the fundamental human rights” and “the peaceful protest.” In addressing the inclusive ideals presumed to be shared, he turned “friendship” into “alliance” within the framework of NATO. From an equal standpoint, he projected intimacy, encouraged empathy, and identified the U.S.-Czechoslovakia relationship with “the strongest alliance that the world has ever known.” Here he used the strategy of identification to confirm a close association between the United States and the Czech Republic. Reinforcing “our common security,” he blended realistic assessment of security alliance with expressions of

hope to create a new security framework for nuclear deterrence - a mode of Cold War thinking - which resulted in promoting nuclear armament.

Obama's call for "a world without nuclear weapons" in Prague symbolically transformed the older slogans like "Ban the bomb!" into his presidential campaign slogan "Yes, we can!" With the disappearance of the Cold War 20 years ago, the nuclear danger changed from the spread of "the ultimate tools of destruction" to "[b]lack market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials" - "dangers that recognized no borders." In the January 2007 *Wall Street Journal* opinion and editorial page, the vision of a nuclear-free world was articulated by former secretary of State George Shultz, former secretary of Defense William Perry, former secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and former chairperson of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn. These four public figures argued for the United States to take the lead in halting the production of fissile materials for use in weapons and securing all nuclear materials around the globe (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, & Nunn 2007, p. A15; See also Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, & Nunn 2008, p. A13). This nuclear-free agenda reminded the U.S. people of a more positive, constructive direction in nuclear disarmament (See Hart 2007, pp. 23-25; Wolfenstein 2007, p. H1). Along with such public consciousness-raising, Obama took into account the status quo in which no state or combination of states except the United States could fill the leadership void in the international arena.

Realistically, foreign policy needs to take into account the historical context and the geographical position of each state in order for them to forgo the very capabilities that they retain as critical to their national security. In pursuit of a world eventually free of nuclear arms, Obama explained and justified organized political action in order to ease international tensions. The effectiveness of a comprehensive nuclear-control regime depends not only on a political commitment, but on a binding legal undertaking. The universal adherence to nonproliferation can only work if the nuclear disarmament obligation is equally applied to all states within a time-bound framework.

To justify U.S. involvement in world affairs, Obama managed to subsume pragmatic national self-interest within the context of nuclear defense strategy. The structure of his argument made it clear that "a world without nuclear weapons" would be the perfection toward which disarmament would "move." He implied that the United States would no longer take unilateral action or to decide what would be in the best interest of the world. He proposed "a new framework

for civil nuclear cooperation” which would make for “true international cooperation.”

The presidential rhetoric based on an orientational metaphor has shaped a sense of who Americans are while broadening the U.S. political community. “Our” sense of national identity has thus evolved across time in expanding and contracting foreign policy. Through his rhetorical and political choices, Obama introduced the language of inclusion in order to project “a world without nuclear weapons” as an accepted vision both at home and abroad. Such rhetorical inclusions enabled him to inspire a diverse set of people to band together, focusing not on their differences but on their commonalities.

### *3. A Dramatistic Perspective*

Taking into account economic, social, political, and moral implications that “war is the ultimate dramatic event” (Hastedt 1997, p. 80), Thomas A. Hollihan argues that “foreign policy dramas situate events by providing credible historical accounts and visions of the future. ... To win and sustain support, rhetorical dramas must be consistent and must corroborate people’s beliefs and expectations regarding the fulfillment of dramatic form” (1986, p. 379). In his case study of the public discussion concerning the ratification of Panama Canal Treaties, Hollihan examines three dramas that provide justification for U.S. foreign policy action - the Cold War, the New World Order, and Power Politics.

The Cold War drama of “good versus evil” goes beyond the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Whereas the villain can be any enemy of democracy, the role of hero belongs to the United States. This rhetorical structure characterized by the conflict between good and evil legitimates the superiority of American moral force supported with physical force within a world of black and white. In argumentation, Cold War logic links expediency with moralism. Guided by the defining characterization of a far-off event, its persuasive power is used to guarantee action in a time where little is certain.

Unlike the above Manichean worldview, the New World Order rhetoric takes into account international law and fundamental human rights. By equalizing all international actors in avoiding confrontation, this rhetorical paradigm requires U.S. leaders to recognize other national leaders as potential peers. Instead of the dichotomous choice of good versus evil, it poses a variety of equal policy choices. Stressing commonalities rather than differences, the leaders focus on key aspects

such as shared history and values. Such focus on common ground is fraught with difficulty in defining heroes and villains. Hence, the New World Order drama requires the United States to come to terms with its imperial and colonial past.

Distinct from both the Cold War and New World Order, the Power Politics rhetoric does not rely on moral claims. Instead, the rhetoric of “technocratic realism,” derived from technological changes and the post-war emphasis on scientism, is an important element in the Power Politics drama. While calling for a shared and rational understanding of mutual self-interest between the powers, it focuses on pragmatic justifications for action, scientific principles of administration, and the possibilities of negotiation. This dramatistic perspective turns a world of nation-states into a world of self-interested pragmatists, insisting on the urgency and importance of events and political actions.

Among these three rhetorical paradigms, Barack Obama attempted to replace the Cold War drama with the hybrid of the New World Order and the Power Politics dramas. By seeing the United States as one among equals, he portrayed his country with the power and the capacity for multilateral action. In this framework, the incompatible national interests and foreign relations continue to give rise to threats of conflict. In such a state of conflict, President Barack Obama used his position as the first colored president to go beyond the Manichean Cold War worldview by saying “[w]hen I was born, the world was divided, and our nations were faced with very different circumstances. Few people would have predicted that someone like me would one day become the President of the United States.” With balancing the continuity and the changes in national self-understanding, he alluded to a high level of “transcendence” himself. In a sense, the power of ethos moved his audience to go forward.

In the dramatistic perspective, what Kenneth Burke calls “symbolic perfection,” in which individual differences become unified with some cosmic or universal purpose so as to disappear, was useful in explaining how the term “nuclear weapon” functioned as “ultimate terms” that label such fundamental, all-encompassing values as life and death (1962, pp. 130-31 & 262). In shifting his focus from “the threat of global nuclear war” to “the risk of a nuclear attack,” Obama worked first with nuclear disarmament, and then with the spread of nuclear weapons in order to remove the nuclear danger.

One nuclear weapon exploded in one city - be it New York or Moscow, Islamabad

or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague – could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequence might be – for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.

Even while projecting the vision of nuclear apocalypses, Obama saw the fulfillment of abolishing nuclear weapons as a logical progression from “today.” In fact, he reminded the audience that “now is the time for a strong international response” twice.

Obama acknowledged that a nuclear-free vision might not be realized in his lifetime by stressing the need for people to “take patience and persistence.” Yet he offered a historic opportunity for making progress on the nuclear agenda, reassuring the U.S. allies for their protection and encouraging people to think about imaginative ways forward. The steps he outlined guided the world to build the largest possible coalition – to expand nuclear-free zones – in favor of preventing proliferation. This path required a real commitment to turn the logic of zero into a practical reality.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The Cold War rhetoric based on dualities structured U.S. thinking about foreign policy for nearly half a century. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the consequent incongruity of the world system has left no widely-shared worldview. Like his post-Cold War predecessors, President Barack Obama was required to explain foreign policy decisions on a case by case basis. In the Prague Speech, he first called for a decrease in the U.S. role internationally, and then justified his rhetorical position in the specifics of a particular case. In doing so, he sought to offer compelling accounts for world events in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

Obama made a shift of U.S. foreign policy from the Manichean rhetoric of the Cold War. In the name of “national security strategy,” he gave a vision of U.S. “moral responsibility to act” that was far beyond a mere instrumental purpose. U.S. involvement in world affairs, on the one hand, entailed an element of mission. On the other hand, he proved that the situation not only involved U.S. interests, but that those interests were vital also to the world. Along with credible historical accounts and visions of the future, strategy as a system of thought leading to action enabled him to justify the U.S. in hosting “a Global Summit on Nuclear Security.” At the nuclear-security summit held on the April 12-13 of

2010, forty-seven countries agreed “nuclear terrorism is one of the most challenging threats to international security” (“Disarmament” 2010, p. 62). Slowly but steadily, the emerging international consensus on global zero was supporting his active role in leading the way to global security without nuclear arms.

Obama combined the pragmatic appeal with a humanitarian perspective to take on the nuclear future. In his address to the people of the Czech Republic, he clearly stated that nuclear disarmament meant to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our [=America’s] national security strategy.” In order to reach that goal, former Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev pointed out that the U.S. military superiority “would be an insurmountable obstacle on the path to a world without nuclear weapons.” In his opening speech at the conference in Rome, on 16 April 2009, he also underscored the need to “demilitarize international relations, reduce military budgets” to overcome nuclear dangers (Gorbachev 2009).

Finally, Obama’s acceptance speech in Oslo on 10 December 2009 was thought-provokingly pragmatic. Obama expressed a presidential “doctrine” with an internationalist perspective. He was aware of the conference on nuclear security that was scheduled for April 2010, and that two weeks later the UN would review the NPT. For that purpose, Obama had worked hard to win unanimous political support for remaking the nonproliferation treaty and regulating nuclear trafficking. He thus committed himself to winning Senate ratification of the CTBT and acknowledged the U.S. legal obligation to move toward eliminating its own nuclear arsenals. In this speech, he continued to express the vision for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on 9 October 2009: for his “extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples,” in particular his “audacious” vision of and work for nuclear disarmament (Erlanger 2009, p. 1).

Employing pragmatism and vision, President Obama was able to reset the U.S. dysfunctional relations with the world, present the UN as a new global forum, and turn to world affairs with his status enhanced. The 5 April 2009 speech in Prague set out a new foreign policy that rejected the Manichean view of his predecessor, George W. Bush, who had walked away from Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Kyoto Protocol). With conciliatory pragmatism, Obama set American diplomacy to work for new nuclear-arms reduction, peace between Arabs and Jews, and climate change so as to give birth

to the harmony of a multipolar world.

## NOTES

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**[ii]** All the quotations from “Remarks by President Barack Obama” at Hradcany Square in Prague, the Czech Republic, on April 5, 2009 are based on the immediate release from the Office of the Press Secretary, the White House.

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# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Use Of The Script Concept In Argumentation Theory



## 1. Introduction. The English term script.

The origins of this paper are in the one we prepared for the 6<sup>th</sup> ISSA conference four years ago (Vega & Olmos 2007). There we talked in general about our proposed approach to enthymemes and enthymematic argumentation and mentioned the concepts of *cognitive environment* and *script* as referring to two different configurations of the kind of undeclared guide, resulting from a common background of knowledge and expectations shared by the agents, that might become the basis of the enthymeme's soundness and persuasiveness. We were acknowledging, thus, the possibility of at least analysing some enthymemes as based on *scripts*, referring, in particular, to those instances in which what is supposedly shared by arguer and audience is not so much a piece of information



as a common *history* or the expectations about a usual behaviour that follows a familiar pattern, that is – according to a now rather extended use of the term – , a well known *script*.

Since then, we have felt that the concept itself needed some clarification as it is currently shared by several related fields and used within argumentation theory itself in various senses. So the main aim of this paper is to offer first a clarifying panorama of these different uses or meanings in order to better understand and situate our final choice and proposal, that is again the one related to enthymematic argumentation, along the same lines of our 2006 paper but, we hope, in a more refined and informed way.

In order to do this, we might begin with the semantics of the term *script* as it appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971, *Supplement* 1987). Here is a summary of this dictionary's entry:

*Etymology*: from Latin *scriptum* (neuter past participle of *scribo*, to write)

- (1) something written; a piece of writing (*Now rare*).
- (2) Handwriting, the characters used in handwriting.
- (3) A kind of writing, a system of alphabetical or other written characters.
- (4) *Law*. "The original or principal instrument where there are part and counterpart" (*script* and *rescript*).
- (5) In theatrical parlance, short for Manuscript (Written '*script*'), the text used.
- (5b) The typescript of a cinema or television film; the text of a broadcast announcement, talk, play or other material.
- (5c) *Tranf.* In *Social Psychology*. The social role or behaviour appropriate to particular situations, esp. of a sexual nature, that an individual absorbs through his culture and association with others.
- (6) An examinee's written answer paper or papers.
- (7) An assistant to the film director.

We have first the proper and original sense of the term (1) – merely something written – of which (2) and (3) are rather immediate derivations. In (4) and (6) we find particular but non problematical applications of the original sense in fields familiarly associated with official writings: the legal and the educational contexts. Curiously enough, the now obsolete and rather attractive legal opposition between *script* and *rescript* could have been exploited in argumentation theory, but as far as we know, it hasn't. Nowadays, though, the most extended and recognized meaning of *script* is the one developed in (5) and (5b) where the term

has become specialized in cases in which we do not just have something written but, we could say, something “pre-written when used”, pre-written by someone and then uttered/enacted by others in contexts where such thing naturally happens (theatre, film, broadcasting). Sense (7) derives from sense (5) as referred, metonymically, to the person professionally taking care of the *script* in filmmaking.

But, as could be suspected, our theoretical interest is mainly centred on the *transferred* meaning labelled (5c). The *Dictionary* picks up here the use extensively made by social and cognitive psychologist of the term *script* in order to describe/explain such kind of behaviour (not necessarily discursive) in which we recognize a sequence pattern that’s been socially or culturally acquired. The term *script* loses, in this metaphoric use, its *textual* character while its *sequential* or *procedural* meaning is emphasized. There is, additionally, another kind of “transfer” here as, in this case, there is no recognized *author* of the sequence and it is life in society itself that provides it through social learning or endo-culturation.

This kind of transferred meaning of the term *script* was first developed by psychologist J. H. Gagnon and W. Simon in 1968 as an adequate concept to deal with sexual behaviour (thus the *Dictionary*’s remark in (5c)): “All human sexual experience is scripted behaviour. Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behaviour little is likely to happen [...] The scripts we bring to such (interpersonal) encounters are most typically non sexual”. These same authors suggested the generalization of a such use of the term in their well know and widely read 1973 book, *Sexual Conduct: the Social Sources of Human Sexuality*: “The term *script* might properly be invoked to describe virtually all human behaviour in the sense that there is very little that can in a full measure be called spontaneous”. But it was the work of R. C. Shank and R. P. Abelson, *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures* (1977) that modelled the way it was going to be understood and developed in cognitive psychology.

For Shank and Abelson *plan* and *script* represent elements of an individual’s acquired knowledge that establish procedural links between necessities or goals and lines of action. Whereas *plan* is used for general knowledge about the adequacy between means and goals, *script* represents detailed knowledge associated with a particular situation, a repeated recognizable sequence that may

become a social standard and, in its strongest sense and most extreme cases, may even become a ritual. In Shank and Abelson's work, the term refers thus to a cognitive structure that is hypothesized as being behind one's stereotyped behaviour. We act thus because we have acquired the corresponding knowledge about standard behaviour in standard situations. Again, there is no *author* of the script here, but just actors (enactors) who generally would not be able not give a proper account as to how they have learned it. Shank and Abelson's proposal was extremely successful and has been, ever since its publication, repeatedly quoted and extensively used within related fields. We can mention, for example C. Bicchieri's recent book on the nature of social norms where she claims that social norms are embedded in such cognitive structures as *schemes* and *scripts* (Bicchieri 2006, Ch. 2).

