

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - The Reasonableness Of Responding To Criticism With Accusations Of Inconsistency



1. Introduction

Responding with accusations of inconsistency to criticism is an interesting way of strategic manoeuvring in public political confrontations. In this way of manoeuvring, a politician who is confronted with a critical point of view replies that the criticism advanced is inconsistent with another position of the critic. The accusation of inconsistency is usually intended to have the criticism retracted, as a way of eliminating the alleged inconsistency, sparing the politician the difficulty of refuting the criticism. On the one hand, one may think that pointing out an inconsistency in the position of an arguer and urging him to eliminate it is a perfectly legitimate response. After all, arguers should not assume mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously. On the other hand, however, pointing out that the criticism advanced is inconsistent with another position of the critic is often used by politicians as a way to silence their critics.

In this paper I shall investigate the reasonableness of the kinds of responses in which an arguer replies to critical points of view by means of accusations of inconsistency. I use the theory of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren, 2010; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002b, 2007) to analyse the responses as instances of a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring; and I attempt to formulate conditions for their dialectical soundness. In line with van Eemeren and Houtlosser, I consider an instance of strategic manoeuvring to be reasonable as long as the critical testing procedure is not hindered by the accuser's attempt to direct the discussion towards a favourable outcome.

2. Accusations of inconsistency as a response to criticism

When a politician who is confronted with a critical point of view points out that the criticism advanced is inconsistent with another position of the critic, the

politician is appealing to a reasonable principle, namely that an arguer cannot be committed to two mutually inconsistent positions simultaneously, in order to reach a favourable situation, namely that the critic retracts his criticism. The exchange below, between David Cameron, the British Prime Minister and the leader of the Conservative Party, and Harriet Harman, the Member of Parliament (MP) and the acting leader of the Labour Party, is an example. The exchange takes place in the parliamentary session of Question Time of 16 June 2010; it is about the budget of the new Government. In her question, Ms. Harman criticises the Government for planning cuts that will 'hit the poorest' and 'throw people out of work'. In his answer, Mr. Cameron responds by pointing out that Ms. Harman's criticism of the planned cuts is inconsistent with her Party's plans to cut £50 billion, in an attempt to direct her towards retracting her criticism.

Harriet Harman (MP, Labour):

[...] We all agree that the deficit needs to come down, but will he promise that in the Budget next week he will not hit the poorest and he will not throw people out of work? Does he agree with us that unemployment is never a price worth paying?

David Cameron (Prime Minister, Conservative Party):

[...] before the election, her Government set out £50 billion of cuts [...]. Before she starts challenging us about cuts, they should first of all apologise for the mess they have left; second of all, tell us where the cuts were going to come to under their Government; and third of all, recognise that the responsible party, in coalition, is dealing with the deficit and the mess that they left behind.

(House of Commons official report, 2010)

Attempts to direct the argumentative confrontation towards a favourable outcome in what is in principle a reasonable way, such as the above, can be best captured by the concept of strategic manoeuvring. Strategic manoeuvring refers to the attempts of arguers to reconcile aiming for rhetorical effectiveness with maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness (Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2007: p. 383). Responses such as Mr. Cameron's are instances of a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring that has been characterised as strategic manoeuvring to rule out a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency (Mohammed, 2009: Ch. 2). In this way of manoeuvring, a discussant casts doubt on a standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency against the proponent of the standpoint challenged, aiming to direct the accused towards the retraction of the standpoint. By means of the

accusation, the accuser attributes to proponent of the standpoint two mutually inconsistent commitments: one on the basis of the standpoint challenged (a commitment to A) and the other on the basis of another position that the proponent of the standpoint assumes (a commitment to -A), and urges him to eliminate the inconsistency by retracting one of the mutually inconsistent commitments.**[i]** Even though, in principle, the accused can eliminate the inconsistency by retracting any of the allegedly inconsistent commitments, the accuser manoeuvres strategically in order to lead the proponent of the standpoint to eliminate the alleged inconsistency by retracting the commitment to A, rather than the commitment to -A. The former is favourable to the accuser as it requires the accused to retract the standpoint in which criticism of the accuser is expressed.**[ii]**

