ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Arguing From Clichés: Communication And Miscommunication

You should always try to avoid the use of clichés. (anonymous)

1. Clichés Don't Grow on Trees – Introducing Clichés

Following the unprecedented growth and dissemination of information and the widespread access to it through the media, we are increasingly experiencing the use of *clichés,* old and new, unchanged and altered, famous and anonymous: 'Life imitates art', 'All the world's a stage', 'It's a small world', 'Money talks', 'Time is money', 'Money does not grow on trees', 'Traduttore, traditore', 'Cherchez la femme', 'the man in the street', 'political correctness', 'I promise to love you until death do us part', 'Men and women are different: Vive la différence!', 'Elementary, my dear Watson', and so on. These frequently recycled expressions are looked upon as unquestionable truths or at least as 'le mot juste' by many people. Some, however, dismiss them as "clichés".

This paper is devoted to clichés. Not to discard them, but to make some observations about their relevance to argumentation and their potential for miscommunication. Actually, we claim that certain clichés are crucial to argumentative discourse, and that their capacity for building arguments is closely linked to their liability to trigger divergent interpretations.

We propose a pragmatic and rhetorical approach to the concept of cliché and its functions in argumentation. This approach takes into consideration three major elements in the dynamics of clichés, the disregard of which may lead to misinterpretations:

1. there is no complete overlap between the form and the function of the lexical entitities that underlie clichés

2. many clichés exhibit a balance between a general scope and a specific focus on certain topoï for which a particular audience is expected to have a particular

preference at a particular time in a particular context
3. there is an inherent tension between the explicit and the implicit functioning of a cliché in argumentation

Cliché is a word with a negative ring to it. When you say "This is a cliché" about an opinion voiced by a partner in conversation, you usually imply that s/he is yielding to popular unreflected opinion, that s/he is just repeating something constantly circulating in the mental marketplace of a certain discourse community. A cliché is then seen as a commonplace, the collective consensus speaking through the mouth of an individual without involving his/her own critical thinking (Lerner: 1956, Ricks: 1980). Maybe what a cliché stands for is not blatantly untrue to a rational observer, as a *prejudice* usually is. But it is still likely to be seen as a crude and simplified way of looking at things that deserve a deeper and less biased consideration.
It is not easy to come to grips with clichés because their form does not display any regular patterns, their structure is difficult to capture and their occurrences impossible to predict. Whether the coinage of clichés is ascribed to well-known or to anonymous sources, it is their distribution and frequency that eventually decides their subsequent evolution.
Generally speaking, cliché seems to be a rather elitist word. Popular wisdom is not likely to come as close to the truth as a well-educated, highly trained and critical mind, such as the typical academic intellectual. Cliché, with its derogatory value load, is a word that Plato, that outspoken critic of the masses, could have used. It would have come less natural to Aristotle with his respect for 'doxa', for tradition and general opinion. We will side with Aristotle on this issue and try to show that clichés fulfil no negligible role even in informed discourse, rational argumentation and creative problem-solving dialogue.

2. What's in a Cliché? – Defining Clichés
Clichés are often defined as stereotypical forms that have been proliferating in many areas of life, such as art, philosophy, behaviour, and language. Whether we like them or not, they represent an important ingredient in verbal and non-verbal communication and are meant to establish or signal common ground. Our education is, after all, based on certain fixed patterns of thinking and speaking.
The origin of the word cliché can be traced back to the technical jargon of the French printing trade in the nineteenth century. It denoted a cast obtained by dropping a matrix face downwards upon a surface of molten metal on the point of

cooling (Howard: 1986). It may be an echoic word since it imitates the plopping sound that the matrix made as it fell into its hot bath, which is rendered in English by 'click' and 'clack', as has been pointed out by Redfern, who adds:

Because of its origins, together with 'stereotype' in printing, and its later extension to photography, the term parallels the development of modern technology. Imitation, identical reproduction (cloning, before its time), such associations led on to the figurative meaning (because reproducibility entails wear and tear) of mechanized mental processes and textural fatigue. (1989: 8)

According to Redfern, "famous quotations become clichés when they are trivialized by inappropriate use, for example: 'To be or not to be', parroted when a footling decision has to be taken" (1989: 41). He considers that *kitsch* is "the twisting of clichés to non-productive ends" (1989: 61).