There is, nevertheless, a final twist in this story that, in our opinion, has become the source of some confusion. The close relationship between cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence (AI) studies has led to the widespread use of the term *script* also in this second field where it has acquired the much more concrete meaning of a "structure that represents procedural knowledge". More concrete because, here, such structures are no more hypothesized operations of the mind nor unidentified "parts" of the brain but materially and symbolically well determined entities. In particular, they are usually written (in some format) lists of instructions creating a *program*. In computation, thus, a *script* is defined as a "mini-application or part of a program - usually a text file - containing a set of directions which perform the automatization of certain tasks" (*Wikipedia*). So in AI studies and computation it seems that we have reached a conjunction of two previously diverging meanings: the psychological sense of "procedural knowledge" together with the original sense of "something written" (a program). And here we have again the figure of the author, a person or a group of people that have done the writing.

With this wide panorama in mind, we can now explore our own field, argumentation theory, in order to take a look at the various ways in which the term *script* has appeared to different theorist as a suitable concept to be fruitfully applied in the understanding of argument. We have identified at least three different uses which we will describe in the following sections and which, we claim, should not be mistaken.

## 2. *The concept of script in Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)*

The first use of the term *script* we have to review is related to computation studies and the application of ICTs to education. Within the field of what is currently called Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) the term *script* appears once and again (Kollar *et al.* 2003) with the concrete meaning already mentioned in the previous section, that of a computer program which is, in this case, usually made explicit and visible to the users - the pupils working in collaboration - and which contains directions and prompts for a closely guided collaborative educational process. *Script* is used here as referring both to the computer program and to the educational sequence performed by the learners prompted by it.

The relationship between this use of *script* and argumentation studies comes from the fact that the desired emphasis on collaboration is also inducing a parallel accent on argumentation as it is in the process of questioning, criticising and justifying what is learned among the learners that such collaboration takes place. A. Weinberger, an important author in this field, has written about the different effects of what he calls *social* and *epistemic cooperation scripts* on collaborative knowledge construction (Weinberger 2003). For Weinberger, speaking in general terms, "the underlying principles of script approaches are to *specify, sequence, and assign* activities to collaborative learners", but he also establishes a useful distinction between more traditional *epistemic* scripts, structuring the basic tasks assigned to the learners as such (discussion and commentary of the educational contents), and *social* scripts, with instructions as to how to face these tasks and how to interact in collaboration (good practices). Weinberger and his collaborators (Weinberger *et al.* 2005) offer the following example of this distinction in the case of a group of students learning "attribution theory" in collaboration by examining a case study:

*Table 1. Epistemic script prompts of study 1*

Case information, which can be explained with the attribution theory

Relevant terms of the attribution theory for this case

Does a success or a failure precede this attribution?

Is the attribution located internally or externally?

Is the cause for the attribution stable or variable?

Does the concerned person attribute himself/herself, or does another person attribute?

Prognosis and consequences from the perspective of the attribution theory

Case information which cannot be explained with the attribution theory

*Table 2. Social script prompts of study 1*

Prompts for the constructive critic

These aspects are not yet clear to me

We have not reached consensus concerning these aspects

My proposal for an adjustment of the analysis is

Prompts for the case analyst

Regarding the desire for clarity

Regarding our difference of opinion

Regarding the modification proposals

As we can see, the *epistemic* script has to do with knowledge clarification and justification, the traditional tasks of scientific learning, whereas the *social* script emphasises communication, familiarity with the matter learned and effective persuasion and thorough agreement between collaborative learners. The important thing for us here is that the conclusion of Weinberger and his co-authors in this study is that “social scripts (that have to do with conversation, interaction and argumentation) work better than epistemic ones in collaborative learning”. Moreover, *epistemic* scripts may constraint too much the way learners are supposed to acquire their knowledge. They represent an excessively “guided” process that might restraint individual capabilities.

This conclusion in favour of the development of *social* scripts has led these authors to get deeper into issues as the importance, for collaborative learning in general, of acquiring, at some point, adequate argumentation skills. So in some

other paper (Weinberger *et al* 2005b) they talk about the particular *scripts* used not in learning any possible matter but in learning argumentation skills proper. And here they resort to what's available in computerized argumentation programs, where arguing is usually reduced to the acquisition and manoeuvring of argumentation schemes: either classical argumentation models (S. Toulmin's, for example) and schemes (D. Walton's) in the case of "single arguments" or, alternatively, sequence models for an argumentative interchange and discussion in dialectic settings. In both cases the learners are provided with a visual interface in which they have to fill up the blank spaces making a contribution that corresponds to a certain label: *e.g.* warrant, backing, etc., in the first option; argument, counterargument, integration, in the second one.

In all these cases, though, as already mentioned, the *script* is provided by the educators and their availability has nothing to do with social immersion. The "procedural knowledge" represented in such cases is the knowledge of the teacher as to the best way for the students to learn something. The *script* is a single, concrete, and fixed entity that might be refined by subsequent insight by committed pedagogues, but that does not present the interesting flexible and plastic aspects of their socio-psychological counterparts. Although Weinberger's conclusions about the importance of *communicative* and *argumentative* scripts for collaborative learning might be of interest to argumentation scholars, this particular use of the *script* concept cannot be considered a real contribution to argumentation theory.

### 3. *Argumentative interaction as script enactment*

The second use we are to review of the term *script* in argumentation and related fields is almost the reverse of the first one. Whereas in the case of CSCL studies we were dealing with a particularly constrained and schematic *script* approach - in relation with the proposals of cognitive and social psychology -, in the following case, the use of the *script* concept tries to capture the widest possible sense of the term in what becomes probably and excessively "loose" approach.

In a 1992 paper entitled "Characteristics of Arguing from a Social Actor's perspective", P. J. Benoit advanced the proposal that arguing itself should be redefined as the enactment of a socially shared *script* common to arguer and audience. This author tried to oppose, thus, other alternative characterizations of arguing as "taking part in a language game" or "performing a speech act" and maintained that her approach helped focusing on the *interactive* aspects of

argumentation. Arguing would be, according to this proposal, “a socially recognizable activity responding to the predictions and expectations of the social agents involved and related to a shared system for organizing experience and refer to it in discourse”. This, for her, could be best characterized as the enactment of a *script*.

Of course arguing, in its many different variants, is something we can learn and acquire through social experience and, as such - as *e.g.* “standard behaviour in a restaurant”, which is Shank and Abelson’s classical example - could be conceptualised as a case of following a learned *script*. But if we go back to Abelson’s mature work (Abelson 1981) we can see his attempt to differentiate script theory from other approaches to behaviour as habit-theory and role-theory. “Role-theory”, he says, “tends to emphasize the web of social and institutional expectations constraining social performances, whereas a script-based theory is anchored in individual cognitive structures that may or may not mesh with the performance expectations of others” (Abelson 1981, p. 724).

What Benoit is trying to do with her “global ascription” of the *script* term to the very complex, variegated, and constitutively multi-agent case of the activity of arguing could be better accomplished, in our opinion, with the use of a broader, richer term, as Abelson’s “role-theory” or still better, in our opinion, “practice theory” (Rouse 2007). Rouse, for example, has defended the relevance of a normative - as opposed to a rule-governed or regularity-exhibiting - conception of practices in terms of “accountability to what is at issue and at stake in a practice”, his main argument being that such a conception would allow us to understand practices and their normativity “without having to posit stable meanings, rules, norms, or presuppositions underlying the manifest diversity of social life”. The use of the term *practice* and its plural *practices* as referring to the different variants of arguing, mediated by institutional settings, would allow us a better characterization of the interactive aspects of the argumentation processes. Even Benoit’s wording when defining arguing as “a socially recognizable activity responding to the predictions and expectations of the social agents involved” responds to what could be better called a *social practice* than a *script*.

Moreover, in the already mentioned paper (Abelson 1981), Abelson differentiates between the psychological use of the *script* concept as ascribed either to *cognitive structures* or to *performative structures*. Although he admits and

describes both uses in psychology, it is our opinion that the term works better in the cognitive case, as representing what has been acquired by a person through socialized but individual experiences and which is shared not in an absolute but in a partially overlapping way with other members of her same social group. For us, it is not so important that the *script* would be *enacted* at some point, something that would always be mediated by the particular situation and complicated by the many factors involved, as that it would be *retrieved* in some way from our stock of cognitive tools and probably reconstructed each time from past experiences.

Our suggestion is, therefore, to save the term *script* for an *individual*, though, of course, more or less shared, *cognitive structure*, sequential or narrative in contents (as opposed to other cognitive elements); a structure memorized in our minds and closely related to our individual, albeit socialized, learning experiences and retrieved (or reconstructed each time) for different purposes. Let us avoid, we suggest, both the loose understanding of the *script* term as describing complex, multi-agent, social behaviour and the restricted schematic idea of a fully pre-determined guide provided by others. Of course we are not saying that these uses are wrong or do not respond to the semantics of the term *script*. On the contrary, what we have called the schematic meaning, widespread in computer science, is evidently closer to script's proper sense and presents a nearer analogy to the parlance of the performative arts. But the proposal of a rather metaphoric use of the term, as made by the social and cognitive psychologists in the 70's, is so attractive that we feel it could give place to very interesting results in different fields and, as we will see, also in argumentation studies.

#### *4. The script as a cognitive structure involved in enthymematic argumentation*

In our opinion, something very much like what's suggested in the previous section could be accomplished following the path of D. Walton's proposal, as made in a 2001 paper entitled "Enthymemes, common knowledge and plausible experience" - and re-exposed again, in 2008, "The three bases for the enthymeme: a dialogical theory". Here, Walton talks about *common knowledge* as one of six possible basis/criteria on which enthymemes may be founded and characterizes this *common knowledge* as "plausible presumptions about the ways things can be generally expected to go in a kind of situation that would (presumably) be familiar to anyone reading/listening to the argument" (Walton 2001, p. 101). He then adds that these plausible presumptions and reasonable expectations are based on "a background body of familiar and expected ways of



doing things shared by speakers and hearers – *scripts* to use the term coined by Shank and Abelson” (Walton 2001, p. 109-110). This is finally, the use of the *script* concept as inherited from psychological studies that we would like to emphasize as more interesting and fruitful within argumentation theory; but, nevertheless we’ll mention three points on Walton’s approach that we feel could be improved and lead to a still better exploit of this concept.

First, Walton keeps repeating that this *common knowledge* is no proper knowledge really, but *plausibility*. In his own 2008 paper, he is somewhat more careful and specifies “it is no knowledge *in the philosophical sense*”. Walton is referring here to the well known, mainstream epistemological definition of knowledge as a successful term, *i.e.* as “true, justified belief”. He is very conscious, though, about the inadequacy of this concept of knowledge for argumentation theory, a field in which we deal with defeasible, arguable and in any case in-process-of-justifying knowledge. He himself, together with Godden (Walton & Godden 2007), tried to build an improved account of such concept in a paper explicitly entitled “Redefining knowledge in a way suitable for argumentation theory”. Our comment here is that we could probably avoid this difficulty by leaving aside an either fully successful or even a more defeasible but equally static concept of knowledge as-a-product, and by concentrating on a more operative approach to knowing as-an-activity. *Scripts* or other kinds of revisable ways of retrieving our stock of available information would be *cognitive structures* operative in cognitive processes regardless of their epistemological status.

Our second observation is that Walton is not really careful enough in assigning a precise meaning to his compound concept of “common knowledge understood as *script*” as something well differentiated from other criteria/basis for enthymemes. Thus, the non-exhaustive list of informal criteria for enthymemes, as given in his 2001 paper (Walton 2001, p. 96) goes as follows: 1) common knowledge; 2) position of the speaker; 3) custom, habit, normal ways; 4) conceptual links; 5) assumptions of practical reasoning and 6) innuendo and conversational implicature.

It is number 1) that is associated with *scripts* throughout the paper, but we must say that number 3) represents likewise something very close to what is usually retrieved in a script format, according to social psychologists. Moreover, the innuendo mentioned in 6) seems to be more a way of presenting partial

information than a differentiated kind of basis for enthymematic argumentation. The effective reconstruction by the audience of an argument presented in an innuendo format could well be analysed as based on a standard narrative or *script* which the arguer trusts her audience to share, at least in its relevant aspects.

There is also an attempt in Walton's work to associate *scripts* with *plausible generalizations* as if a script was finally something like an aggregate of such plausible generalizations which are represented as statements predicting a *reasonable expectation* for a certain clause, other clauses given. But here we perceive a kind of atomism that might be negative for the fruitful exploitation of the *script* concept in our context if, finally, all we end up with is a bunch of plausible generalizations instead of something more complex as a partially common narrative whose main advantage is to evoke a more intricate game of expected relationships that might work in slightly different ways in each member of the audience (according to their different personal experiences) and yet be equally effective with many of them. So our proposal here is that we keep and exploit the overall sequential - though not necessarily linear - character of *scripts* so that such concept would not be alluded to in describing any punctual likelihood but just used when the likelihood involved has to do with a more complex, particularly sequential and narrative setting. In this sense, the typical enthymematic argumentation based on a script would be, for us, one in which the likelihood or unlikelihood of a claim or a group of claims is supported by framing it into a narrative sequence (typically incomplete) so that the audience may retrieve from their own cognitive stock a suitable script to match it.

A final remark regarding this problem of clarification of the concept of *script* as used by Walton comes from the observation that he mentions AI studies and their use of the term *script* at several points (Walton, 2001, p. 93; p. 101) as something unproblematic and equally relevant to his approach as Shank and Abelson's conception, something that, as we have already seen, might cause some confusion.

Our third and more substantial point has more to do with the overall perspective adopted by Walton in his approach to argument studies in general and enthymemes in particular. His account favours what we may call the individual viewpoint of the arguer, ideally recovered by the analyst. He would like to be able to analyse and to complete the enthymeme that is in the arguer's mind and is very concerned with the problem of identifying her *used assumptions* as something

different from the *needed assumptions* dictated by a too charitable reconstruction of the argument. For him, it seems, the only relevant *script* involved is the *script* effectively evoked by the speaker that must be grasped as such by the audience. But, from a more rhetorical, more *audience related* account of the enthymeme, as the one advanced by C. Tindale, for example (Tindale 1999; 2004), for whom the enthymeme is the kind of argument that necessitates the collaboration and co-authorship of the audience for its very existence, the effectively *used assumptions* would be those *retrieved* by the audience which, in our case, could be more or less overlapping *scripts* related to the different learning experiences of the individuals present in the audience.

The final idea we would like to offer is that it is precisely such flexible character of the *script* structure, as used by social and cognitive psychologists, that makes it so attractive and theoretically interesting for us. We could be dealing with a concept that is not so restricted as the term used in computer science, because it does not refer to something provided by others and “ready made” but has been learned through different living experiences and is, at the same time, more or less shared by those belonging to the same society. On the other hand, we could count on a rather precise type of individually owned *cognitive structure* that might determine individual behaviour but that should not be confused with a multi-agent practice or performance as is the socially situated activity of arguing - as, to our view, happens in Benoit’s suggestion.

Such a balanced sense of the *script* term might finally help better an *audience related* conception of the enthymeme than it really helps Walton’s own account, where the script gets confused with other types of *hidden assumptions*. A *script*-based enthymeme would be successful as long as it is capable of evoking some kind of narrative setting, in principle shared by the individuals in the audience - at least a high percentage of them -

but, at the same time, learned through personal experience in a non fully explicit way, and so capable of adopting slightly different patterns, slightly different sequences, most of them, in the arguer’s hope, compatible with the proposed argumentation. Within this approach, enthymematic argumentation based on socially acquired scripts would be taking advantage of the enormous possibilities of being able to be successful in front of a very diverse audience whose members, in this case, are not required to share a very precise and particular “missing premise”, but just to be able to retrieve, from all their personal stock of learned

experience, an approximately matching narrative.

