

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Nature Of Symptomatic Argumentation



1. Introduction

There seems to be general agreement among argumentation theorists that argumentation schemes are principles or rules underlying arguments that legitimise the step from premises to standpoints. They characterise the way in which the acceptability of the premise that is explicit in the argumentation is transferred to the standpoint. The argumentation scheme that has been used by an arguer determines the specific relation that is established between the explicit premise and the standpoint that is being justified. This relation is not a formal but a pragmatic relation.

Argumentation schemes play an important role in the evaluation of argumentation. In order to evaluate an argumentation, one must first determine which argumentation scheme is employed. Then it can be established whether the premise is in an adequate way linked to the standpoint. For this purpose, one has to answer the critical questions that go with the argumentation scheme that has been used.

The pragma-dialectical typology of argumentation schemes is designed to enable an adequate evaluation of argumentation. In this typology, three types of argumentation are distinguished:

1. *symptomatic* or 'token' argumentation, where there is a relation of concomitance between the premise and the standpoint;
2. *comparison* or 'similarity' argumentation, where the relation is one of resemblance; and
3. *instrumental* or 'consequence' argumentation, where there is a causal relation between the premise and the conclusion.

These three argumentation types are categorised based on the way in which the argumentation scheme concerned is to be evaluated. With each type of argumentation go corresponding assessment criteria that pertain to the relation that is characterised in the argumentation scheme. This means that a new

argumentation scheme should be distinguished only when it can be shown that “new” assessment criteria are needed to evaluate the corresponding type of argumentation.

Each of the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes represents a category that can be subdivided into a number of subtypes. The reason for distinguishing between subtypes is that evaluating the argumentations concerned requires more specific evaluation criteria. Argumentation based on analogy is, for instance, a subtype of comparison argumentation which is to be distinguished because the critical question ‘Are the things that are compared (X and Y) comparable’ needs further specification. This way of classifying the argumentation schemes results in a typology that meets the requirements of an adequate classification: its categories are clearly demarcated, homogeneous, mutually exclusive, and non of them is superfluous.

2. Theoretical and empirical research

In my doctoral dissertation on the pragma-dialectical typology of argumentation schemes I have tried to answer two questions

(Garssen 1997: 3-4). My first aim was to examine whether the pragma-dialectical typology of argumentation schemes is an optimal starting point for evaluating arguments. My second aim was to determine whether, and to what extent, the relations between premises and standpoints as they are perceived by ordinary language users, correspond with the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes.

In order to answer the question whether the pragma-dialectical typology is an optimal starting point, I made a comparison between the pragma-dialectical typology and other typologies of argumentation schemes – or similar notions like types of argumentation or modes of argument. This is a first step in establishing whether the typology is exhaustive. In this way it can be investigated whether the wide and varied argumentation types distinguished by others are all captured by the pragma-dialectical typology. In this endeavour, I analysed all major modern theoretical approaches of argumentation schemes. Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of approaches. First, those approaches that focus on evaluating arguments. These are the approaches inherent in the classification of types of argument in American textbooks on argumentation and debate. But they also include the classification of Hastings and that of Schellens. An approach that focuses on finding arguments is the New Rhetoric of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. Finally, there is Kienpointner’s approach, who puts the emphasis on the description of argumentative discourse by means of argumentation schemes. My

analysis makes it clear that there are notable similarities between the different classifications of argumentation schemes. This can largely be explained by the fact that the authors made use of the same sources and also influenced each other. Of course, there are many differences too. The first striking difference is the number of categories. In some classifications only three types of argument are distinguished, in others more than fifty. Other differences are related to the way the classifications are organised.

My comparison of the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes with the argumentation schemes proposed by others showed that there is a large conceptual overlap between the typological accounts that can be found in the various approaches examined. In most cases, the argumentation schemes appear to correspond well with one of the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes. Some can be seen as a variant of one of these schemes, while others can be regarded as a subtype. There is therefore no need to amend or expand the pragma-dialectical typology of argumentation schemes.

With regard to the treatment of causal argumentation and comparison argumentation, most approaches seem to agree. Leaving minor differences aside, these two types are in most approaches treated in the same way. This can not be said, however, of symptomatic argumentation.