Some dictionary definitions tend to draw a fine line between cliché as a repetitive formula, and *stereotype* as a more negatively loaded and oversimplified evaluative formula and mental attitude. Thus the word cliché is defined as "a stereotyped expression, a commonplace phrase" by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), "a hackneyed phrase or expression; also the idea expressed by it; a hackneyed theme or situation" by the *Longman Webster English College Dictionary* (1985), and "a form of expression that has been so often used that its original effectiveness has been lost" by the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995). The word stereotype is defined as "something continued or constantly repeated without change; a preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception" by the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), as "somebody or something that conforms to a fixed or general pattern; esp. a standardized, usu. oversimplified, mental picture or attitude that is held in common by members of a group" by the Longman Webster English College Dictionary (1985), and as "disapproving (a person or thing that represents) a fixed set of ideas that is generally held about the characteristics of a particular type of person or thing, which are (wrongly) believed to be shared by all the people and things of that type" by the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995).

As can be seen in the definitions above, the most common connotations of the term stereotype are overwhelmingly negative, which is not always the case with clichés. *Stereotypes* are conceived of as subjective and prejudiced speech and thinking habits, as well as the label of disapproval given by a person to another person's generalisations (Missimer: 1990). Unlike clichés, which apply mostly to

verbal and visual expression, stereotypes are especially used in connection with human types, attitudes, as well as human perception and behaviour. In social psychology, the method of phenomenology has been used to highlight and account for various stereotyped classifications, which tend to perceive and evaluate people as specimens of a social type. However, Ichheiser (1949) provides a more complex and nuanced picture of social and psychological stereotypes. He emphasizes that, in spite of their predominantly negative evaluation, "the preformed stereotyped images about other people are certainly among the most important factors in the system of 'collective representations' necessary to guarantee a minimum of consensus for a group. They should not be lightly dismissed as 'prejudices'" (1949: 34). We subscribe to his claim that classificatory stereotypes contain both elements of truth and elements of falsehood. After a reconsideration of the linguistic form of clichés in 3. below, we will argue in 4. below for a new way of redefining clichés in terms of the relation between their linguistic form, on the one hand, and their discursive and rhetorical structure, on the other.

3. Words Don't Make the Cliché – The Linguistic Form of Clichés

In what follows we proceed to a reevaluation of the criteria usually applied to the definition and classification of clichés as distinct from *idioms, euphemisms*, and other more or less fixed linguistic expressions.

Clichés have been studied by scholars from different disciplines, such as linguistics, literary studies, psychology, sociology, and political studies, to name but a few. After examining the items in Partridge's *Dictionary of Clichés,* Luelsdorff (1981) has analysed their phonological, syntactic and semanic features, and makes the distinction between clichés exhibiting nominal, verbal or sentence structures. Whereas Luelsdorff focuses on the strictly linguistic features of clichés, Howard (1986) takes a step further, by discussing various subtypes of clichés in terms of idiomaticity and distinguishes between non-idiomatic and idiomatic clichés.

Of more recent date is the research carried out by Gramley and Pátzold (1992) on so-called 'prefabricated language', namely multi-word units or lexical phrases, including clichés. They discuss the effects and functions of clichés in connection with an analysis of the wider category of fixed expressions. Like Redfern (1989), they claim that clichés fulfil an important social function and can be assigned even a positive role in those areas of human interaction where consciously thought-out language is unusual, if not inappropriate, such as funerals, disasters,