This persuasive possibility is usually widely present (and duly exploited) in the evaluation of evidence in legal cases, as the experimental works of Pennington and Hastie on decision making (1986, 1988) have pointed out. These authors present a model for evidence evaluation in which cognitive representations of the evidence in the form of stories are produced, showing that subjects spontaneously tend to evaluate evidence in a legal judgment task by constructing an explanatory representation in the form of a narrative story. A more theoretically committed approach is the one represented by the work of Wagenaar, van Koppen and Crombag (1993 [1992]) on the role that “anchored narratives” - narratives that are sufficiently anchored in reality and experience - play within the psychology of criminal evidence. Bex *et al.* (forthcoming) finally try to clarify the panorama of evidence evaluation distinguishing between two approaches to reasoning with evidence, one argument-based and one story-based. As they think that both kinds of reasoning occur and are likewise relevant in most cases, they support a hybrid model that is the theoretical basis of their software formalization of evidence evaluation in complex cases.

These modern approaches might shed light on discursive strategies that have been used for centuries in courts and assemblies. Thus, the legal speeches of Lysias (4<sup>th</sup> c. BC) show cases in which the partial reconstruction of a plausible narrative - a story considered sufficiently *eikōs* (probable) or at least *eikoterōs* (more probable) than the other part's account - becomes the basis of the defence or accusation. Taking in account the large and heterogeneous composition of the juries in 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC Athens - legal cases were conducted before 200 or more *dikastes* (Humphreys 2007) - the narratives used and reconstructed, that should allegedly match with the audience own experiences (their fairly overlapping *scripts*), had to recur to widely assumed social patterns. For example, Lysias' Defence Speech in the Eratosthenes Murder Case (Lysias I) takes advantage of such kind of socially patterned (stereotyped) conduct to interpret all the steps taken by the defendant during the day of the crime. A more interesting and complex case could be the one presented in Lysias XXV: a speech of defence against a charge for subverting the Democracy. In this case, belonging to the series of trials that took part after the defeat of the Tyranny of the Thirty (404 BC), Lysias wrote a speech for his client - defendants talked for themselves but were allowed to use speeches made by professional writers - in which he appealed to

the audience vivid, recent and widely shared experiences in similar trials in such a way as to portray his own case as deviant regarding *the usual script*: “Now, I consider that I have a strong justification in the fact that, if my accusers were able to convict me of personal wrongdoing, they would not charge me with the misdeeds of the Thirty” (Lysias, XXV, 5).

In this final example, the narrative cognitive structure (script) supposedly (hopefully for the defendant) present in the individual memory of the different members of the audience - socially acquired through their massive albeit particularized experiences in other trials where strong cases of “personal wrongdoings” have been presented - is used as a counterargument to weaken and rebut the accusation’s account as unlikely.

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# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Enthymemes: From Reconstruction To Understanding



## 1. Enthymematic resolution

Traditionally, an enthymeme is an incomplete argument, made so by the absence of one or more of its constituent statements. An enthymeme resolution strategy is a set of procedures for finding those missing elements, thus reconstructing the enthymemes and restoring its meaning. It is widely held that a condition on the adequacy of such procedures is that statements restored to an enthymeme produce an argument that is good in some given respect in relation to which the enthymeme itself is bad. In a previous paper (Paglieri, Woods in press), we emphasized the role of parsimony in enthymeme resolution strategies and concomitantly downplayed the role of “charity”. In the present paper, we take the analysis of enthymemes a step further. We will propose that if the pragmatic features that attend the phenomenon of enthymematic *communication* are duly heeded, the very idea of reconstructing enthymemes loses much of its rationale, and their interpretation comes to be conceived in a new light.

In an obvious extension of the well-known distinction between what an utterance means and what an utterer means in uttering it, let us acknowledge a difference between an argument *as uttered* and an argument *as meant* or, for short, an uttered argument and a meant argument. (For ease of exposition, we allow “utterance” to cover speaking and inscribing alike.) We are interested in a class of arguments in which the uttered and meant are thought to be linked in a quite particular way, to be discussed in section 2. For ease of exposition let A<sup>u</sup>

symbolize an uttered argument and  $A^m$  the argument it means. When  $A^u$  is an enthymeme with respect to  $A^m$ , we will say that  $A^u$  “craters”  $A^m$ .

Among philosophers who investigate enthymematic discourse, there is considerable support for the idea that  $A^u$  communication couldn't succeed except that, in taking the argument you meant from the redundant crater of it, your addressee *filled in* the crater. How else could he know the argument you mean if he is not able to give it full articulation, that is, a formulation that uniquely individuates it? (Or, in plainer terms, a formulation that fills in the blanks that constitute the crater.) Accordingly the task imposed by mainstream enthymeme-theorists is that of determining how blanks are to be filled, that is to say, determining the appropriate *enthymeme resolution* strategy.

The most popular answer, by far, is that the right filling-in is one that removes  $A^u$ 's distinguished badness with least adjustment of it. This is a *minimalist badness-elimination strategy*, said to be both the strategy that gives the right filling-in and the strategy that addressees actually manage - somehow - to implement. Several versions of this strategy are discernible in the literature, usually in connection with application of the principle of charity to enthymeme resolution (Scriven 1976; Thomas 1977; van Eemeren, Grotendorst 1982; 1983; 1992; Walton 2001; 2008).

We ourselves have come to think that this received view is mistaken (see Woods 2002; Paglieri 2007; Paglieri, Castelfranchi 2010; Paglieri, Woods in press). It is mistaken not only in its details. It is mistaken in principle.

## 2. Compact centers

The present authors are at one with those who see arguments  $A^u$  and arguments  $A^m$  linked in such a way as to satisfy the conditions that follow. While we think that these conditions have an undeniably attractive plausibility, we cite them with a provisionality proportional to the complexity of their subject matter.

**ADVANCEMENT:** Meant arguments are not themselves uttered but are advanced by uttered arguments.

Again, let  $A^u$  be an uttered argument and  $A^m$  a meant argument. Then  $A^u$  and  $A^m$  satisfy the advancement condition just in case, for any arguer  $S$ , in uttering  $A^u$  he



advances but does not utter  $A^m$ . So we may say that utteredness is not closed under argument-advancement. For example, in standard conditions, utterance of the argument "Socrates is a man", \ "Socrates is mortal" advances the unuttered argument "All men are mortal", "Socrates is a man", \ "Socrates is mortal".

**BADNESS:** When uttering  $A^u$  advances  $A^m$ , there is a respect in which if  $A^m$  is a good argument,  $A^u$  is not. **[i]**

The respect in which the unuttered Socrates argument is good is its validity. It is in this same respect that the uttered argument is bad. It is invalid.

On the face of it, the badness condition is bad news. How, we might ask, can it be good communication practice to advance a good argument with a bad argument? Aren't bad arguments precisely what sensible people will take steps to avoid? For the class of cases presently in view, the answer is "No". It is "No" thanks to the fulfillment of a third condition.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Among co-linguals, S and S $\phi$ , it is standardly the case that when, in the absence of specific tutelage, **[ii]** S $\phi$  has an adequate lexical understanding **[iii]** of  $A^u$  then if, in uttering  $A^u$ , S advances  $A^m$ , S $\phi$  will on hearing (reading)  $A^u$  know that  $A^m$  is the argument meant. S $\phi$  will take it that, in uttering  $A^u$ , S is advancing  $A^m$ .

Not only is utteredness not closed under advancement, neither is argument-badness. The further importance of the transparency condition can be seen as follows:

**TRUMPS:** When the transparency condition is met,  $A^m$ 's goodness trumps  $A^u$ 's badness. So a bad  $A^u$  is a good *argument-advancer* if the  $A^m$  it advances is good in the respect that the  $A^u$  is bad.

A perfectly necessary question now presses for an answer. It is, so to speak, our "KANTIAN" QUESTION: What are the conditions that make possible the concurrent satisfaction of the advancement, badness, transparency and trumps constraints?

The single most important part of the answer to this question is:

CONTEXT-FREEDOM: When  $A^u$  and  $A^m$  are such as to fulfill the above conditions, there are no contextual or conventional elements in play save those required for an untutoredly correct lexical understanding of  $A^u$ .

It is easy to see what this condition seeks to exclude. Consider a not untypical example. At a boring party, Sarah says to her husband, "Oh, look, Harry, it's still early." "Right", says Harry, who goes off to collect their coats. Whatever the details of how, in uttering these words, Sarah managed to tell Harry that she wanted to go home, there was something more to it than whatever it takes for a Sarah-Harry co-lingual to have a lexical understanding of "Oh, look, Harry, it's still early."

Accordingly, the answer usually given to (or assumed for) the "Kantian" question is that, except for a quite particular kind of omission,  $A^u$  and  $A^m$  have the same lexical, syntactic and semantic constitution - that is, that  $A^u$  just is  $A^m$  with some blanks in it. This, in turn, occasions a further condition:

REDUNDANCY: When  $A^u$  and  $A^m$  are such as to satisfy the above conditions,  $A^m$  is a redundant version of  $A^u$ .

Concomitantly,

COMPACTNESS: When  $A^m$  is a redundant version of  $A^u$ ,  $A^u$  is a compact version of  $A^m$ .

Redundancy and compactness are phenomena of interest to pragmatics, and have occasioned a large and interesting literature. A good deal of it deals with the compactness of craters achieved by removal of subsentential - typically morphemic - elements. For example, "Sarah was giv<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> Harry the kiss of life when the ambulance arrived" is a compact crater of "Sarah was giving Harry the kiss of life when the ambulance arrived", as is "Harry poured the honey <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> the nearest jar" a compact crater of "Harry poured the honey into the nearest jar". What is interesting about *our* cases is that craters are created by the omission of sentential parts. When  $A^u$  is a crater of  $A^m$ , some of the sentences present in  $A^m$  will be absent from  $A^u$ . Either way, when the crater is compact, then in uttering the crater one advances the non-crater.

Notwithstanding the similarities, there are some important differences between the sentence-craters and argument-craters. One is that argument-craters are an untutoredly natural way of advancing complete arguments, but sentence-craters are not at all the untutoredly natural way of advancing complete statements.

### 3. Syntactic over-investment

We said in section 1 that the dominant view of enthymeme resolution in what we called the minimalist badness-elimination is a mistake. To see why this so, let's return to the original distinction between utterance and utterer meaning. Let  $f$  be a sentence and  $\Psi$  the statement meant in the utterance of  $f$ . Suppose that  $f$  is a crater. What is it a crater of? Strictly speaking, it is a crater of  $f\phi$ , which in turn is the *fully constituted* expression of  $\Psi$ . An example: If  $f$  is the sentence "Sarah was giv... Harry the kiss of life" then  $\Psi$  is the statement that Sarah was giving Harry the kiss of life, and  $f\phi$  - the sentence that removes the crater in  $f$  - is "Sarah was giving Harry the kiss of life." **[iv]** Now no one has seriously proposed that for these things to be true,  $f\phi$  had to be good in a certain way and  $f$  had to be bad in that same way. That is, no one has required that  $f\phi$  be *semantically* good and  $f$  correspondingly *semantically* bad, that for  $f$  to advance  $f\phi$ ,  $f\phi$  must be true and  $f$  not true. Indeed, when it is the case that in uttering  $f$  one states that  $\Psi$ , it is hardly plausible to suppose that when  $f$  is true  $f$  can't be. This is a point worth emphasizing.

SEMANTIC REFLECTION: In cases of statement-making by way of sentential utterance, if  $f$  is a redundant crater of  $f\phi$ , then  $f\phi$ 's semantic properties are reflected back on  $f$ .

For example, if  $f\phi$  *means* that  $\Psi$ , so does  $f$ ; and if  $f\phi$  is *true*, so is  $f$ . It is well to note that in proposing the semantic-reflection condition, we have taken a large step. Not only is it not the case that, in matters of statement-making, meant statements must be true and redundant craters not. Neither is it the case, *whatever* the truth value of the statement meant, that its compact crater cannot also have it.

No doubt, not everyone will like the semantic reflection condition. So let's pause to consider what the case against it might look like. For one thing, we could note that in all strictness  $f$  is not a sentence, hence cannot be a true sentence even if  $f\phi$  is true. So semantic reflection fails and deserves to fail.

How might all this have applied to arguments? Could we have floated a semantic reflection claim for  $A^u$  and  $A^m$ ? Could we have said:

SEMANTIC REFLECTION 2: If  $A^u$  is a redundant crater of  $A^m$  then  $A^m$ 's semantic properties are reflected back on  $A^u$ ?

If so, then *valid* or *invalid*, whatever held for  $A^m$  would also have held for  $A^u$ .

Of course, here too there is a counterargument. If one examines the cases which most occupy the attention of logicians, validity is the target semantic property, and validity is a matter of having the right logical form. There are cases galore in which the form that makes an  $A^m$  valid is missing from its compact crater  $A^u$ . Doesn't this overturn the present semantic reflection claim?

We will consider these objections in order, beginning with the proof that  $f$ 's failure to be a sentence precludes its truth even when the statement it advances is true. In the formal semantics of uninterpreted languages, the proof is perfectly in order. Natural languages support a distinction between a sentence and the proposition it expresses. Artificial languages have no such distinction except in the limiting case in which it is stipulated that an uninterpreted sentence is its own statement. Truth is then defined for sentences and nothing else. Any string at odds with system's formation rules is disqualified for sentencehood, and likewise for truth.

Natural languages are different. Truth is defined for statements and *derivatively* for sentences. If  $f^*$  is a sentence and  $\Psi$  is the statement it expresses, then  $f^*$  is true if  $\Psi$  is. But suppose now that  $f$  is a compact crater which likewise expresses statement  $\Psi$ . Where is the gain in allowing  $f^*$  to be true on account of its expression of  $\Psi$  and  $f$  not to be true notwithstanding its expression of  $\Psi$ , given moreover that  $f$  just is  $f^*$  except for some of  $f$ 's redundant bits and pieces?

The question answers itself, and in so doing, helps us see that there are two features of compact craters to pay special attention to - their craterliness and their compactness. Craterliness is a syntactic property. Compactness is a *semantic* property. They are related in an important way. Here is how.

TRUMPS 2: Compactness trumps craterliness.

So if  $f^*$  expresses  $\Psi$  and is true when  $\Psi$  is, and  $f$  is a compact crater of  $f^*$ ,  $f$  is true when  $f^*$  is.

It remains to deal with the second case, that is, the purported proof that when an  $A^m$  is valid, there are a great many cases in which  $A^u$  will be invalid, made so by the syntactic fact that its craterliness denies it the logical form that makes  $A^m$  valid. Here, too, it is necessary to point out that just as uninterpreted languages lack the distinction between a sentence and the proposition it expresses, it also lacks the distinction between a sequence of sentences and the argument it expresses. In natural languages, if a sequence of sentences expresses an argument and the argument is valid, one can say, derivatively, that the sequence of sentences likewise is valid. In uninterpreted languages, lacking this distinction, a sequence of sentences *is* the argument it expresses. And since validity is defined over syntactic features of those sentential sequences, nothing that fails to be a *bona fide* sequence of *bona fide* sentences is valid in those languages.