According to the pragma-dialectical conception of this type of argument, in symptomatic argumentation, the argument is presented as if it is an expression, a phenomenon, a sign or some other kind of symptom of what is stated in the standpoint (Van Eemeren en Grootendorst 1992: 97). In the literature no analogon of this conception can be found that covers all the possible variants of symptomatic argumentation.

In the empirical part of my study, I have investigated to what extent the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes correspond with the pre-theoretical intuitions of ordinary language users. My empirical investigation focused on the question of whether the different types of argumentative relations as perceived by ordinary language users do match the pragma-dialectical argumentation schemes. Since no similar research regarding the intuitions of ordinary language users has hitherto been conducted, a new research method had to be developed. To this end, I have carried out several feasibility tests.

The nature of my research question posed an important restriction on the formulation of the instruction that was to be given to the respondents: it should

not contain any information concerning the argumentation schemes. Two methods of research appeared suitable: a characterising-grouping test and a critical response test. The characterising-grouping test is a pencil and paper test that actually combines two tests. First, the respondents had to characterise in their own words the relation between the premise and the standpoint in a series of twelve argumentations. Subsequently, they had to classify the argumentations in a number of groups and explain their groupings. Both the respondents' characterisation of the relation between premises and standpoints and their classification of the argumentations provide clues as to how the different kinds of relation between premises and standpoints are perceived.

The results of the characterising-grouping test indicate that the relation between the premise and the standpoint is adequately interpreted by the respondents. Most of them were able to offer informative and pragmatically appropriate reconstructions of the unexpressed premise, instead of just connecting the premise to standpoint by way of the so-called 'logical minimum'. Many characterisations that were given of the premise-standpoint relation indicated that the respondents had a more or less clear conception of causal argumentation and also of comparison argumentation. They were also quite capable of reconstructing the unexpressed premise of symptomatic argumentation. Most of them, however, did not explicitly refer to the specific kind of relation used in the latter type of argumentation. These results were confirmed by the results of the grouping test. In that test, the respondents classified the argumentations based on a relation of analogy quite well and the argumentations based on a causal relation reasonably well. Only a few, however, succeeded in classifying the symptomatic arguments correctly.

The critical response test is an altered replication of the characterising-grouping test: the respondents had to react to the argumentation by criticising the relation between the premise and the standpoint. The fact that there is a correspondence between their critical reactions and the standard critical questions going with the argumentation schemes indicates that they had a notion of the specific type of relation between the premise and the standpoint that was involved.

The results of the critical response test confirm the results of the characterising-grouping test. Most critical reactions indicate that the respondents discerned a relation between the premise and the standpoint that is pragmatic in nature – and that is more specific and more informative than the so-called 'logical minimum'. Many critical reactions could be interpreted as critical questions that go with the

argumentation schemes concerned. Not all critical reactions of the respondents, however, contained explicit or implicit references to the argumentation schemes. In their reactions to comparison argumentation, the respondents very often made use of verbal indicators of the relation of analogy; in reacting to instrumental argumentations, they sometimes used verbal indicators of the causal relation; in reacting to symptomatic argumentations, they only rarely used verbal indicators of the relation of concomitance, used in symptomatic argumentation.

All the results of my empirical research indicate that the respondents were not so familiar with the concept of symptomatic argumentation. These results show that symptomatic argumentation is more difficult to understand than the other two argumentation types. The results of both the theoretical part and the empirical part of my dissertation make clear that symptomatic argumentation is a more heterogeneous category than the other two. A specification of the various variants of symptomatic argumentation is required to provide a better insight in its nature. A first step in this endeavour of making an inventory of the different uses of symptomatic argumentation is to start analysing how this type of argument is conceptualised in other approaches and next to determine how the pragma-dialectical notion of symptomatic argumentation relates to similar types of argument distinguished by others.

3. Symptomatic argumentation

Now I shall discuss some notions of symptomatic argumentation as proposed in modern approaches of types of argument. Most textbooks on argumentation and debate that are since the beginning of this century published in the United States pay attention to reasoning and the evaluation of argumentation. There are usually chapters on types of argument and the tests that go with them. The classifications and tests that are offered enable the debater to evaluate his own arguments and to anticipate counter argumentation. A representative classification is that of McBurney and Mills presented in *Argumentation and Debate Techniques of a free society* (1964).