the writing of references and testimonials.
Concerning the distinction between an *idiom* and a cliché, Gramley and Pátzold are quoting Brook's conclusion: "Whether we call a phrase an idiom or a cliché generally depends on whether we like it or not" (1981: 14). This statement appears to confirm our own intuitions, even though it offers little enlightenment about the nature of clichés. It is precisely at this point that a discussion of the defining features of clichés should actually start. None of the studies mentioned above has succeeded in pinning down the properties that distinguish clichés from other related linguistic expressions such as idioms. In trying to establish linguistic parameters and comparative default features for clichés, the authors overlook the crucial fact that clichés can hardly represent a linguistic category, but rather a pragmatic and a rhetorical category. In other words, clichés cannot be treated and classified as syntactic and/or lexical entities, i.e. according to grammatical form and structure, but rather as functional elements made up of longer or shorter stretches of words, from one word to a whole utterance. This insight may help to explain why both idiomatic and non-idiomatic expressions can acquire the value of a cliché, as can any other linguistic item in a particular context. Makkai (1972) expresses a similar view in this respect: "Some clichés are idioms and some idioms are clichés, but neither group includes the other fully".

Like *idioms, euphemisms* represent still another shifting pragmatic category that may turn into and function as clichés. An increasingly popular example is Sir Robert Armstrong's famous statement during the cross-examination in which he tries to provide a justification for not having reported everything he knew in the Spy Catcher case. When asked why he did not tell the authorities everything he knew and withheld important information, his reply was: "I have been economical with the truth". This example is symptomatic for the way in which many euphemisms are more politically biased nowadays. As a result of the growing influence of the concept of 'political correctness' in several areas of social and political life, an increasing number of 'politically correct' terms have emerged lately, some of them replacing older, no longer appropriate ones. Thus, the former 'Swedish Board of Immigration' has recently been renamed with a strategically more fitting name, i.e. the 'Swedish Board of Integration', which is generally perceived as an attempt to avoid the overuse of the negatively loaded word 'immigration'.
Are there clichés specific to particular professions? On the one hand, there is a 'jargonisation' of all-purpose clichés, such as 'deliver the goods', which is

increasingly used institutionally, on the other, there is an emergence of everyday clichés adapted from established institutional discourse types, such as 'to know the ropes', or 'cast the anchor', borrowed from seafaring jargon. Howard refers to these as 'occupational clichés' (1986: 90), while Ichheiser (1949) calls them 'occupational stereotypes' (1948: 33). Nowadays clichés are more widespread since they are used not only by professionals at the work place, but also by laymen outside the work place. More and more people are using, as well as misusing, clichés coined within various types of institutional discourse, such as journalese, advertising, legalese, political or medical jargon. This is why we propose to call them *institutional clichés*. The dynamics of institutional discourse is thus speeded up and this may account for the fact that some clichés become outdated and are gradually replaced with new ones.

Propaganda, another of those tired expressions one seldom hears nowadays because *public relations* has taken its place (or education, or consciousness-raising): the propagandist does not coax, wheedle, indoctrinate, or inveigle the public into accepting his point of view, but educates it or raises its consciousness. (Bolinger, 1980: 115)

Worth mentioning among institutional clichés are the ones originating in the theories of language and philosophy of language, such as 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously', 'The king of France is bald', 'Have you stopped beating your wife?'. These clichés are not simply recycled, but also reinterpreted, recontextualised and rediscussed both within and outside their institutional frame.

Gender clichés are age-old, but they have become so downgraded and deconstructed lately that they have already started to trigger their counter-clichés. For example, the masculine 3rd person pronoun 'he' used to act as the generic pronoun for both 'he' and 'she', whereas now it is normally used together with 'she', which in writing appears as 's/he'. Several writers have even made a point of consistently using 'she' instead of 'he' as a generic pronoun in their books. Moreover, many generic nouns ending in 'man', such as 'spokesman', 'chairman', have undergone an alteration, whereby 'man' has been replaced by 'person', as in 'spokesperson' and 'chairperson', the new clichés in the making.

An important category of clichés which are being institutionalised as often as they are being deinstitutionalised are *ethnic clichés*. They are as necessary as they can become infinitely dangerous in that they have a tendency to degenerate easily from outlines of recognizable national patterns of behaviour and mentality into

polarised, usually negative and distorted, value judgements. Past and modern history shows clearly that the misuse of such ethnic clichés can have most undesirable, even tragic, effects. Take a common cliché, like 'Swedes are blond and blue-eyed'. It probably started from a matter of fact observation, which may afterwards lend itself to a variety of more or less biased interpretations. According to one interpretation, which exists in Swedish, 'blue-eyed' also means 'innocent, not sophisticated, easy to be cheated'. An oversimplification and generalisation of this particular connotation would not only be false, but also misleading.