But, again, natural languages are different. If  $A^s$  is a sequence of natural language sentences expressing the argument  $A^m$ ,  $A^s$  is valid if  $A^m$  is. Suppose now that  $A^u$  is a redundant crater of  $A^s$  which likewise expresses argument  $A^m$ . Where is the gain in allowing  $A^s$  to be valid on account of its expression of  $A^m$  and  $A^u$  not to be valid notwithstanding its expression of  $A^m$ , given moreover that  $A^u$  just is  $A^s$  except for some of  $A^s$ 's redundant bits and pieces? Again, the question answers itself, and we have it anew that the semantic property of compactness trumps the syntactic property of craterliness.

#### 4. Broadening the definition?

It is a notable consequence of present provisions that enthymemes are far from exhausting the class of arguments  $A^u$  for which the associated  $A^m$  is readily discernible. Consider the following:

- It is raining.
- So Eveline won't be driving to Calgary.

While untutored lexical competence doesn't suffice to pin down the meant argument, anyone who has that competence and is also familiar with Eveline and

the character of rain in Southern Alberta would have no difficulty in knowing what argument is being advanced by this crater. (Let's suppose that part of what fills this hole is the knowledge that Eveline has a phobia against driving in the rain.) Much the same can be said for:

- There isn't any hydrogen in the atmosphere of the planet Xerxes.

ii. So there won't be any ice-crystals forming on its surface.

Anyone with basic school science will readily understand the argument advanced by this crater. This leaves millions of others who, even with an untutoredly competent lexical understanding of the crater's sentences, could not achieve this understanding.

In each case,  $A^m$ -specifications requires the satisfaction of two conditions: untutored lexical understanding of the relevant sentences, and untutored command of relevant non-linguistic situational factors. In contrast, enthymemes in our present sense are  $A^u$ 's that satisfy only the first of these conditions. This raises an important question for the logic of enthymemes. Shall we persist with a definition that denies to large classes of cases exhibiting the features of the Eveline and Xerxes cases the status of enthymeme? Or should we try to widen the definition in ways that collect these two case and the afore-mentioned Socrates example under a more generous conception of enthymemehood?

Favouring the No-side is the traditional idea that the analysis of enthymemes is a matter for logic, for which the principal task is to determine whether an enthymeme and its associated  $A^m$  exhibit the same or a different relation of semantic consequence. If this is indeed the project, it might well be argued that the answer to this question should be determined by semantic facts alone rather than semantic facts supplemented by non-semantic facts about - as in our examples - Eveline's clinical state and modern science's insights into the molecular structure of water. On the other hand, cases such as these are genuinely interesting and they clearly bear some resemblance to enthymemes. And the desired generalization of enthymeme is easy to formulate, as follows:

If  $A^u$  is such that its meant argument  $A^m$  is discernible to anyone simply on the basis of what he already knows, then  $A^u$  is an enthymeme of  $A^m$ .

Since time presses, we propose the following accommodation: we shall persist with the narrow definition of enthymeme and yet leave it open to those who may wish to do so to reconfigure our claims in keeping with the more inclusive definition.

### 5. *Some morals*

If our reflections up to now can be made to stand, the central questions about enthymemes all cluster around semantic redundancy and compactness in argumentative contexts. Leading the list are these two:

- As we saw, in learning to argue, compact utterance is the earlier and more natural achievement, and it dominates over fully articulated utterance thereafter. What accounts for this? What accounts for this when learning statement-making reverses this priority, favoring redundancy over compactness?
- What are the semantic mechanisms underlying the semantic reflection property? In particular, what are the consequences, if any, of semantic reflection for compositional semantics?

This pair of questions defines a large and wide-open research programme in scientific and philosophical linguistics. We ourselves are far from ready answers but perhaps it would not be premature to register a caveat. The caveat is that, whatever its details, the enthymemes project will not be much advanced by the practices and presumptions of the logical and argumentation theoretic mainstreams. For, if the semantic reflection condition holds true, and if the semantic property of compactness trumps the syntactic property of craterliness, then no reconstruction is needed for enthymemes, and their resolution strategy, whatever it turned out to be, must account for the easiness and lack of ambiguity in the typical understanding of enthymemes.

### 6. *The enthymeme understanding problem*

So far our conclusions on the nature of enthymemes have been mainly negative ones. We argued that *no reconstruction* is involved in understanding an enthymeme, since its  $A^m$  is directly advanced by its  $A^u$ , and any competent speaker will understand the former as the intended meaning of the latter. This implies that enthymemes *do not suffer of any semantic deficiency* with respect to their explicit counterparts, since semantics in natural languages refers to interpreted meaning, not to syntactic form alone, and the interpreted meaning of an

enthymeme coincides with that of its explicit counterpart – indeed, a fully explicit argument can be said to be a “counterpart” of an enthymeme only by virtue of such identity of meaning. This is tantamount to saying that enthymemes are *semantically unambiguous*: they have non-ambiguous meaning to start with, and they do not need any supplementation in order to “acquire” or “disambiguate” their meaning.

However, it remains true that (i) the incomplete utterance of an enthymeme ( $A^u$ ) typically admits of multiple syntactic reconstructions that would generate different fully explicit arguments, and (ii) the intended meaning of the enthymeme ( $A^m$ ) coincides with the meaning of one of these possible reconstructions. Let us define a complete argument ( $A^c$ ) as any syntactic sequence that describes a fully explicit argument structure. For every enthymeme, the  $A^u$  admits of multiple  $A^c$ s, and the  $A^m$  coincides with the meaning of one of these  $A^c$ s. This fact cannot be mere happenstance, and this leaves us with an important problem: how do we select a unique  $A^m$  out of many  $A^c$ s? The fact that we are good at this task does not remove the problem – on the contrary, it intensifies it. How do we immediately home in on  $A^m$ , without even bothering to consider other  $A^c$ s as potential meanings of  $A^u$ ? How is that understanding  $A^u$  immediately implies knowing  $A^m$ ? What are the principles that make  $A^u$  *unambiguous*, with respect to its  $A^m$ , in spite of multiple syntactic ways of turning a non-argument sequence ( $A^u$ ) into an argument sequence ( $A^c$ )? Let us call this the *enthymeme understanding problem* (EUP).

EUP is a challenge precisely because an enthymeme is not semantically ambiguous, even though the incomplete utterance that expresses it would admit of multiple argument-making completion sequences (let us call this property *syntactic openness*). So the question is: *why syntactic openness does not generate semantic ambiguity in enthymeme interpretation?* It is worth emphasizing that EUP does not imply that enthymemes need any reconstruction prior to their interpretation: enthymemes *have* unambiguous meaning to start with, and EUP simply poses the question of how they can be so semantically unambiguous, in spite of the syntactic openness of their utterance.



Notice that semantic openness does generate semantic ambiguity in statement-making: the main reason why “John ... a good friend of Mark” is more costly to process than its complete counterpart is because it is not immediately clear how to fill the gap, precisely because there are multiple candidate gap-fillers, e.g. “is”, “isn’t”, “knows”, “loves”, etc. There must be something in enthymeme understanding that prevents similar difficulties, excluding all argument-making completion sequences but one as legitimate interpretations of  $A^u$ . A central task of a theory of enthymeme is to specify what is that does the trick with negligible costs.

*Parsimony* is a crucial factor in solving EUP. As noted above, the costs of understanding an enthymeme need to be lower than the benefits of uttering the argument compactly rather than redundantly, otherwise we would have the same situation observed in statement-making, where redundancy trumps compactness – whereas with argument-making the opposite is true. So we need a solution to EUP which does *not* typically impose high costs on the interpreter.

### *7. Familiarity and enthymeme understanding*

EUP asks how a single meaning is so easily established for an enthymeme, among many potential candidates. In previous work (Paglieri, Woods in press) we suggested an answer that do not imply a specific focus on the speaker’s intended meaning, but rather concentrates on the interpreter’s background knowledge and inferential habits. We proposed that parsimony shapes the interpretative process, by imposing the path of minimal resistance: among the various possible  $A^c$ s of an enthymeme, the one that comes more readily available to mind is the one that determines its  $A^m$ . Notice that here ‘availability’ refers also to a certain inferential scheme, not only to the content of the unuttered premise. Consider for instance the enthymeme “All butterflies are short-lived, therefore the *Psittacula krameri* is short-lived”. Here a competent interpreter will understand “The *Psittacula krameri* is a butterfly” to be part of  $A^m$ . This is not because the interpreter had any privileged access to this information beforehand, but rather because she was highly familiar with the following inferential pattern: From (Every  $X$  has property  $B$ ) and ( $p$  is an  $X$ ), it follows that ( $p$  has property  $B$ ). It is familiarity with this inferential mechanism that biases enthymeme understanding, and not any previous knowledge on the matter under discussion. By the way, the *Psittacula krameri* happens to be a parrot, so it is neither a butterfly nor short-lived.

We have now reasons to introduce a distinction between two types of familiarity: *semantic familiarity* and *inferential familiarity*. Semantic familiarity refers to those implicit elements of the enthymeme which conveys facts already believed to be true by the interpreter. This case was already present in Aristotle's characterization of enthymemes, [v] and it is sufficient to account for enthymemes like "Socrates is a man, therefore he is mortal", where the missing premiss "Every man is mortal" is indeed known to any competent speaker. Inferential familiarity refers to the argument structure of  $A^m$ , of which  $A^u$  is a syntactically incomplete occurrence: such structure can be more or less frequently used by the interpreter, and thus more or less familiar to her. This kind of familiarity is crucial in understanding enthymemes with unstated premisses that are not known in advance by the interpreter, like the example just discussed: "All butterflies are short-lived, therefore the *Psittacula krameri* is short-lived". [vi]

If we move to consider the interplay of semantic and inferential familiarity, it is possible to outline a procedure that determines (with minimal costs for the interpreter) the meaning of an enthymeme, given its incomplete utterance. Parsimony over semantic and inferential familiarity is achieved by sequentially applying the following procedure, until it stops:

(1) If there are one or more  $A^c$ 's with premisses that are not notoriously false for the interpreter (see definition below), then the one that maximizes inferential familiarity is selected and the procedure stops; in the unlikely case that more than one such premisses instantiate argument structures of equal inferential familiarity, semantic familiarity is used to break the tie, giving priority to premisses believed to be true over premisses believed to be false or simply not believed.

(2) If all  $A^c$ 's use premisses that are notoriously false for the interpreter, then the one among them that maximizes inferential familiarity is selected (even if it produces a crazy argument), and the procedure stops; eventual ties are solved as described in (1).

Semantic familiarity serves two purposes: it *preliminary restricts the set of potential argument structures over which inferential familiarity is maximized*, by excluding from consideration at step (1) any interpretation relying on notoriously false implicit premisses; and it *acts as tie-breaker* in the unlikely event that two equally familiar argument structures compete for the meaning of the enthymeme,

by ruling in favor of the one which uses implicit premises that are more likely to be familiar to (i.e. believed to be true by) the interpreter.

Here “P is *notoriously false* for X” means that subject X believes P to be false and also believes that any sane co-lingual shares this belief in the falsehood of P. We need a notion of “notoriously false for X” because the weaker notion of “disbelieved by X”, i.e. believed false by X, would suggest that we hesitate in understanding enthymemes with (unuttered) premises we consider false, and this is certainly *not* the case. Faced with “There have been repeated terrorists attacks against Israel from groups based in the Gaza strip, so Israel has a right to invade the Gaza strip”, competent speakers would interpret this as implying that “Terrorists attacks gives a right to invade the territory where terrorists are based”, even if some of these speakers would consider this statement false, and thus the enthymeme unsound. What we resist understanding as a tacit premise in an enthymeme, unless as a last resort, are statements that are notoriously false to us, the falsehood of which we take as a matter of general knowledge. This captures the fact that we have no problem in considering arguers to be mistaken, but we do have qualms in considering them to be deranged.

If we now turn back to concrete instances of enthymemes, we can see how their understanding is determined by parsimony over familiarity. “Socrates is a man, therefore he is mortal” is solved at the first step of the procedure: the premise “Every man is mortal” is both well known and it fits a familiar inference scheme, the Barbara syllogism. As for enthymemes that involve premisses unknown to us (but not notoriously false), like “All butterflies are short-lived, therefore the *Psittacula krameri* is short-lived”, these also are solved at step (1), whereas step (2) is reserved for blatantly crazy enthymemes, e.g. “I am happy, so Mars is not a planet”: lacking any other alternative to understand this enthymeme, the interpreter has to admit that it conveys the notoriously false corresponding conditional “If I am happy, then Mars is not a planet”.

Particularly interesting to discuss are *invalid enthymemes*: incomplete arguments that are understood as being not just unsound, but also invalid. Consider “Every Catholic priest is male, so John is a Catholic priest”. Assuming that its typical interpretation includes the unstated premise “John is male”, we do not want to say that inferential familiarity alone is responsible for such an interpretation. This would imply that a fallacious scheme of inference is more familiar to the interpreter than a perfectly valid one – namely, modus ponens (MP), that would

make the argument valid (albeit unsound) by adding the corresponding conditional “If every Catholic priest is male, then John is a Catholic priest”. Saying that Affirming the Consequent (AC) is more widespread than MP in everyday reasoning and argumentation would be far too uncharitable towards the community of speakers. Again, it is the interplay of semantic and inferential familiarity that rules out MP and selects AC in this case. The fact that “John is male” is known to the interpreter, so AC is a viable candidate on step (1). In contrast, “If every Catholic priest is male, then John is a Catholic priest” is not just false, but notoriously so, and this rules out MP unless there is no other interpretation – which is not the case here. So the upshot is that correct interpretation in this case demands acknowledging the invalidity of the argument, even if MP in general is (hopefully) a more familiar inference rule than AC. The morale of this example is that we are more than ready to consider our fellow arguers to be inferentially mistaken, if this helps justifying a presumption of sanity for their beliefs.

Since only notoriously false premises are ruled out at step (1), there is a priority given to inferential familiarity over semantic familiarity. Consider a case like “The *Drosophila melanogaster* is short-lived, so it is a butterfly”. Here two  $A^c$ s compete for determining  $A^m$ : an argument including the tacit premise “All short-lived animals are butterflies”, which is false **[vii]** but instantiates MP, and another argument including the premise “All butterflies are short-lived”, which is true (if we define “short-lived” as being in between few hours and few months) but instantiates AC. According to intuition, the first option seems what is naturally understood in this case, while the second would be regarded as misconstruing the enthymeme: it seems clear that being short-lived is proposed by the speaker as a reason for the fact of being a butterfly, not vice versa. So here MP wins over AC even if this means understanding the enthymeme as including a false premise instead of a true one. This reflects the intuition, built in our procedure, that we are far more ready to consider our fellow arguers to be factually mistaken, rather than inferentially misguided.

We now see how the proposed procedure expresses an *ordering criterion* over the presumptions that we are ready to make towards each other’s enthymemes. In particular, this procedure assumes that, if possible, we take the arguer to be misinformed rather than non-consequential, and that in turn a mistake of reasoning can be presumed (and possibly condoned), if this preserves a

presumption of sanity for the arguer.**[viii]** So we posit that:

ORDER OF PRESUMPTIONS: *sanity of mind* trumps *correctness of reasoning*, which trumps *truth of arguer's beliefs*.