In the exchange between Mr. Cameron and Ms. Harman above, Mr. Cameron challenges Ms. Harman's critical standpoint about the Government's planned cuts by accusing her of being inconsistent in her attitude towards cuts. Ms. Harman's criticism of the Government can be understood as a standpoint like *The Government's planned cuts, which will hit the poorest and throw people out of work, are a sign that the performance of the Government is not up to standard.***[iii]** In his response, Mr. Cameron attributes to Ms. Harman a commitment to the proposition *the Government should not be allowed to plan cuts that hit the poorest and throw people out of work* (commitment to A) on the basis of her criticism, and a commitment to the opposite proposition, namely that *the Government should be allowed to plan cuts that hit the poorest and throw people out of work* (commitment to -A) on the basis of the plans of Labour to cut £50 billion. The accusation challenges Ms. Harman's commitment to her critical standpoint, on the basis of the unacceptability for an arguer to hold mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously, and urges her to eliminate the alleged inconsistency. Mr. Cameron manoeuvres strategically to direct Ms. Harman towards the retraction of her commitment to A, rather than her commitment to -A, which she could retract, for example, by admitting that her Government's plans should not have been made. The retraction of the commitment to A is favourable to Mr. Cameron as it requires Ms. Harman to retract her critical standpoint and thus spare him the need to refute it.

3. The reasonableness of accusations of inconsistency as a response to criticism: Soundness conditions

In line with the view of fallacies as derailments of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002a, 2007), the Prime Minister's manoeuvring at issue can be considered reasonable as long as the pursuit of winning the discussion, typical of strategic manoeuvring, does not hinder the critical testing procedure. That is to say that the manoeuvring at issue is in principle reasonable. Only when, in a particular instance, the attempt (to lead the proponent of the standpoint challenged to retract it) constitutes a hindrance to the critical testing procedure, is the strategic manoeuvring in this move considered to have derailed and the instance of strategic manoeuvring is therefore considered fallacious.

Generally, for a move in an argumentative confrontation not to hinder the critical testing procedure, two requirements need to be fulfilled. First, the move needs to constitute a contribution to the externalisation of the difference of opinion at stake. This is mainly because, as van Eemeren suggest, for an argumentative move to be sound, the move needs to contribute to the critical testing procedure. In an argumentative confrontation, this means that the move needs to contribute to the aim of the confrontation stage, namely the externalisation of the difference of opinion at stake. The importance of the latter is evident, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst show (2004: pp.135-137). The requirement is also in line with the view suggested by van Eemeren and Houtlosser that a dialectically sound case of strategic manoeuvring needs to respond to the move preceding it and allow a relevant continuation after it.**[iv]** The second requirement is that the move does not hinder the development of the argumentative confrontation towards any of the outcomes of externalisation, namely those definitions of the difference of opinion which are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. This condition is necessary for protecting arguers' freedom against attempts of bringing about particular outcomes, which is inherent in strategic manoeuvring.

In order for the accusation of inconsistency to constitute a contribution to the externalisation of difference of opinion (i.e., in order for the first requirement for reasonableness to be fulfilled), the accusation needs to play its dialectical role in a clear manner. Given that the accusation is employed to challenge the critical standpoint, the accusation needs to clearly, even if only indirectly, express the accuser's non-acceptance of the standpoint challenged.

When casting critical doubt upon a certain standpoint by means of an accusation of inconsistency, the non-acceptance of the standpoint challenged is derived from the unacceptability for an arguer to hold mutually inconsistent commitments

simultaneously. The accuser challenges the commitment of the accused to his standpoint by attributing to him a simultaneous commitment that is inconsistent with this standpoint. This attribution needs to be justified in order for the accusation of inconsistency to express the accuser's non-acceptance of the standpoint challenged. The three following soundness conditions are meant to guarantee that:

- (i) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint challenged,
- (ii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to -A on the basis of the other position assumed, and
- (iii) The accuser should be justified in attributing to the accused the commitments to A and to -A simultaneously.

Only if the three conditions above are fulfilled can the accusation of inconsistency justifiably function as an expression of doubt concerning the standpoint challenged. Failure to meet any of them leads the strategic manoeuvring to derail, resulting in hindrances to the critical testing procedure.