Are clichés specific to a culture, and to a certain age? Certainly every culture and every age have their own clichés, but there are also commonly shared clichés. While it is obvious that *culturespecific* and *time-specific* clichés may cause certain problems of understanding and interpretation, it is less obvious that each culture and each historical age is differently aware of the commonly shared clichés. For example, in our age, postmodernist clichés in the visual arts and popular culture represent meaningful and easily recognizable expressions of thinking patterns and values. Many more or less universally recognized clichés seem to have fostered their own 'subclichés' in different ages and communities. For instance, a cliché like "man is the measure of all things" has been frequently reinterpreted. Today, as we know, the meaning of 'man' can equally be interpreted less generically and more in terms of the contrast between the two poles of the dichotomy 'man' – 'woman'.

4. Clichés Revisited – Redefining Clichés as Discursive and Rhetorical Structures

As we have showed above, clichés are not definable in strictly linguistic terms. Like other complex elements of discourse, clichés have a multi-faceted structure: textual, ideational and pragmatic (Halliday 1989/85). When faced with a cliché we can notice one of these aspects, or two, or all of them. We may conceive of a cliché as a phrase, or a fixed expression (textual level). Or we may look upon a cliché as a certain idea, the propositional content of the particular phrase just mentioned or as a logical scheme underlying a number of stereotypical phrases as a generative matrix (ideational level). Or it may bring to mind a repetitive utterance or speech act (pragmatic level). Quite often all three aspects are involved in our evaluation of a cliché.

Can we find a *differentia specifica*, something that distinguishes clichés from other utteraces and ideas? In search of an answer to this question, we need to go back to Aristotle (Ross: 1949) and a very important distinction he made

concerning two kinds of knowledge: *apodictic* and *problematic.* By using this distinction in our definition of clichés, we intend to show their particularity and relevance to argumentation.

To Aristotle, apodictic knowledge is certain and conclusively proved. It cannot be doubted. Its primary domain is mathematics and logic. It is the goal of a theoretical science. *Problematic knowledge* on the other hand concerns our practical life. It is relevant to situations where we must choose a line of action. In such cases we need to make a judicious decision, perhaps by arguing back and forth, but no certitude can be reached.

By applying both of these concepts we propose a *rhetorical definition* of a cliché in keeping with the functional approach outlined in section 3. above:

A cliché is a problematic claim treated like an apodictic truth by a certain group in a certain socio-cultural setting. Typically, it derives its discursive efficiency from a simple structure with general applicability. As can be seen, this definition relies primarily on the ideational aspect but does not exclude the other dimensions. The reason for this choice of focus is its emphasis on the functions of clichés in argumentative reasoning. This definition opens up opposite perspectives on clichés at the same time, thus doing justice to the somewhat dualistic nature of this concept.

Let us now see what the definition above actually entails. It is based on antagonistic concepts which help explain the distinctive functions of clichés in argumentation. What we find is a series of four dichotomies:

1. *questionable vs unquestionable*

On the one hand, a cliché expresses something problematic in the sense that it could actually be otherwise. It is not merely a formal truth of a logical nature. It makes a statement about the world, and in so doing it restricts the possible ways of looking at a certain issue. This is how a cliché becomes such a powerful tool for establishing and maintaining a common perspective upon reality. On the other, this problematic aspect tends to be forgotten when the cliché is used. Typically, a cliché is not questioned by its adherents. That does not mean that they might not see its problematic nature if it were pointed out to them. But basically they tend to treat the cliché as something that can be taken for granted and that is not a proper subject for a debate. This dichotomy can be further clarified if we consider a very well-known cliché: ‘All men are equal’. It sounds uncontroversially true, especially because it expresses something highly desirable. However, on closer examination, it becomes problematic because of the underlying questions in search of evidence:

How do we agree on what ‘equal’ means? Is it a measurable concept?, Does it apply in all circumstances?, etc.