### 8. Last words

Perhaps all this will strike readers as too hard on the enthymeme resolution community. For isn't an important purpose of enthymeme resolution argument reconstruction? Isn't it also true, especially in philosophy, that there are cases galore of arguments that seem much in need of careful reconstruction, and true as well that, in its absence, our interest in assessing these arguments is seriously compromised?

Yes. Arguments are sometimes frightfully obscure or otherwise recalcitrant to ready assessment. But these recalcitrant cases present us with features that are not characteristic to the  $A^u/A^m$  dynamics. If in uttering  $A^u$ , S advances to  $S\phi$  the argument  $A^m$ ,  $S\phi$  and any typical co-lingual will understand  $A^u$ , and will typically know the  $A^m$  that S is advancing. In argument reconstruction cases the latter feature is always missing, and the former is also missing, not invariably, but with a notable frequency.

There is a brisker way of saying the same thing.

- Reconstruction is needed for recalcitrant arguments.
- The relation between a recalcitrant argument and its reconstruction is not that between an  $A^u$  and its  $A^m$ .
- So recalcitrant arguments are not enthymemes.
- So, whatever they turn out to be in detail, enthymeme resolution strategies are not argument reconstruction strategies.

Recalcitrant arguments call out for attention. Comparatively speaking, enthymematic arguments are pretty small beer. Better that we reserve our strategic energies for the things that require them.**[ix]**

### NOTES

**[i]** We don't mean to overlook  $A^u$ s whose  $A^m$ s are bad in a respect in which the  $A^u$ s are also bad. But these are not our focus here.

**[ii]** This excludes cases in which  $A^m$  is literally coded in  $A^u$ -Morse, Omega, and so on.

**[iii]** One has a lexical understanding of a sentence just in case one's understanding is constituted by an understanding of its words and word order.

**[iv]** We are using "statement" and "proposition" interchangeably.

**[v]** "The Enthymeme must consist of few premisses, fewer often than those which make up the normal syllogism. For if any of those premisses is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself" (*Rhetoric*, I, 2, 1357a, 16-19).

**[vi]** Clearly inferential familiarity concerns competent *application* of a given inferential scheme, not the capacity to describe its structure or to assign it the proper logical label.

**[vii]** Notice that "All short-lived animals are butterflies" is false but not notoriously so, i.e. it is not a belief that we would normally consider as a sign of insanity, but rather just an indication of the arguer being misinformed. Compare, for instance, with "I am happy, so Mars is not a planet" or "If every Catholic priest is male, then John is a Catholic priest".

**[viii]** This is purely the result of an automatic procedure to determine, easily and effortlessly, the  $A^m$  of an enthymeme. So there is no need to postulate (as we do not, in fact) that arguers have the explicit intention of privileging mental sanity over inferential correctness over factual truth in their interpretation of the utterance: this is just an unintended effect of how our cognitive processes work, under the pressure of scant resources.

**[ix]** For helpful advice the authors warmly thank the editors' anonymous referee.

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# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Acceptance, Epistemic Concepts, And Argumentation Theory



## 1. Introduction

Within the field of argumentation theory, one central approach has been epistemically motivated. John Biro and Harvey Siegel, Christoph Lumer, and Alvin I. Goldman are some of the contributors to advocates of the epistemic approach. In general terms, the idea is to link argumentation theory to epistemology, that is, to the philosophical theory of knowledge. At the outset, this seems as a very good idea, especially if one defines the concepts of knowledge and argumentation using a concept of justification. The point I wish to argue is that despite the close relation of epistemic concepts and argumentation, the general theory of argumentation should be kept separate from epistemology in the sense that the general theory of argumentation as whole

should not be defined in a way that restricts its application to knowledge only.

In section 2 I will describe the epistemic approach, or more accurately, some issues dealt with by Biro, Siegel and Goldman, that are relevant to my case. These include the definition of argumentation or argument, and especially within that definition the concepts of believing in truth of a claim (or truthlikeness or highly probable of a claim). Section 3 is titled 'A general argumentation theory', and there I will explain my view that a general argumentation theory is about the process and product of forming arguments, and that the issues within argumentation are not restricted to factual claims, but may include value claims. In section 4, I will shortly take a look at the domain of epistemology and a definition of knowledge. In section 5, I shall describe the domain of argumentation theory in terms of what kinds of points of views there are, and especially point out about value claims, that within philosophy there is an open dispute about the status of value claims, namely between cognitivists who claim that moral statements do have a truth value, and non-cognitivists who claim that moral statements do not have a truth value. The upshot of this is that if argumentation is defined using the concept of truth, then in the case moral statements do not have a truth value they would be outside the domain of argumentation theory by definition. In section 6, I will take a look at the concept of acceptance and its relation to some epistemic concepts. Relying on the distinction of semantic/pragmatic I propose that argumentation theory is defined pragmatically using the concept of acceptance, not using semantic concepts. Section 7 deals with the critique of pragma-dialectics by epistemic approach, and the idea is to view how well judging arguments with criterion of truth seeking goes, and my conclusion is that it is not promising. In section 8 I present some additional remarks and state my conclusion.

## *2. The epistemic approach*

In Siegel and Biro (1997) the epistemic approach is further developed from their earlier (Biro and Siegel 1992). They defend a normative approach (against a descriptive approach) and by this they wish to be able to make judgments on arguments in terms of their goodness or badness. Their idea is to 'cash out normativity in *epistemic* terms', and they straightforwardly state that 'arguments aim at the achievement of knowledge or at least of justified belief' (Siegel and Biro 1997, 278; original emphasis). Their position is even more clearly stated in their (2006, 94) where an argument is said to be good if it gives reasons to believe



the truth of the conclusion. Siegel and Biro (2008, 192-193) find acceptability as described in the Pragma-Dialectical theory inadequate, and call for an objective epistemic theory (Biro and Siegel 2006).

Goldman (2003) also approaches argumentation with an epistemic mindset. He is much more modest than Siegel and Biro regarding the importance of the epistemic approach (that is, he allows for other approaches to have significant import to the study of argumentation; Goldman 2003, 52). However, he stresses the view that argumentation should be seen as aiming at justified beliefs, and he furthermore stresses the close relationship between justification of beliefs and truth. A belief is, according to Goldman (2003, 62), likely to be true, if it is justified.

Christoph Lumer has worked with the epistemic (or epistemological) approach in a number of publications (see, for example Lumer 2005a, 2005b), and positioned himself among the above mentioned Biro, Siegel, and Goldman on the one hand, and on the other hand criticized the pragma-dialectical approach on a number of points (Lumer 2010). The key features of the epistemological approach are described by Lumer: 'An epistemological theory of argument is characterized by two features. 1. It takes the standard function of arguments to be: to lead the argument's addressee to (rationally) justified belief, i.e., to guide him to realize the truth or acceptability of the argument's thesis - where 'acceptability' is intended to be a broader term, meaning truth, high probability or verisimilitude. 2. It develops criteria for good arguments and argumentation on this basis, i.e., it designs them in such a way as to fulfil their epistemic function.' (Lumer 2005b, 213-214).

The critical examination of Pragma-Dialectics and its comparison to epistemic (or epistemological) theory by Lumer (2010) illuminates quite nicely what the epistemic approach is after. One recurring theme in the critique is the worry that Pragma-Dialectical theory is - possibly, in the end - consensualistic; that is, it does not provide sufficient criteria for evaluating arguments, but in the end the evaluation of arguments is up to an unqualified consensus among the arguers (Lumer 2010, inter alia 41, 67, et passim; for example, Lumer on page 67: Pragma-Dialectics is (partly) composed of 'unqualified and therefore unsatisfactory consensualism'). Whether or not this overall critique is apt, I will not take sides here; the point of mentioning this is just that it shows nicely what Lumer is after in the epistemic or epistemological approach: the function of

argumentation is to reach knowledge (or justified belief) rather than consensus. Lumer concludes in his examination of the functions of argumentation that procedural rules of Pragma-Dialectical theory of discussion are the strong point, but the rules for argumentation *proper* are the weak point. (Lumer 2005a, 190; Lumer 2010, 67)

What is common, among many other things, for the above mentioned theorists in the epistemic approach is that they closely bind the concepts of justified belief and truth.

### 3. A general argumentation theory

By argumentation theory I mean a theory that deals with the process where claims and reasons to accept the claims are formed and/or put forward, and that deals with the nature of the relation of reasons and claims. I take the product of such process to be relevant to the study of argumentation. A number of definitions for argumentation could be cited, but I will settle with a fairly general definition due to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, 1): 'Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the propositions expressed in the standpoint.' Even though someone might prefer a different wording and perhaps even disagree with at least part of this definition, I shall take it as a starting point for my treatment of argumentation and arguments. I shall stress that an important feature of Pragma-Dialectical approach is that the concept of *standpoint* is to be understood to cover without restrictions any subject matter: 'facts, ideas, actions, attitudes, or whatever' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 14); this is what I mean by generality.

Also, I take a general argumentation theory to be rich enough to describe the process of argumentation. Here also, I take the Pragma-Dialectical theory to cover the ground: argumentation proceeds from the confrontation via opening and argumentation stage to conclusion stage. A critical discussion (argumentation in the above sense) is related to a standpoint, and after one discussion, another discussion with the same difference of opinion can be commenced, should the parties choose to do so (though, to repeat the discussion with exactly the same background knowledge and values would be futile, but not so with different knowledge or values). (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 60-62). What is also noteworthy in the Pragma-Dialectical theory is that also a discussion rule may be

taken up and critically discussed. This is called a meta-discussion (ibid, 143), and it implies that the critical parties may also discuss about validity of argument schemes, or (if I have correctly understood the spirit of Pragma-Dialectics) even the whole argumentation theory.

#### *4. What is epistemology and how to define knowledge?*

Epistemology deals with theory of knowledge and justification, according to Robert Audi (2003, x). With this broad characterization, it is trivially true that if argumentation is defined as activity aimed at justification, then argumentation is related to epistemology, by definition. However, justification by these definitions is neither exclusively reserved for knowledge claims nor conceptually linked to truth.

Defining knowledge is not a trivial matter, neither is the question of the purpose of the definition. Walton and Godden discuss, with reference to argumentation theory, the traditional definition of knowledge as 'true belief plus something else', where the 'something else' may be a number of things; for example, justification or evidence (Walton and Godden 2007, 6). In effect, Walton and Godden are actually dealing with a set of definitions, where each definition has in common true belief and they differ with respect to the 'something else' part. Nevertheless, Walton and Godden end up presenting a definition of their own for pragmatic purposes of argumentation theory: knowledge is 'justified acceptance of a proposition based on evidence and supported by rational argumentation to a specified standard of proof' (Walton and Godden 2007, 10). It could be said that the traditional definition is stricter, and it is more suitably thought of as an ideal than as a practical definition like the Walton-Godden definition. I will not discuss the merits of either definition, the mentioning of the set of traditional definitions (as Walton and Godden describe them) and Walton-Godden-definition of knowledge gives a glimpse of the spectrum of knowledge definitions. However, it is notable that Biro, Siegel and Lumer that I have taken to represent the epistemic approach, are closer to the traditional view, and especially notable is that truth is not mentioned in the Walton-Godden definition.

#### *5. Value statements as points of views*

An important question about knowledge is this: what is our knowledge about, that is, what sorts of things can be substituted for X in 'S knows X'? This question leads into philosophical debates about the nature of subject matters like facts, actions, and values, because the standpoints in argumentation can - generally

speaking – be about these kinds of subjects. If acceptability of a standpoint is the goal of argumentation and we follow the epistemic approach in that acceptability is to be understood as truth or truthlikeness, then we should demand of the standpoints that they ought to be true or probable. But is this a reasonable?

Let me take, as an example of a standpoint, ‘It is immoral to cheat on one’s spouse’. Would it be possible to say that it is true (or false) that cheating on one’s spouse is immoral? The answer ultimately depends on the philosophical view one takes regarding moral language. The issue is rather complicated, and this is reflected by the discussion around it (for a short exposition of that discussion, see for example van Roojen 2009). However, to establish the point, one does not need to go into the details of that discussion. A non-cognitivist would answer the question about the above-mentioned statement, that it is neither true nor false, since moral statements do not have truth values, and a cognitivist would answer that the statement is true (or false), just like other kinds of statements. In order to give a general idea, an emotivistic non-cognitivist could take the moral statement to be more like an emotional cry similar to an accusation like ‘You thief!’. The idea of seeing moral statements as not similar to factual statements, but rather as similar to something else, like a greeting such as ‘Good morning’, leads to the view that moral statements do not have a truth value (Ayer 1971, 110-111). A non-cognitivist could also take some other than emotivist interpretation, such as a variant of prescriptivism, but I will not go there. A cognitivist, on the other hand, could answer the question and say that the statement is true (or false).

The philosophical question of whether statements about moral (and perhaps other, such as aesthetic) values can be assigned a truth value or not is related to a number of philosophical issues. One bundle of issues is related to truth; for example, Hare (1993, 30) mentions the meaning of truth, the formal characteristics, the conditions of truth, and the function of usage. Also, whatever position one takes on the existence of (moral and other) values, that is, on ontology of values, a philosophical theory is needed. What I am saying, is that there are questions and positions one could tackle, there are open disputes on many fundamental questions regarding ethics; these issues are unsettled. So, going back to the question of whether it is reasonable to demand that ‘acceptability’ should be understood as ‘true’, or ‘probable’, it would seem wise to withhold from taking a stand, at least for the time being.

The point of bringing up the fact that these issues are unsettled within the field of

philosophy, is that with respect to a general argumentation theory one is basically to choose between two possibilities: incorporate into the argumentation theory also a theory of ethics (understood widely), or keep argumentation theory neutral of any specific theory of ethics[i]. If an argumentation theorist constructs a theory that includes a very detailed theory of ethics, taking a strong stand on, say, the mode of existence of moral values or specific moral norms, then - if the argumentation theory includes an evaluative component - the theory would automatically cast a negative judgment on any statement that presupposes a rival ethical standpoint. This kind of situation would not be intrinsically contradictory, as it would only lead to a situation where for each philosophical position there would have to be a stand on argumentation theory as well (assuming, of course, that argumentation is seen as possible with regards to that philosophy). However, if a general, non subject specific theory of argumentation is to be sought for, then one should resist the urge of incorporating substantial positions into that theory. It should be noted about the philosophical discussion on ethics, that a general argumentation theorist might want to study that argumentation, and the study should not be biased by the argumentation theorist's view on the ethical issues.

So, should there be an argumentative discussion about the morality of cheating one's spouse, and the parties would settle the dispute after a reference to, say, hedonistic grounds, then the argumentation theorist can not make an absolute judgment about that standpoint or the grounds by which the dispute was settled. Regarding the epistemic approach, if it is defined by theorizing about discussions that aim at justified beliefs that are true or probable, or discussions that tend to produce truths, then the approach by definition excludes discussions that rely on moral statements, should it turn out that it does not make sense to talk about truth (or probability) of a value statement. The point could be extended to cover for example political views and legal judgments as well, since it could be - generally speaking - said that they rely on values.