Unless the accuser is justified in attributing to the accused a commitment to A on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, i.e. unless condition (i) is fulfilled, the accusation of inconsistency is irrelevant to the standpoint it reacts to. The irrelevance of the accusation that results from failing to fulfil condition (i) is of the kind associated with the *straw man* fallacy. If the accuser cannot, on the basis of the standpoint of the accused, justifiably attribute to the accused a commitment to A, the accuser distorts the standpoint by making it seem as if a commitment to A follows from it. Failure to fulfil condition (i) hinders the critical testing procedure by violating the pragma-dialectical *standpoint rule*, which stipulates that "attacks on standpoints may not bear on a standpoint that has not actually been put forward by the other party" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 191).

Unless the accuser is justified in assuming that the other position of the accused commits him to -A and that commitments to A and to -A are held simultaneously, i.e. unless conditions (ii) and (iii) are fulfilled, the accuser is falsely presenting these assumptions as commonly accepted starting points. The correctness of these assumptions, which are made in the accusation, is necessary for the accusation to function as an expression of doubt. If any of them is incorrect, the inconsistency does not come about and, hence, the commitment of the accused to

the standpoint challenged is not problematic. Unless the accuser argues explicitly in support of these assumptions, the assumptions need to be considered as commonly accepted starting points.

Failure to fulfil conditions (ii) and (iii) can thus be considered to hinder the critical testing procedure by violating the pragma-dialectical *starting-point rule*, which stipulates that “discussants may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 193).**[v]** The exchange between Mr. Cameron and Ms. Harman is an example. Mr. Cameron is not justified in attributing to Ms. Harman a commitment to *the Government should be allowed to plan cuts that hit the poorest and throw people out of work* on the basis of the plans of the Labour Government to set out £50 billion of cuts. The attribution assumes as a commonly accepted starting point that Harman’s Government’s plans to cut £50 billion were going to hit the poorest and throw people out of work, just like the cuts criticised by Ms. Harman are alleged to be. Unless this is assumed, there would be no inconsistency on the basis of which Ms. Harman’s critical standpoint is challenged. Because no further argumentation is advanced to support this assumption, the assumption needs to be considered as a starting point. But Ms. Harman cannot be assumed to share this starting point. Hence, assuming so, as the accusation does, hinders the critical testing procedure by falsely presenting an assumption as an accepted starting point.

It is important to note that Mr. Cameron’s accusation can also be interpreted more generally to be about the general attitude towards cuts, in which case condition (ii) is fulfilled. If the alleged inconsistency is interpreted to be concerning A’: *the Government should not be allowed to plan cuts in its budget* rather than A: *the Government should not be allowed to plan cuts that hit the poorest and throw people out of work*, there would be no problem in attributing to Ms. Harman a commitment to *the Government should be allowed to plan cuts in its budget* on the basis of her Government’s plan to cut £50 billion. However, in this interpretation of Mr. Cameron’s accusation, condition (i) is violated. Mr. Cameron is not justified in attributing to Ms. Harman a commitment to *the Government should not be allowed to plan cuts in its budget* on the basis of her standpoint that *The Government’s planned cuts, which will hit the poorest and throw people out of work, are a sign that the performance of the Government is not up to standard*. In his accusation, Cameron would be distorting Ms. Harman’s

standpoint, which is about the specific cuts that the Conservative Government is planning by making it seem to be about any cuts that a Government plans. This overgeneralisation of the standpoint, intended to make it easier to refute, is a case of the *straw man* fallacy.

Conditions (i), (ii) and (iii) guarantee that an accusation of inconsistency that comes in response to a standpoint functions as an expression of doubt concerning this standpoint. But in order for an accusation that functions as an expression of doubt to contribute to the externalisation of the difference of opinion at stake, the accusation needs to be expressed clearly. The soundness condition below is meant to guarantee that:

(iv) The accusation of inconsistency needs to be performed clearly enough for the accused to understand that the accuser attributes to him commitments to A and to -A simultaneously and demands him to retract one of them to eliminate the alleged inconsistency.