2. *implicit vs explicit*

Since a cliché sounds so familiar, it may look acceptable and unproblematic to most people. Its apparent simplicity makes it easy to recall and gives it a special openness, like in ‘All men are equal’.

However, its ironical counter-cliché comes to mind instantly, to remind us that everything can be implicitly challenged: ‘Some men are more equal than others’. The initial cliché is meant to adjust and ‘correct’ precisely this circulating cynical view. Its explicit message is backed by the implicit assumption that there are exceptions to all generally accepted rules.

3. *outsider’s perspective vs insider’s perspective*

On the one hand, this dichotomy endorses the outsider’s view as an unbiased and critical perspective which makes it possible to see clichés for ‘what they are’, namely more or less challenging propositions that can always be questioned. On the other hand, it endorses the insider’s perspective, which makes it possible to look at clichés with the trusting eyes of the one who sees them as established and reliable points of reference. To take the example above, the use of the concept ‘equal’ may vary from one discourse community to another and from one historical age to another. What is ‘equality’ to some may very well be meaningless or downright unacceptable to others.

4. *argumentative vs deductive*

This dichotomy refers to the functioning of clichés in argumentation. To understand this, we have to see how a cliché is integrated into an argumentatively backed knowledge claim. On the one hand, argumentation deals with problematic issues, where deductive certainty cannot be achieved, and the questionable character of clichés allows for a considerable openness. On the other hand, an argumentation sets out to convince, to reduce uncertainty and ideally to replace it with assurance. The apparent self-evidence of clichés satisfies this striving for a firm ground on which to build a stable line of reasoning.

Let us now look at the further specifications of the definition of a cliché. First, we say that a typical cliché has a simple structure and is of a general nature. It does not apply primarily to a single individual or event but to all items of a kind. This wide applicability of a cliché is important to its use in argumentation. Having a general scope, it can serve as the major premise of a syllogistic type of argument.

Or, in Toulmin's terms (1958), it can function as a warrant, relating a ground to some specific claim. Usually, a warrant should not in itself be the object of a debate. The quasi-apodictic quality of the cliché makes it well suited for its supportive function. Second, a cliché is valid only within a specific group. This feature is highly relevant to argumentation. It helps explain why an argument must be directed at a certain audience, whether this audience consists of some physically present persons or of an abstracted and idealized group operating only in the speaker's mind (cf Perelman's "universal audience", 1969). The argument is successful only as long as it takes into consideration what this group can agree upon as reasonable starting points for a line of reasoning. This includes group-specific clichés.

Clichés have a striking resemblance to the concept of *topos* in classical rhetoric. Topos is often translated into English by *commonplace,* and although this translation does not render the whole meaning of the Greek word, it matches the aspect of its meaning which comes closest to a cliché – a phrase or an idea known and accepted by many which could be put to good use in persuasion or, heuristically, taken as a starting point in the search for a specific truth in a concrete case.

In classical rhetoric, a distinction was made between *general* and *particular topics*, the former belonging to all kinds of discourse and the latter to specific types of discourse. In the same way, a distinction could be made between *all-purpose clichés,* anchored in the everyday cultural patterns of a community, and *institutional clichés,* shared by the members of a professionally restricted group, such as lawyers and scientists observant of a certain rhetorical paradigm. Toulmin (1958), among others, sees argumentation as field-specific. These fields could be related to sets of particular clichés, which are recycled in different areas.

5. Your Clichés Tell Us Who You Are: Functions and Malfunctions of clichés in Argumentation

In this section, we will take a closer look at the functions of clichés in argumentation. We will start from the basic assumption that clichés bridge the gap between the problematic and the apodictic poles of an argument. We will also discuss some aspects of clichés that are likely to give rise to divergent interpretations in a particular situation and how that may affect their functions in argumentative discourse.