#### *6. Acceptance, truth, and belief*

A general theory of argumentation is not restricted by a specific subject matter, it covers factual statements as well as value statements. Of factual statements it is quite natural to say that they are true or false, but it is not evident that a truth value could be assigned to a value statement (as said before, philosophers disagree on this point). I understand the relationship between the concepts of truth and acceptance in such a way that one (in most, or normal circumstances)

accepts truths; if I asked someone 'why do you accept the claim that Helsinki is the capital of Finland?', a natural response would be 'well, it is true, isn't it'. In normal circumstances (that is, no 'for the sake of the argument' - situation or argumentation competition or something similar is the case) we do not accept falsities. The same goes for beliefs and truths: we do not normally admit that what we believe is not true. (What are normal circumstances is admittedly vague. Furthermore, it has been shown that the issue is rather more complicated than exposed here. Paglieri and Castelfranchi (2007) present as their view that belief and acceptance are independent yet often coinciding, but still functionally distinguishable. I agree with much of what they say, including the view that belief and acceptance have different functions and that acceptance is best seen as having a pragmatic function rather than equating acceptance with, say, true belief; however I am not sure that belief has always an alethic function.) Likewise, we accept moral statements that we take to be *right* or *correct* (or what ever term you prefer) or even *true* (if one is a moral cognitivist). But the difference between the concepts of *acceptance* on the one hand, and *truth*, *right*, *correct* etc on the other, is that acceptance is a pragmatic concept, and the latter are semantic concepts. Generally speaking, the pragmatic concept of acceptance refers to the discussion at hand, whereas the semantic concepts have a reference to reality beyond the discussion. One could point out that truth could be understood as not a matter of a relation of a proposition and reality, that is, there are other ways to understand the concept of truth[**ii**].

Acceptance can be viewed as a more general concept than just referring to assertions. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 25) present it in terms of speech act theory, a speaker that for example warns or advises someone or makes a request, has as an aim that the listener accepts the warning, advice, or request. In those cases, it would be rather stretching the concept of truth to say that accepting the request is the same as holding the request true. Even though this point does not go directly against the epistemic approach of argumentation, it does show that the usage of the term acceptance is more naturally suited to the pragmatic level than to the semantical level; this is a point of usage.

### *7. About the critique of Pragma-Dialectics by the epistemic approach*

Biro, Siegel, and Lumer have critiqued the Pragma-Dialectical approach, which I take to be a general argumentation theory in the sense that it allows claims (or standpoints) to be about anything. One central issue they take to be a problem

with Pragma-Dialectics is *normativity* (Siegel and Biro 1997, 281-284) or unqualified consensualism (Lumer 2010). Siegel and Biro propose that normativity should be understood epistemically, that is, 'good arguments *warrant* their conclusions', where conclusions are to be seen as justified beliefs or knowledge (Siegel and Biro 1997, 278). Lumer deals with the function of argumentation, and proposes an epistemological approach - that is - truth seeking approach to argumentation theory (Lumer 2010, 47-48).

It seems that, if it turns out (or at this point, if it is possible) that value statements are neither true nor false (or probable or improbable), then Biro, Siegel, and Lumer are in effect imposing on a general argumentation theory a restriction on the subject matter. To see where their view seems to lead, it is worth while taking a closer look. Let it be, for the sake of the argument at least, that truth and justified belief were understood widely enough to cover value statements, so that it would be sensible to say of a statement like 'it is not morally permissible to cheat on one's spouse' that it is true (or false), or in a restricted sense acceptable. The point of this assumption would be to see whether it would make a difference, with regards to the demand of the normativity (in the sense Biro and Siegel present it) or rejection of unqualified consensualism (in the sense Lumer presents it). The epistemic approach demands that an argumentation theory should be able to give conditions of adequacy for an argument to be acceptable (objectively, or by standards that are justified with regards to truth). However, what sort of conditions of adequacy can one give for an argument for a claim 'it is morally not permissible to cheat on ones spouse'? For an argument to be acceptable, there would have to be an idea of what constitutes cheating, there would have to be acceptable notion of morality, and an idea of how cheating relates to immorality. Practically speaking, I can not see how in a general argumentation theory there could be any *substantial* view about what are the correct conditions for cheating, and unless this sort of substantial view is presented, there is no way of giving a judgment of the truth or acceptability of the statement. There could be formal ideas as to how the concepts in the premises and conclusion have to be related (say, a logical, or a conceptual relation could be a criterion). In principal, someone might propose a general theory where the exact criteria for cheating were in fact given, but for that kind of approach to meet the requirement of generality, it would have to be a theory of practically *everything*.

The point could be illustrated by taking a look at an argument Siegel and Biro in

their (1992, 90-91) put forward. 'Two disputants are arguing about the upcoming election. Both agree that the most handsome [...] should be elected. They disagree at the outset, about which candidate is most handsome [...] but after some discussion, during which the rules of the code of conduct are honoured, the dispute is resolved and the participants agree that they should vote for candidate C.' Now, what Siegel and Biro are after here, is that a normative argumentation theory should judge this argumentation irrational. The problem is, in my view, that a general argumentation theory just can not take sides on a substantial matter like whether it is true or acceptable that the most handsome candidate is the one to be voted for, or, who is the most handsome candidate. It could be the case, that handsome people get their agendas through better than not-so-handsome people, and should it be the case that the agendas are not so different, then the disputants would be quite 'rational', according to standards of Siegel and Biro, if I am not mistaken. It would be too much to ask for an argumentation theory to include a view on how things in the world are and how things in the world should be. **[iii]** And I might add, even if this was demanded, it most probably would result in a dispute among argumentation theorists about what is the matter of fact in very many cases. So, I gather that the critical account towards Pragma-Dialectics that Siegel and Biro present actually leads to a situation where the argumentation theory is a theory of everything, or if not, then a critical discussion about the issues would be in place in order to resolve the difference of opinion, in which case for example the Pragma-Dialectical view would suffice.

### *8. Conclusion and some additional remarks*

A general argumentation theory that is not limited by a subject matter of an argument should take into account factual as well as value statements. It may be the case - depending on the philosophy of the nature of value - that value statements are not assignable a truth value. Therefore believing in the truth of a statement should not be a criterion of acceptability of all statements. I have not argued that truth should not be a criterion of knowledge. But I have argued (in section 7) that argumentation theory can not practically speaking take a stand on truth value of a specific factual statement, or the acceptability of a specific value statement (for example the aesthetic statement that a candidate is handsome or the statement that handsomeness is irrelevant to woerthiness of a candidate), which seems to follow from the discussion in Biro and Siegel (1992).



I have treated truth as a semantic concept, and by this I mean that it relates to reality; the truth value of a statement depends on how things are in the world. Argumentation theory can not include a view of how things in the world are (as it can not be a theory of everything). The situation is analogical for value statements: the semantics might be different from factual statements (which possibility I am referring to by bringing up the philosophical debate between cognitivist and non-cognitivists), but whatever the philosophy behind values, the semantical evaluation of a specific value statement is not the business of argumentation theory, and likewise for a factual statement. I wish to make a clear distinction between two separate points here: that truth in general is not (necessarily) a criterion for all possible statements is one point (which is what I wanted to show with the argument on there being an open discussion between moral cognitivists and non-cognitivists). Another point (which is directed towards the theory due to Biro and Siegel) is that the truth value of a particular statement is not generally speaking the business of argumentation theory.

It is not perfectly clear what Toulmin means with his concept of 'logical type' (Toulmin 1958, 13-14; van Eemeren et al 1996, 136-137), but from the examples Toulmin provides of statements belonging to different logical types I gather that it is close to what I am after when I refer to the possibility of value statements having different semantics than factual statements. In Toulminian terms, I think, my point could be rephrased as pointing to field-dependence of criteria of sound arguments.

Besides all this, there is an additional complication for a view that defines argumentation in terms of truth, namely situations where it is clear to all parties of the dispute and the evaluator that the statements they are dealing with are plainly *false*. One such situation could be a competition, another could be for educational purposes in a class room, and yet a third, a situation where one party just goes along to see if the other party can make a coherent case for a standpoint. For the sake of generality, I think that a theory of argumentation should be applicable to these admittedly non-standard cases. This does not necessarily pose a serious problem for an epistemic approach as such, if the approach is defining a standard function of argumentation. After all, a number of types of argumentation could be defined. Nevertheless, if generality is an issue, then truth can not be a defining characteristic for argumentation. This complication would not be so problematic for a theorist who would allow

loosening of definition of argumentation (like Lumer, who admits also non-standard functions). But it would strictly speaking – I think – affect the definition in the sense that truth could not be the aim of any argumentation.

One further note I wish to make, is that I am not against theorizing about epistemic or epistemological issues in relation with argumentation; I think that, for example, when Lumer discusses the function of argumentation (Lumer 2010), he does talk about a very important area – knowledge. The role of argumentation in epistemology deserves attention, attention that it so far has not received too much (only recently did Walton and Godden (2007) bring up quite fundamental topic of defining knowledge with respect to argumentation theory, which shows that the area is still in need of research). The discussion of the definition of knowledge from the perspective of argumentation theory by Walton and Godden results in a refined definition, and a notable difference is that in the Walton-Godden definition truth does not play a role. From the perspective of epistemology, truth may certainly be of vital importance, and argumentation theory may have an important input for epistemology, but there should be a division of labour between argumentation theory and epistemology, as their domains do not coincide. The relation of argumentation theory and epistemology should then be seen as complementary.

I will finish with one final remark. What about the semantic issues such as what are truth conditions of facts or correctness conditions for ethical statements, how does a general argumentation theory treat them? Well, the parties see if they agree upon the criteria appropriate to the subject matter. If they agree, they then go about on arguing on those agreements. If they do not agree, then they are free to take the criteria as the subject matter of a meta-discussion. An argumentation theorist may evaluate the argumentation and arguments in the following instrumentalist sense: Compared to criterion C, the argumentation or the argument meets (or doesn't meet) the criterion. C may be a general or specific criterion (but as I have argued on the limits of a general argumentation theory, a general theorist can not have specific stands on substantial issues), but the meta-discussion about the criterion C is open for discussion among argumentation theorists, *just as it is open for any arguer*.

## NOTES

**[i]** One anonymous reviewer asks at this point 'Why is the relationship of argumentation theory to ethics any more of an issue than its relationship to other

inquiries, like logic?' I am not quite sure what the reviewer is referring to. If the question is about *which* logic should the argumentation theorist adopt, my reply would be that a number of different logical systems may be applicable to argumentation (and arguments). If the question is whether *any* logic should be kept apart from argumentation theory, then my reply is that logic is a vital theory when describing relations of propositions between premises and conclusions. Elaboration of these issues is not possible here.

**[ii]** An anonymous reviewer brings this point up in one comment. I am under the impression that Lumer, Biro and Siegel would see truth as a relation between a proposition and world (I am not sure at all about this and I may very well be mistaken about the views of Lumer, Biro and Siegel, but for example in Lumer 2005a it may be gathered that a consensus view is contrasted to the view of Lumer's.)

**[iii]** An anonymous reviewer points out that the point of Biro and Siegel 'is that agreement on false or unjustified beliefs is not enough to make the belief worthy of acceptance; an argumentation theory needs to leave room for pointing out that the belief is false or unjustified'. But Biro and Siegel do not explain why handsomeness is not a good criterion to vote for a candidate, they just say it is irrational or unjustified. The anonymous reviewer states that 'Siegel and Biro in their (1992) are not demanding that an argumentation theory include a substantive judgment on whether handsomeness is a relevant criterion for choosing among candidates in an election, but merely that the theory allow for normative judgments on such a question.' As I understand it, the judgment made by Biro and Siegel is unjustified. As I point out in the text there may have been quite good reasons behind the discussants; my point is that Biro and Siegel have to assume that there is no relevant connection between handsomeness and worthiness in order to make their judgment. To make such an assumption would - in a manner of speaking - make them participants of the discussion, or they would have to have an argumentation theory that included the information that 'handsomeness is irrelevant when deciding on a candidate'.

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# **ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Situational Constraints On Argumentation In The Context Of Takeover Proposals.**



## *1. Introduction*

The 2010 ISSA conference has proposed for the first time a panel session devoted to financial argumentation. This is an indication that argumentation scholars are exploring an increasing variety of social domains (cf. van Eemeren 2010; Rigotti & Greco Morasso 2009b), in which people make use of arguments in order to handle with differences of opinion, interpersonal conflicts and individual and collective decision-making. The relevance of argumentation for finance is mainly due to the numerous decisions that investors and companies are concerned with. The inescapable and high uncertainty surrounding financial activities makes reasoning and argumentation fundamental and particularly complex, because the data (information) from which decisions must be inferentially drawn are often incomplete or not fully reliable (cf. Grinblatt & Titman 1998). In particular, financial argumentation is significantly conditioned by the information asymmetry and conflicts of interest that constrain the relationship between corporate managers/directors and shareholders (cf. Healy &

Palepu 2001). These aspects typically characterizing financial interactions make financial communication particularly interesting for argumentation scholars. In fact, as a result of agency conflicts, shareholders could question managers' willingness and ability to undertake value-creating business projects, and could thus cast doubt on the actual expediency of investing in the company; due to information asymmetry, investors may lack important premises to argumentatively support their own decisions and to critically assess managers' decisions. It is not by chance that corporate financial communication not only consists in the disclosure of relevant information that investors need in order to reason out their decisions and assess the behavior of managers/directors: companies often defend argumentatively their decisions and try to justify the investments and transactions that they propose.

This paper shows this by focusing on the argumentative interactions entailed in takeover proposals - or takeover bids - (see also Green et al. 2008; Olson 2009; Palmieri 2008a&b), which constitute one of the most relevant activities of the financial market. In a takeover bid, one company - the bidder - proposes to the shareholders of another company - the target - to sell their shares in exchange for cash or bidder's shares (cf. Ross et al. 2003). The directors of the target company, who may either endorse or oppose the bid, should publish a document in which their opinion is expressed and argumentatively based (cf. Easterbrook & Fishel 1981; Sudarsanam 1995; Haan-Kamminga 2006). Indeed, because shareholders are less informed and often less skilled than corporate directors, the quality of their decision-making largely depends on how the proposal is communicated, in particular which information bidder and target directors make available and which reasons they give to justify their position.

When target directors recommend shareholders to accept a takeover proposal, the offer is called *friendly*, while a bid that directors recommend to reject is called *hostile*. In hostile offers, bidder and target directors advance two opposite standpoints, thus making shareholders' decision even more dilemmatic (cf. Brennan et al. 2010). In this paper I compare friendly and hostile bids made to companies listed in the UK stock market, to show how the two different argumentative situations (van Eemeren 2010) entail different strategic maneuvers that bidder and target directors activate in order to bring the eventual decision towards the desired outcome.

## 2. *The communicative interactions implied by takeover bids*

Through a takeover bid, the bidder aims to obtain the control over the target so that the two companies can be combined through merger or acquisition. The bid coincides with a public proposal made to target shareholders, i.e. those people who have invested in the company by buying shares. The ownership of listed companies is dispersed across hundreds of investors so that it is practically impossible to negotiate a deal with each of them individually. Thus the bid represents an instrument with which to reach all shareholders and seek their approval. If shareholders accept the offer and sell their shares, the control over the target is transferred to the bidder. The new board and executive team assume the delicate task of integrating the two businesses in order to realize the benefits expected at the outset.

The public offer is often preceded by negotiations involving both firms' managers and directors (cf. Bruner 2004; Duhaime & Schwenk 1985). It goes without saying that, in case of agreement in the pre-offer phase, the bid will be friendly. Similarly, a bid which follows unsuccessful negotiations will be hostile. Pre-offer negotiations, however, are not necessary, as the bidder may immediately and directly address target shareholders. In this case, the bid is named *unsolicited* and its friendly/hostile mood (Morck et al. 1988) depends on whether the target board recommends acceptance or rejection of the offer.