McBurney and Mills distinguish between four basic kinds of argument: sign argumentation, causal argumentation, argumentation based on examples and argumentation based on analogy. According to McBurney and Mills, an argument from sign gives an indication that the proposition is true without attempting to explain why it is true. All arguments from sign are based on the (stated or implied) assumption that two or more variables are related in such a way that the presence of absence of one may taken to be an indication of the presence of

absence of the other. This definition might give the impression that McBurney and Mills' conception of sign argumentation is very similar to the pragma-dialectical notion of symptomatic argumentation. There are however some striking differences. According to McBurney and Mills, the effects of a given cause are in a typical sign argumentation employed 'as signs that this cause has operated or is operating'. Take the following argumentation:

Frank must be at home because the kitchen is a mess.

What is stated in the standpoint is seen here as a cause of what is stated in the premise. It follows that the link between the premise and the standpoint is of the causal type. To regard this type of argument as sign argumentation is confusing: in fact, it blurs the distinction between causal argumentation and sign argumentation. In the pragma-dialectical typology this kind of argumentation would be regarded as causal argumentation.

Another well-known textbook on argumentation and debate is *Argumentation and debate; critical thinking for reasoned decision making* by Freeley (1993). Freeley also distinguishes sign argumentation but he uses a different definition than McBurney and Mills. According to Freeley, sign argumentation is based on a substance-attribute relation. Since every subject (object, thing, person, event) has certain distinguishing attributes or characteristics (size, shape, colour) the attributes may be taken as signs of the substance, or the other way around. This definition agrees with the pragma-dialectical notion of symptomatic argumentation.

In his dissertation *A reformulation of the modes of reasoning in argumentation* (1962) Hastings gives a more elaborated classification of types of reasoning, or – as he calls them – 'modes of reasoning'. His classification serves as a basis for the typology of Schellens and also for Waltons' list of argumentation schemes. In his classification, Hastings distinguishes verbal, causal and free-floating argumentation. In the verbal argumentation types, the premise is linked to the standpoint by making use of word meaning or a definition. This happens in an argumentation such as the following:

This is a sonnet because it is a poem with 14 lines.

The premise is linked to the standpoint by means of the general statement: sonnets are poems with 14 lines. Verbal argumentation also includes argumentation based on a value judgement, as in the following argumentation:

This movie is good because it has a very realistic plot.

Both argumentation based on a definition and argumentation based on a value judgement can be seen as symptomatic argumentation. In the *New Rhetoric* (1969), Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca distinguish two sorts of argumentative relations that are based on the structure of reality: sequential relations and the relation of coexistence.

In arguments which display both types of relation a link is established between two elements in order to promote a transfer of approval from the accepted to the not yet accepted. Sequential relations are causal in nature. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, cause and effect are on the same phenomenal plane. This is not the case with the elements that are linked by means of coexistence relations. An essential property of argumentation relying on a coexistence relation is that one element is presented as being more fundamental than the other is. The relation between the person and the act is here seen as prototypical. The idea we have of the person is thus considered more essential than that of his acts. It is possible to argue from the person to the act but also the other around. One can for instance, say that Frank is trustworthy because he is never late, but one could also argue that Frank will not be late because he is trustworthy. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca consider the argument from authority as a special variant of this kind of argumentation. Other types of argument based on a relation of coexistence include that of the group and its members and argumentation based on a double hierarchy.

In his Dutch book *Redelijke argumenten* ('Reasonable arguments', 1985), Schellens presented a typology that is partly based on Hastings' Typology. Schellens makes a distinction between argumentation based on rules and argumentation based on regularity. A subtype of argumentation based on rules is argumentation with the argumentation scheme based on rules of behaviour. In this type of argumentation a certain kind of action is promoted by referring to certain conditions. The argumentation is based on a relation of concomitance between the conditions and the required action. There are still many other conceptions of sign or token argumentation. My exposé is only meant to give you an idea of the many variants of symptomatic argumentation. For a better understanding of symptomatic argumentation, more systematic analysis is needed. One important way to get a clearer idea of this type of argumentation, is to examine more carefully which type of standpoint can be supported by

symptomatic argumentation and what kind of premises can be used to support, and what combinations are possible.

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