Let us start with a simple cliché that acts as a prop in a line of argumentation. A

case in point is the following example. The political opposition in Sweden is known to continuously attack the social democratic government with arguments such as: 'The present government should be voted out of power, since unemployment [which is now unusually high in Sweden] can only be fought by setting the market forces free'. This type of argument is based on two powerful clichés which, although not self-evident in the strict sense, are not likely to be critically examined by supporters, or by unmotivated addressees. The first cliché functions as the *suppressed major premise*: 'Unemployment is bad and should be fought'. Probably, one could envisage a coherent argument against this view. But it still remains a cliché because most people who share this view do not feel that it should be interpreted as a controversial view that needs to be defended. They rest assured that all sensible people will agree. Actually, most people who think like this might not even have the impression that they are committed to a specific view but rather that they are just expressing an objective fact of life.
There is one more hidden cliché in the argument above, which functions as the *suppressed minor premise*. It could be expressed as follows: 'Social democrats indulge in thwarting the market'. This is a cliché of a different kind. Many people who hold this view are definitely aware that it is not a neutral, but a politically loaded truth and that others may completely disagree. Still, it is regarded by many as a sort of axiom, a political fact that need not be discussed and that should be readily accepted by any unbiased observer of the political scene. And finally, let us examine the argument itself, 'The present government should be voted out of power, since unemployment can only be fought by setting the market forces free'. This statement openly expresses the *conclusion*, the only explicit part of the argument.

In such a case, two important functions are associated with the cliché:
(a) it fulfils an ideological function by defining certain basic views about potentially controversial issues as being most accurate and relevant;
(b) it functions as a device for strengthening group cohesion: 'Show me what your clichés are, and I will tell you what company you keep'. We will return to these points shortly.

Clichés are of crucial importance to rhetorical argumentation for one simple reason: Argumentation must always start somewhere, and preferably with something generally accepted within its target group. The least controversial things are the commonly shared views that we take for granted without any

further critical thinking. Views that are constantly repeated in a way not inviting discussion are most likely to function as the shared axiomatic wisdom of a discourse community. Clichés can function as *premises* in argumentation, i.e. as agreed-upon beliefs in debatable issues, because they are normally accepted as suitable starting points for a line of reasoning. They may sometimes be *implicit*, as the *suppressed premises* above, since they are so well-known that they can easily be inferred by the listeners or readers. Actually, asserting them instead of presupposing them might even draw undue attention to them and consequently involve them in a debate as elements that can be scrutinized and questioned. Thus, the truncated syllogisms called enthymemes and considered by Aristotle as a characteristic of rhetoric, are typically conveyed by clichés. By being left unverbalised, the cliché must be supplied by the addressee. Certainly, that leaves plenty of room for indeterminacy – anyone can distort a cliché so as to fit their goal.

6. The Characteristic Features of a Cliché as a Source of Miscommunication

We will now discuss what we consider to be five major features of clichés. The intrinsic complexity and the complementarity of these features enables the clichés to function argumentatively in a predictable and efficient way. However, the more their efficiency is taken for granted, the more their conventional interpretation tends to be abandoned when it interferes with new context-sensitive reinterpretations, which are likely to bring about different effects perceptions.

1. Typical for a cliché is that it is *recycled in discourse*. As a matter of fact, this is how it becomes a cliché. It is used over and over again, explicitly or implicitly, to convey a socially accepted common ground or shared belief among the people discussing a particular topic within a particular field. In this way, a cliché acquires its quasi-apodictic character, which may sometimes be reduced to what is politically correct, serving as a constraint for so-called acceptable ways of reasoning.

Moreover, a circulating cliché tends to develop semantic ‘density’. It becomes permeated with additional connotations and acquires a multiplicity of meanings, which allow for wider acceptability. Sometimes, however, a recycled cliché may result in combinations of incompatible elements. Building an argument from clichés does not mean so much starting with a well-defined common ground as bridging two distinct positions by means of a comprehensive and flexible approach. The argumentative movement towards a common conclusion could be suitably illustrated by a triangle pointing upwards and resting on the cliché as its

base, which represents the diversity of opinions brought together by a common discursive practice.