From an argumentative viewpoint, the bidder necessarily holds the standpoint that accepting the offer would be expedient for target shareholders. We could consider it a *virtual standpoint* (van Eemeren et al. 1993: 104-105), entailed by the felicity conditions of the speech act "to propose" (cf. Colombetti 2001): by making a proposal, the speaker is committed to the claim (i.e. the standpoint) that the proposed action is expedient for the hearer. Of course, a proposal might be insincere. In this case, the speaker proposes something that he/she actually believes it is expedient only for him/herself, though the opposite belief is externalized.

It is not by chance that "pro-shareholders" and "pro-managers/directors" reasons are distinguished within the impressive literature in financial economics which discusses the motives behind takeover bids (cf. Trautwein 1990; Shleifer & Vishny 1991; Berkovitch & Narayanan 1993; Andrade et al. 2001). In fact, managers/directors should, in line with their institutional commitments, pursue a takeover only if this is expected to benefit the company and, in particular, its shareholders. However, because of agency problems, their decision to acquire

another company might be due only to motives of personal benefit, such as power, prestige, etc. (cf. Amihud & Lev 1981; Morck et al. 1990). A takeover bid benefits bidder shareholders if the implied acquisition increases the value of their shares. This can occur because the combination produces synergies, i.e. additional value which could not be created without the acquisition (cf. Damodaran 2005: 3). The possibility to obtain synergies allows the bidder to pay a premium (i.e. a price above the value of the target), which coincides with target shareholders' gain and constitutes the main rationale for tendering their shares. Obviously, it might also be the case that the bidder pays an excessively high price (i.e. a price including a premium which cannot be recovered by the synergies produced by the acquisition), so that only target shareholders will gain (cf. Roll 1986). However, it is also possible that the bidder decides to acquire a company because the latter is undervalued by the stock market (cf. Shleifer & Vishny 2003). In this case, the bidder and its shareholders would gain while target shareholders would lose.

Instead, the speech act performed by the target board corresponds to an advice (recommendation), in which an entailment of benevolence is certainly involved, but the propositional content can refer either to the acceptance of the offer or to its rejection. In fact, the board is not proposing a deal, but, in relation to a proposed action, is recommending the best course of action to the decision-maker. If directors recommend the acceptance of the offer, they are committed to the virtual standpoint that this is expedient for target shareholders; otherwise, their implicit claim is that rejecting the offer would be desirable.

Numerous studies have also been devoted to the motives behind target directors' recommendation to shareholders (Easterbrook & Fischel 1981; Walkling & Long 1984; Sudarsanam 1995; Rhodes-Kropf & Viswanathan 2004). Similarly in this case, motives coinciding with the fulfillment of the institutional commitments towards shareholders (the shareholders-welfare hypothesis) are distinguished from decisions affected by agency problems (the management-welfare hypothesis). In particular, it is suggested that target managers and directors could be concerned with the implications of the acquisition on their job position rather than with maximizing shareholder value.

Now, since target shareholders are less informed than managers and directors (asymmetric information), they often lack the premises for determining whether an offer is expedient, whether the bidder is paying an adequate price, whether the board's recommendation is credible, etc.



In order to empower target shareholders' decision-making, strict takeover rules exist in all developed financial systems, imposing communicative (disclosure) and non-communicative commitments on companies. In my analysis I focus specifically on bids addressed to companies listed on the UK stock market, as it is the Europe's most active takeover market. In the UK, takeover bids are subject to the *City Code on Takeovers and Mergers*, which implements the *European Directive on Takeover Bids* (cf. Haan-Kamminga 2006).

The City Code represents a framework for conducting the *bid*, establishing, in particular, the kind of information that must be disclosed, who and when should disclose such information, and defining appropriate standards of care when publishing a document. In fact, echoing the European Directive, the City Code states that "shareholders must be given sufficient information and advice to enable them to reach a properly informed decision as to the merits or demerits of an offer" (Rule 23).

As one of its purposes is to avoid inequalities of information among investors (see *General Principle 1* and *Rule 20. Equality of information*), the Code emphasizes the importance of absolute secrecy before any public announcement is made (*Rule 2.1*) and requires an announcement to be made in any case when rumors and speculation emerge (*Rules 2.2; 2.5*).

Once a statement is published, the *offer period* begins, during which the companies concerned are subject to the commitments imposed by the Code. An important distinction must be drawn between the *announcement of a possible offer* (*Rule 2.4*) and that involving a *firm intention to make an offer* (henceforth, *firm intention announcement*) (*Rule 2.5*). The former, usually made by the potential target, does not pre-commit the potential bidder; instead, the firm intention announcement, unless special circumstances materialize, must be followed by the offer, which is formally made with the publication of the offer document.

The bidder must cover numerous points in the offer document, including the financial terms of the offer and the consequences of the implied combination for the target company, its management and employees. The Code recognizes in this way that the takeover bid is more than a trading of securities, as it brings about a corporate combination which might significantly affect the target company and its stakeholders. Furthermore, a burden of proof is imposed, as the long-term

commercial justification of the offer should be stated (*Rule 24*).

After the offer document has been issued, the Code requests target directors to advise target shareholders by publishing a document in which the directors express an opinion about the offer and state the reasons for forming such an opinion (*Rule 25*).

Therefore, two fundamental interactions occur during the offer period: one between the bidding company and the target shareholders, in which the former makes an offer to the latter; the other between target directors and shareholders, in which the former gives advice to the latter. Both interactions envisage argumentation, as the Code requests the bidder to motivate the offer from a commercial viewpoint and the target board to argumentatively support its opinion.

### *3. Comparing argumentation in friendly and hostile offers*

The friendly/hostile distinction is particularly relevant when we consider these two interactions from the argumentative point of view, in relation to the issue *p*: “*should target shareholders accept the offer?*”. In fact, a friendly offer entails the bidder and the target boards of directors holding the same positive standpoint *+/p*: “*target shareholders should accept the offer*”; instead, a hostile offer brings a different confrontational trigger (cf. van Eemeren & Garssen 2008:12): the bidder virtually holds the previously indicated positive standpoint (*+/p*), while the target board, by recommending the rejection of the offer, has to defend the opposite standpoint *-/p*: “*LSE shareholders should not accept (reject) NASDAQ’s offer*”. Notably, in relation to this issue, the City Code only imposes a burden of proof on the target board.

As the (in-)expediency of an offer is far from being immediately evident, shareholders will at least cast doubt on these standpoints. Thus, in both friendly and hostile offers, target shareholders assume the role of antagonist within an argumentative discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, 2004), which envisages two different initial situations within the two types of offer.

In order to compare how the two different situations are argumentatively dealt with, I have considered several cases of UK takeover bids made in the 2006-2010 period. In this paper I will focus on two prototypical cases: the friendly bid made by *BAE Systems* to *Detica* (July 2008) and the hostile bid that *NASDAQ* made to

the *London Stock Exchange* (December 2006). Both offers were in cash. The first one was accepted, while the second one was rejected by shareholders.

An important difference between friendly and hostile cases emerges already when we consider the relevant texts published during the offer period. As Table 1 shows, the crucial communicative events in the friendly case (the acquisition of Detica by BAE Systems) consist of two documents: the firm intention announcement and the offer document. Moreover, an inspection of these two texts reveals that the content of the offer document is largely anticipated in the announcement (cf. Palmieri 2010).

BAE-DETICA (friendly)		NASDAQ-LSE (hostile)	
28.07.08	Announcement of firm intention to make an offer	20.11.06	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of firm intention to make an offer</li> <li>• LSE's response to NASDAQ's announcement</li> <li>• NASDAQ's response to LSE's rejection</li> </ul>
31.07.08	Offer document	12.12.06	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer document</li> <li>• LSE's Rejection statement</li> </ul>
		19.12.06	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSE's 1<sup>st</sup> defense circular</li> <li>• NASDAQ's response statement</li> </ul>
		08.01.07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NASDAQ's 1<sup>st</sup> response circular</li> <li>• LSE's response statement</li> </ul>
		18.01.07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSE's 2<sup>nd</sup> defense circular</li> <li>• NASDAQ's response statement</li> </ul>
		23.01.07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NASDAQ's 2<sup>nd</sup> response circular</li> <li>• LSE's response statement</li> <li>• NASDAQ's response</li> </ul>
		05.02.07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LSE's 3<sup>rd</sup> defense circular</li> <li>• NASDAQ's response statement</li> </ul>

Table 1. Documents displayed in friendly and hostile bids.

Table 1. Documents displayed in friendly and hostile bids.

The reason why the friendly case does not include a document specifically devoted to the target directors' reasoned opinion is that the latter is included into the bidder's documents (see later).

The hostile case is evidently more complex, since the views of the bidder and the target directors are communicated separately: the firm intention announcement is immediately followed by the statement from the target, while the offer document is - so to say - replied to by the defense circular, through which the target board attempts to persuade shareholders to reject the offer by argumentatively justifying its position. Moreover, further response statements are published, by means of new announcements (press releases) or circulars to shareholders. As Haan-Kamminga (2006) suggests, hostile bids entail a battle between the two boards, which can be fought at three levels: (1) a financial battle, in which the target board tries to make use of various anti-takeover measures, which regulations try to prevent as much as possible; (2) a legal battle, in which the

companies litigate in a court; (3) a communication (or media) battle. From Table 1, it can be seen that a communication battle has been fought by the London Stock Exchange (LSE) and NASDAQ.

The two different situations can be seen from the beginning of the offer period. In fact, friendly offers typically begin with a *joint* announcement:

*1. The boards of directors of BAE Systems and Detica announce that they have reached agreement on the terms of a recommended cash offer to acquire the whole of the issued and to be issued share capital of Detica (BAE-Detica, firm intention announcement, 28.VII.2008).*

From this statement we infer that the public offer was preceded by a successful negotiation involving managers and directors, in which, presumably, argumentation was relevantly involved as is typically the case in negotiation dialogues (cf. Walton & Krabbe 1998).

In the hostile case, two distinct press releases were issued: NASDAQ individually announced its intention to make an offer (ex. 2), then the LSE board reacted on the same day by publishing its own announcement (ex. 3):

*2. The Board of NASDAQ announces the terms of Final Offers to be made by NAL, a wholly owned subsidiary of NASDAQ, for the entire issued and to be issued share capital of LSE. (NASDAQ, firm intention announcement, 20.XI.2006).*

*3. The Board of London Stock Exchange Group plc (the "Company") rejects Nasdaq's final offer to acquire the Company for 1243p per share in cash. The Board firmly believes that the proposal, which represents only a 2 per cent premium to the market price at the close of business on 17 November 2006, substantially undervalues the Company and fails to reflect its unique strategic position and the powerful earnings and operational momentum of the business. (LSE, Statement re: Nasdaq final offer, 20.XI.2006).*

### *3.1. The argumentative coordination in friendly bids*

As Table 2 shows, the offer document is divided in two parts, the first being the letter of recommendation from the target board and the second being the letter from the bidder representing the formal offer. Most of the paragraphs of the target letter (e.g. "the offer", "irrevocable undertakings", "United Kingdom Taxation", etc.) actually coincide with those contained in the bidder's, as the former reports the same text of the latter and explicitly refers to it (through expressions such as "as stated in BAE's letter"; "Your attention is drawn to the

letter from BAE Systems Holdings on pages 10 to 20”).

Part I: Letter of recommendation from the Chairman of Detica Group plc (pp. 6-9)	Part II: Letter from BAE Systems (Holdings) Limited (pp. 10-20)
1. Introduction	1. Introduction
2. The Offer	2. The Offer
3. Background and reasons for recommendation	3. Irrevocable undertakings and interests in Detica
4. Irrevocable undertakings	4. Information relating to BAE Systems
5. Break fee arrangements	5. Information relating to Detica
6. Management and employees	6. Background to and reasons for the Offer
7. Detica Share Schemes	7. Financing of the Offer
8. United Kingdom Taxation	8. Intentions regarding Detica, staff, and employees
9. Further information	9. Detica Share Schemes
10. Action to be taken	10. Break fee and Implementation Agreement
11. Recommendation	11. United Kingdom taxation
	12. Overseas Shareholders
	13. Procedure for acceptance of the Offer
	14. Settlement
	15. Delisting, comp. acquisition and re-registration
	16. Further information
	17. Action to be taken

Table 2. Macro-structure of the BAE-Detica's offer document (31 July 2008).

Table 2. Macro-structure of the BAE-Detica's offer document (31 July 2008).

Two paragraphs immediately capture the attention of the argumentation analyst: “Background and reasons for the offer”, located in the bidder’s letter (par. 6) and “Background and reasons for the recommendation”, located in the target’s letter (par. 3).

The first one focuses on the reasonableness of the acquisition, as the reasons that led to the decision of pursuing the offer are exposed:

#### 1. 4. *Background to and reasons for the Offer*

BAE Systems has identified the national security and resilience (NS&R) sector as an evolving and growing sector benefiting from increasing priority government attention. A strategic objective of BAE Systems is to establish security businesses in its home markets. While BAE Systems has been developing plans for substantial organic investment to pursue growth NS&R opportunities in these markets, the proposed acquisition of Detica provides an economically attractive and accelerated implementation of its strategy to address these opportunities.

[...] The combination of Detica’s well established customer relationships and technical capabilities together with BAE Systems’ system integration capabilities will result in a depth of financial and technical capability to address growth opportunities and better serve customers in the NS&R sector.

[...] BAE Systems’ existing activities and structure will provide a platform for Detica to apply its capabilities into the US Homeland Security market.

The business combination is expected to benefit from strong growth, consistent with the anticipated growth in the sector, and from cost synergies including benefits from more efficient internal investment. BAE Systems believes these benefits will enable the acquisition to achieve a return in excess of BAE Systems' cost of capital in the third full-year following completion. (BAE-Detica, *offer document*, p.12, 31.VII. 2008)

The acquisition is seen as subservient in realizing a "strategic objective of BAE", in line with an identified business opportunity (lines 2-3). In particular, the acquisition is expected to efficiently improve BAE's means for realizing its goals (lines 7-9). The integration of the two companies' respective strengths is emphasized and the benefits that BAE would bring to Detica are also indicated (lines 14-15). The bidder expresses its belief that the acquisition will produce a superior (bidder) shareholder return (lines 18-21).

Through all this information, the writer activates a pragmatic argumentation (Walton 1990, Rigotti 2008), in which the conditions for a happy joint action are made explicit: the realization of a goal benefiting both agents, the compatibility and integration of their respective means and even their improvement (cf. Rigotti & Palmieri 2010) .

The issue tackled in this paragraph concerns the expediency of the combination implied by the offer for the two companies involved and not the financial attractiveness of the offer for target shareholders. As BAE's bid was in cash, meaning that Detica shareholders would cease to invest in the company, one could be tempted to conclude that these arguments developed by the bidder are actually addressed to bidder shareholders and to the stakeholders that would be affected by the combination. Without overlooking the presence of a multiple audience during the offer period (notably in this respect, the City Code requests the offer document and the target board's opinion to also be sent to employees), I argue that there are two aspects that make the content of this paragraph relevant to the decision that target shareholders should make. Firstly, shareholders, as owners of the company, could also be concerned with the social and organizational implications that would occur in case of acceptance of the offer. Indeed, this is probably in the spirit of takeover rules, which request that shareholders receive information about the after-deal company. Secondly, as mentioned previously, a premium in the offer price can only be justified if the implied combination produces a value superior to such a premium. Otherwise,

either the price is excessively high or the bidder is attempting to buy an undervalued company. In the latter case, target shareholders would probably reject the offer. Following this interpretation, the bidder should dispel suspicions of undervaluation by convincing target shareholders that the proposed corporate acquisition makes sense from a financial viewpoint.