Failure to fulfil condition (iv) can be associated with violations of the pragma-dialectical *language usage rule*, according to which “discussants may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulations” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 195). Clarity, as required in the rule, does by no means rule out indirectness and implicitness as unreasonable (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987: pp. 293-296). In fact, advancing an accusation of inconsistency to express critical doubt is in itself an instance of indirectness that is not unreasonable as such. And as long as the speech act is identifiable, implicitness is no obstacle to critical testing. However, lack of clarity can have direct consequences for the critical testing procedure, for example, by masking failures to fulfil other requirements for reasonableness.

In the exchange between Mr. Cameron and Ms. Harman, for example, insufficiently clear formulations of the accusation were indeed used to mask failures to fulfil other soundness conditions. Mr. Cameron advances his accusation vaguely leaving it unclear whether the inconsistency is about those cuts that hit the poorest and throw people out of work or about the cuts in general. The lack of clarity masks the failure to fulfil conditions (i) and (ii) discussed above and makes it difficult to realise that the accusation is either distorting the standpoint challenged or falsely presenting an assumption as a common starting point.

Conditions (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv), taken together, guarantee that an accusation of inconsistency clearly expresses the accuser's non-acceptance of the standpoint challenged. This is necessary for the accusation to fulfil the first requirement for reasonableness, formulated above as to contribute to the externalisation of the difference of opinion at stake. But, in order for the accusation not to hinder the development of the argumentative confrontation towards any of the outcomes that are allowed in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion (i.e., in order to fulfil the second requirement for reasonableness), the accusation must not restrict the response of the proponent of the standpoint, in his next turn, to the one favoured by the accuser. That is to say that the accusation must not preclude the possibility for the accused to maintain rather than retract the standpoint in the following turn.

In an argumentative interaction in which an accusation of inconsistency functions as an expression of doubt, the maintaining or the retraction of the standpoint challenged by the accusation are realised through the perlocutionary effects of the accusation (Mohammed, 2009: Ch.2) . While the proponent of the standpoint can retract the standpoint by retraction of the commitment to A, the standpoint can be maintained by not accepting the accusation of inconsistency or by retracting the commitment to -A in case the accusation is accepted. If the accused does not accept the accusation, he has no obligation to retract anything, and can therefore maintain his standpoint. An accused can express his non-acceptance of the accusation by denying that his standpoint commits him to A, that his other position commits him to -A or that his commitments to A and -A are held simultaneously. By doing so, the proponent of a standpoint attempts to justify that his position is consistent in order to be able to maintain his current standpoint.

Dissociation is one of the ways of expressing non-acceptance of the accusation. By means of dissociation, the alleged inconsistency is denied by dissociating between different interpretations of the commitments attributed, one of which involves no inconsistency. But even if the accused accepts the accusation, he can still maintain the standpoint by retracting the commitment to -A, which the accused can do by conveying that he has changed his mind about his other position, for example. The final soundness condition below is meant to guarantee that the accusation does not preclude the possibility for the accused to maintain rather than retract the standpoint in the turn that follows:

(v) The choice of topic, audience frame, and stylistic devices of the accusation of

inconsistency must not preclude the possibility for the accused to either express non-acceptance of the accusation or to retract the expressed commitment to -A in case the accusation is accepted.

Exactly because the accuser makes his choice of topics, audience frames and stylistic devices so that the accused is directed towards retracting the commitment to A, it should be observed that such a choice does not violate the freedom of the accused to opt for a different response.

Failure to fulfil condition (v) hinders the critical testing procedure by violating the pragma-dialectical *freedom rule*, which stipulates that “discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: p. 190). The violation results in cases of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The exchange between Mr. Cameron and Ms. Harman is an example. Mr. Cameron, who would rather have Ms. Harman retract her commitment to *the Government should not be allowed to plan cuts in its budget* (commitment to A), precludes Ms. Harman’s option to eliminate the inconsistency by retracting the opposite commitment (commitment to -A). As he refers to the plans of the Labour Government to cut £50 billion and asks her to apologise for the mess that her party has left, Mr. Cameron portrays Ms. Harman’s maintaining of her commitment to A as an acknowledgement that the plans of the Labour Government were problematic and that the policies behind them have left the country in a mess. So if Ms. Harman chooses to maintain her critical standpoint, which Mr. Cameron does not favour, she would be enforcing Mr. Cameron’s claim that her Government left the country in a mess. The latter can also be seen as an attempt to discredit Ms. Harman. Ms. Harman’s acknowledgement that her party has “messed up” the finances is an indication that she is unworthy of being taken seriously. So, whatever response to the accusation she chooses, whether to reject the accusation, or to retract commitment to -A, Ms. Harman’s choice cannot be trusted.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have investigated the reasonableness of a politician’s response to a critical standpoint by accusing his critic of being inconsistent concerning the subject of the criticism. The investigation is based on the analysis of the kind of response at issue as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring and guided by van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s view that cases of strategic manoeuvring are reasonable as long as the attempt to achieve advantageous