2. Since they are the product of constant repetition, clichés are typically expressed by *formulaic expressions.* In certain situations clichés need to be explicitily mentioned or at least evoked, in order to be transmitted to members of the discourse group who are not yet fully socialised into it, to remind violators of decorum of the basic premises still in force or, simply as a way of reasserting them. Particularly for the last purpose, formulaic expressions can be seen to facilitate the articulation of a coherent line of argumentation. At the same time, their ready-made form makes them heavily dependent on context, thus allowing for a variety of interpretations.

In a dialectical discussion, however, these expressions need not function as catch-phrases which immediately support a claim, but as starters, feelers or stepping stones leading to more specific ideas developed during the ensuing dialogue. Clichés may be eventually reconsidered, but by then they will have already served their function as ready-made tools for opening up a new area to reflection.

3. Clichés are also important devices for *group cohesion*. Since clichés are socially rooted, they tend to present reality as reflected in a collective practice, by pointing back to the group(s) and to the the ideas that fostered them. More than any other element of social cognition, clichés discriminate between different groups, while at the same time serving as a means of identification for the members of each group. They can also fulfil a positive role by creating a greater awareness among the members of a particular group about the normality and acceptability of unfamiliar or unusual beliefs and customs observed in other communities. In this way, clichés help to shape a mentally and culturally coherent audience that can be collectively affected by the socially inclusive appeal of an ethical argument. Group cohesion can be established *intraculturally,* i.e. within and between ethnic groups or individuals belonging to the same culture or discourse community, but also *interculturally,* i.e. between ethnic groups or individuals belonging to different cultures.

4. Clichés tend to be *ideologically loaded*. Since clichés serve as rhetorical devices for orienting the members of a group in the social environment, they systematically influence people’s beliefs, value judgements and actions. In doing so, they fulfil an ideological function. This function becomes even more prominent in situations where political power is exerted by one group against another. The ideological function of clichés is important for rooting arguments in common ground, in order to guarantee their function as supporters of the general social

claims articulated by the group using them. Thus, clichés help maintain a common perspective which is essential for efficient argumentation.
While normally functioning as general matrices of meaning that other utterances adjust to, clichés also allow for contextualised meanings. This is why it is essential to be familiar with the various socio-political configurations of a particular culture, both synchronically and diachronically. Ignoring the clichés of certain areas of one's culture or of another culture deprives us of a crucial means for accessing discourse meaning and intentionality.
5. An interesting feature of clichés is that they tend to attract *counter-clichés.* As solutions to open-ended problems, clichés are not complete in themselves because they automatically trigger complementary alternatives. Between them, a cliché and a counter-cliché tend to structure an argumentative dialogue and give it pluridimensional orientation, dynamic intentionality and a higher potential for truthfulness. Politically left-wing and right-wing clichés may contradict each other, but they are also interrelated through a pattern of left-right polarisation.

7. Clichés in a Nutshell – Conclusions
The aim of this paper has been to examine and redefine clichés in an attempt to identify their argumentative functions, as well as their liability for miscommunication. We claim that clichés are crucial to argumentative discourse, and that their potential for building arguments is closely linked to their tendency to trigger divergent interpretations in certain contexts.
When redefining clichés, we argue that they do not represent a linguistic category, but rather a pragmatic and a rhetorical category, and we emphasize their dualistic nature. As a rule, a typical cliché has a simple structure with general applicability, which may account for its use and misuse in argumentation. A cliché may serve as the explicit/implicit premise, or as the explicit/implicit conclusion, in a syllogistic argument.
We started from the basic assumption that clichés bridge the gap between the *problematic* and the *apodictic* poles of an argument, which helps to explain why they tend to attract counterclichés. The analysis has led to the insight that building an argument from clichés does not mean so much starting with a well-defined common ground, as bridging two distinct positions by means of a comprehensive and flexible approach.
Due to the fact that clichés emphasize group cohesion and adherence to a particular ideology, they are often used as slogans which can give rise to conflicting interpretations when recycled by opposite socio-political groups.

We would like to conclude with what may very well turn out to be a cliché about clichés: we cannot do without them, but we had better watch out.

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