That said, we remark that neither Detica shareholders nor the bid itself are explicitly mentioned in the paragraph. In other words, the financial attractiveness of the offer is not directly discussed, as the focus is rather the possible acquisition that would follow the offer.

Indeed, the reasons why Detica shareholders should accept the bid are given by Detica directors in a specific paragraph of their recommendation letter:

#### *1. 5. Background to and reasons for the recommendation*

Detica's business strategy has been to become the pre-eminent consulting provider servicing the counter-threat agenda in both the UK and the US. [...]

As a result of its success in executing this strategy, the Detica Group has delivered compound annual growth of 39 per cent and 25 per cent in revenues and adjusted diluted earnings per share, respectively, over the five year period ended 31 March 2008. This growth in the business has been predominantly organic, supplemented by acquisitions including, most recently, those of DFI in 2007 and m.a.partners in 2006.

#### *Current Trading and Outlook*

The current financial year has started well with the Detica Group performing in line with the Board's expectations. [...] Detica's UK Government business continues to perform very well [...] As a result, the outlook for the Detica Group remains good and the Board's expectations for the current financial year remain unchanged.

#### *The Offer*

Notwithstanding the Directors' confidence in the prospects for the Detica Group, the approach by BAE Systems and level of the Offer is such that the Directors believe it provides Detica Shareholders with certainty of value at an attractive level, which reflects both the quality of the Detica business and its standing in its markets, and that Detica Shareholders should have the opportunity to realise

their investment in Detica. In addition, the Directors also recognise the benefits and enhanced opportunities available to Detica and its employees as part of the enlarged group since it will have increased resources to compete more fully and will benefit from the significant international footprint that BAE Systems will bring.

The Offer represents a premium of approximately 57 per cent to the Detica closing price of 281 pence on 17 July 2008, being the last business day prior to the announcement by Detica that it had received a preliminary approach which may or may not lead to an offer being made for Detica; approximately 66 per cent. to the volume weighted average closing price of approximately 265 pence per Detica share for the one month period to 17 July 2008; and approximately 70 per cent to the volume weighted average closing price of approximately 259 pence per Detica share for the six month period to 17 July 2008. (BAE-Detica, *offer document*, p. 7, 31.VII.2008)

In the first part, the board stresses the high growth achieved both organically (i.e. by implementing its business strategy) and inorganically (i.e. by small acquisitions). Then, the good prospects for the near future are confirmed. Such a very positive outlook is however offset by the value of BAE's offer. A "notwithstanding" indicates precisely that the good past and future performances of the company are not sufficient to reject the proposal in the given terms.

Based on the principle that "Detica Shareholders should have the opportunity to realise their investment in Detica" and on the presumed fact that the offer provides an attractive and certain value, the directors implicitly conclude that accepting the bid is preferable than continuing to invest in Detica as a standalone company.

The argument *from alternatives* is exploited here: "given two mutually exclusive actions - X and Y - if X is better than Y, X should be chosen". What makes tendering a better alternative is, according to Detica directors, that BAE's offer is in cash, which provides certainty, and that the price is very high. The latter aspect becomes a sub-standpoint that is justified through a comparison between the offer price and the pre-offer market price, which would demonstrate that a premium is included in the bid. More precisely, three different values are computed which, according to the reference day that is chosen, imply different levels of premium (lines 29-37).



This argumentation presupposes a general opinion (*endoxon*, see Rigotti 2008) that market prices are reliable indicators of Detica's value. Such an endoxon is combined with more specific data concerning the share price of Detica before the offer, whose computations are actually taken from the paragraph indicating the terms of the offer ("The offer"), which appears both in the bidder's letter and in the target's letter (see Table 2). Through the *model of critical discussion* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004) we can reconstruct an *opening stage*, in which the Detica board assumes the burden of proving that the offer price is attractive and establishes the just mentioned endoxon and data. In the *argumentation stage*, these material starting points become the premises which, once conjoined, activate an inferential connection (cf. Rigotti & Greco Morasso 2010) which allows directors to conclude that the offer is financially attractive.

Therefore, in friendly bids, the task of argumentatively defending the expediency of the offer in front of target shareholders is mainly accomplished by the target board. The bidder focuses on the justification for the implied acquisition (whose possible relevance for target shareholders has already been explained) and, remarkably, does not make its virtual standpoint explicit. Instead, the bidder seems to rely on the target directors' recommendation, which is explicitly referred to at the beginning of its letter:

6. Your attention is drawn to the letter of recommendation from the Chairman of Detica in Part I of this document, which sets out the reasons why the Detica Directors [...] consider the terms of the Offer to be fair and reasonable and unanimously recommend that all Detica Shareholders accept the Offer. (BAE-Detica, *offer document*, p.1, 31.VII.2008)

In other words, a distribution of tasks emerges between the two boards: the justification of the acquisition is a task entrusted to the bidder while the reasons for preferring to tender are developed by the target.

This distribution of tasks shows respect for each other's province and institutional role, which gives a better position to know. In particular, the assessment of the two alternatives (to sell or to continue investing) requires a valuation of the target's standalone prospects, which target managers and directors are in the best position to make. This argumentative coordination reflects the nature of the deal as a negotiated transaction between the two management teams, which in turn led to a friendly offer. It seems that the bidder has devoted all its

argumentative efforts to convincing target managers/directors to endorse the bid. Once this consent has been obtained, the bidder addresses target shareholders but refrains from advancing its main standpoint, namely that shareholders should accept the offer, and from argumentatively supporting such claim.

### *3.2. The argumentative battle in hostile offers*

A substantially different scenario occurred in the NASDAQ-LSE case, as can be deduced from Table 1. Pre-offer negotiations have been unsuccessful and the coordination of the two sides' positions is absent: NASDAQ's firm intention announcement does not include LSE's reasoned opinion and the offer document does not contain a letter from the LSE board.

The bidder's argumentative strategy is clearly affected by the T-directors' rejection. In the offer document, the bidder still defends the reasonableness of the implied combination:

## *7. Reasons for the Final Offers*

[...] The combination of NASDAQ and LSE will bring together two of the world's leading groups in the global exchange sector to the benefit of their respective users and the wider global financial community [...] (NASDAQ, *offer document*, 12.XII.2006)

However, unlike that found in friendly offers, the "hostile" bidder also argues in favor of the offer acceptance as these two examples show (the second referring to the hostile bid made by Centrica to Venture) :

8. An attractive offer which fully reflects both LSE's standalone prospects and an appropriate premium [...]. An offer price of 1,243 pence per LSE Ordinary Share represents:

- a 54 per cent. premium over the Closing Price on 10 March 2006, the Business Day immediately prior to LSE's announcement that it had received a pre-conditional approach from NASDAQ, as adjusted [...]
- a 40 per cent. premium to NASDAQ's indicative offer price of 9 March 2006, as adjusted for the LSE Capital Return;
- a 2 per cent. premium over the Closing Price on 17 November 2006, the Business Day immediately prior to the date of the announcement of the Final Offers (NASDAQ, *firm intention announcement*, 20.XI.2006)

9. Centrica believes that the Offer represents a compelling opportunity for Venture Shareholders to realise the value of their Venture Shares in cash at a significant premium to Venture's pre-bid speculation share price and at a time of continuing economic uncertainty and market volatility. (Centrica, *firm intention announcement*, 10.VII.2009)

If we compare these two examples with example (5) we find numerous similarities, in particular the focus put on the certainty provided by the offer and the attractive value of the bid computed by relying on the pre-offer share prices. The fundamental difference is that, in BAE's bid, these arguments are developed by the directors of the target (Detica), while in NASDAQ and Centrica's bids, the bidder put them forward after having advanced its standpoint. Thus, an evident attempt to replace the target directors in their advisory function has evidently been made, which seems to be a prelude to the institutional replacement that typically occurs after a hostile takeover succeeds. The reaction of the target directors can be seen in Table 1: the LSE Board makes use of a special text typology, the *takeover defense circular*, which is exclusively adopted for unfriendly proposals. It is a document of about 20 pages, combining written text, figures, graphs etc. The defense circular is characterized by an explicitly argumentative intention. The standpoint is already declared on the cover page, where it is spelled out as a directive speech act (e.g. "Reject NASDAQ's offer"). In the letter introducing the document, the board also assumes the burden of proof (typically with a sentence like "in this document we explain why we believe that you should reject the offer"). For reasons of space, I shall focus on one specific aspect, namely the value of the price offered, which represents a crucial issue in hostile bids. While the bidder defends the attractiveness of the offer price on the basis of pre-offer share prices (as the target board does in friendly bids), the target relies on alternative methods. Implicitly, the endoxon stating that market prices are reliable indicators of value is questioned, so that another kind of data must be invoked (in the opening stage) in order to determine the standalone value of the target and to infer (in the argumentation stage) the expediency or not of the offer. The method used by the LSE board is based on a particular form of analogy argument, in which the value of LSE is estimated through a relative valuation based on the *price-to-earnings ratio* (P/E) of comparable companies.

10. *Standalone value is not being recognized*<

Nasdaq's offer of 1,243 pence per ordinary share represents a multiple of 24.7

times the Exchange's forecast adjusted basic EPS for the 12 months to 31 December 2006. This values your company below the trading multiples of virtually all other major listed exchanges. [*graph comparing the P/E ratio of numerous other exchanges*](LSE, *defense circular*, p. 9, 19.XII.2006)The rationale behind the use of earnings multiples is based on the assumption that the relation between *stock price* and *earnings* (P/E ratio) should be the same for companies sharing some essential characteristics, in particular growth, risk and cash flows (cf. Damodaran 2005). Therefore, by applying the P/E of such similar companies to the earnings of LSE, we obtain an estimate of the LSE price. Thus, at this point the crucial issue is to establish the set of similar companies (peer group). In fact, by considering or excluding some firms in the peer group, the eventual result might differ significantly. It is not by chance that, in its response document, NASDAQ criticizes the choice made by LSE:

11. The analysis in the LSE Defence Document is based on 2006 P/E multiples for many different types of exchanges from all over the world. [...] we question why a cash equities exchange chooses to compare itself with businesses as diverse as a commodity futures exchange, a derivatives and physical energy marketplace and an electronic derivatives and options exchange. (NASDAQ's response, 8.I.2007)

Having refuted the endoxon on which the LSE's value case was based, NASDAQ selects the data which correspond to its own criterion of selection (cash equities exchange). In this way, a different value is obtained which would bring to conclude that the offer actually includes a premium. Interestingly, an intense discussion by distance now takes place, as LSE reacts again by giving further reasons - based this time on an *appeal to expert opinion* - why its value case was actually correct:

12. Nasdaq wrongly claims that the Exchange's peer group is restricted to European exchanges. This is not the view of financial experts who have provided "fairness opinions" for recent precedent exchange transactions [*a list of analysts' opinions follows*] (LSE, *second defense circular*, p. 14, 18.I.2007).

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis of friendly and hostile takeover proposals, which was discussed in this paper, allows comparison of argumentation in two different situations of the same type of social interaction. Friendly offers envisage a situation in which the two arguers have already found an agreement. This brings a coordinated public

argumentation where the decision-making audience is addressed. Each side limits itself to tackling the sub-issue that its institutional position allows to deal with at best and for which the regulation has imposed a burden of proof. Thus, the proposal maker refrains from arguing in favor of its proposal, because this is already done by someone being in a better *position to know*. In hostile offers, the argumentative “rate” increases, as more texts are published and more specific arguments are advanced in support of the standpoint. This suggests that companies engaged in a takeover deal consider argumentation as a relevant instrument in realizing their objectives. An argumentative battle emerges in which each side seeks to impose its own analysis against the other’s one. In particular, the endoxa on which the other side bases its own argumentation are criticized in order to prevent some information from becoming the premises of arguments that would prove the opposite standpoint. More generally, it emerges that argumentation is extremely important in determining which information is relevant in financial decisions. The analysis of takeover bids clearly confirms that financial communication cannot be reduced to the disclosure of private information. Numerous data, being private or already public information, acquire or lose their relevance by being argumentatively elaborated.

## NOTES

**[i]** In modern public corporations shareholders elect the Board of Directors who hire the executive managers and monitor them on behalf of shareholders. In practice, however, directors are more closely related to managers rather than shareholders. The Chief Executive Officer is usually also a member and sometimes even the Chairman of the Board of Directors. In any case, conflicts or disagreements between managers and directors are rarely externalized so that, from an argumentative viewpoint, they advance and defend the same standpoint in relation to an emerging issue. For this reason, in this paper managers and directors are not systematically distinguished, although they cover two different institutional positions.

**[ii]** In financial economics, the relationship between corporate managers/directors and shareholders has been typically interpreted in the framework of agency theory (Ross 1973; Jensen & Meckling 1976). An agency relationship arises when one person (the principal) engages another person (the agent) to perform a service on his/her behalf. This agreement, which in general entails a certain delegation of decision-making, is subject to several conflicts of interest, as the agent, if not properly incentivized, might be tempted to pursue

his/her own goals instead of being fully committed to the interests of the principal.

**[iii]** From a legal point of view, in a merger one company is absorbed into the other and ceases to exist. Instead, the acquisition of the majority or all the shares brings the delisting of the acquired company, which becomes a subsidiary of the acquiring one. Economists as well as financial professionals usually adopt the terms *merger*, *acquisition* and *takeover* interchangeably, because the distinction is often relevant for law or accounting and less for the business and financial implications on the relevant stakeholders. On this point, see also Bruner (2004: p.1); Grinblatt & Titman (1998).

**[iv]** Sometimes, it also happens that an activist shareholder openly manifests disagreement with one of the advanced standpoints, even trying to persuade fellow shareholders to accept/reject the offer. For an example of such mixed discussions, see Palmieri (2008b).

**[v]** This research is based on my PhD dissertation (Palmieri 2010), in which ten cases of friendly bid and ten cases of hostile bid have been considered.

**[vi]** In my PhD dissertation I have shown that every paragraph of the BAE's firm intention announcement ("The Offer", "Irrevocable Undertakings", "Information relating to BAE Systems", "Information relating to Detica", "Background to and reasons for the Offer", "Background to and reasons for the recommendation", "Recommendation", "Financing of the Offer", "Management and employees", "Detica Share Schemes", "Disclosure of interests in Detica relevant securities", "Break Fee and Implementation Agreement", "Delisting, compulsory acquisition and re-registration") reappears in the offer document with the identical content.

**[vii]** Hostile takeovers are often disciplinary (cf. Grinblatt & Titman 1998, pp. 674-675): the bidder intends to remove existing target managers and gain from a better management of the firm's assets.

**[viii]** In the cases considered in my PhD dissertation (Palmieri 2010), I found two different strategies adopted by target directors in order to prove the price's inadequacy: relative valuation of the target standalone value, which is based on analogy reasoning, and asset revaluation made by an external valuer, which is based on an appeal to authority.

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