outcomes does not hinder the critical testing procedure. Analysing the kind of response at issue as a particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring reveals the strategic function of the response as an attempt by the politician to get his adversary to retract his critical standpoint, by appealing to the reasonable principle that one cannot hold two mutually inconsistent commitments simultaneously. But this principle does not necessarily guarantee that the critical testing procedure is not hindered by the accusation. As the investigation shows, unless the five soundness conditions suggested are fulfilled, an accusation of inconsistency cannot be considered a reasonable response to the standpoint it challenges.

Similar to the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion, the soundness conditions formulated in this paper assess the reasonableness of argumentative moves based on their contribution to the critical testing procedure. However, the conditions are formulated to apply to the actual moves that arguers perform, namely the accusations of inconsistency, rather than to their reconstructed analytically relevant counterpart, namely the expression of doubt. Consequently, the conditions bring the evaluation closer to argumentative moves as they actually occur in argumentative practice and enable the analyst to trace the dialectical (un-)reasonableness of the responses at issue to aspects related to the accusation of inconsistency advanced.

NOTES

[i] This analysis of the particular way of manoeuvring at issue is based on the speech act account of an accusation of inconsistency suggested by Andone (2009). Andone formulates the essential condition of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency as “raising a charge against an addressee for having committed himself to both p and $\neg p$ (or informal equivalents thereof) in an attempt to challenge the addressee to provide a response that answers the charge” (2009: p. 155). In line with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958), who understand an accusation of inconsistency as an attempt to get the accused to eliminate the inconsistency by retracting one of the inconsistent commitments (p. 195), I take Andone’s ‘response that answers the charge’ to be the retraction of either of the two mutually inconsistent commitments alleged.

[ii] See Mohammed (2009: Ch. 2, Ch.4) for elaborate analyses of cases of this particular way of confrontational strategic manoeuvring.

[iii] Ms. Harman’s question in this exchange is interpreted as a contribution to an

overarching discussion about the performance of the Government. This interpretation is guided by the view that Prime Minister's Question Time is a mini-debate over the performance of the Government (Beard, 2000; House of Commons Information Office, 2005; Rogers & Walters 2006; Wilson, 1990). In this debate, the Prime Minister and MPs from his party defend the standpoint that *the performance of the Government is up to standard* by means of arguments that praise plans, policies or actions of the Government, and MPs from the Opposition defend the opposite standpoint by means of arguments that criticise plans, policies or actions of the Government (Mohammed, 2009: Ch. 3).

[iv] In a presentation at the research colloquium of the department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric at the University of Amsterdam in late 2006, van Eemeren and Houtlosser suggested that a dialectically sound case of strategic manoeuvring needs to be (a) "chosen in such a way that it enables an analytically relevant continuation at the juncture concerned in the dialectical route [...]", (b) "in such a way adapted to the other party that it responds to the preceding move in the dialectical route [...]" and (c) "formulated in such a way that it can be interpreted as enabling a relevant continuation and being responsive to the preceding move". Even though I do not at this stage associate -as van Eemeren and Houtlosser do- the requirements I suggest with the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, I consider that the three conditions, taken together, are meant to guarantee that a move constitutes a contribution to at least one of the allowable outcomes of the stage at issue.

[v] Even though the starting point rule pertains usually to the argumentation stage (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: pp. 149-157), the rule can also be applied to exchanges that exemplify argumentative confrontations. Especially in argumentative exchanges that occur in institutionalised contexts, arguers do not enter confrontations with an empty commitment store. Reference to commonly accepted starting points is therefore possible in argumentative confrontations. The starting point rule is accordingly applicable.

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