Adversarial argumentation and common ground in Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*

Colin Guthrie King[1,2]

Abstract

In this paper I provide support for the view that at least some forms of adversariality in argumentation are legitimate. The support comes from Aristotle's theory of illegitimate adversarial argumentation in dialectical contexts: his theory of eristic in his work *On Sophistical Refutations*. Here Aristotle develops non-epistemic standards for evaluating the legitimacy of dialectical procedures, standards which I propose can be understood in terms of the pragmatic notion of context as common ground. Put briefly, Aristotle makes the answerer's meaning in giving assent in dialectical contexts the basis for further moves in the game of dialectic. Moves which subvert the answerer's meaning or do not solicit the answerer's consent are marked as eristic, i.e. adversarial in a problematic sense. I conclude with remarks on what Aristotle's theory may teach us about how semantic features relate to the normative evaluation of argumentation.

Keywords Aristotle · Eristic · Dialectic · Common ground · Meaning · *Pragma*

1 Introduction

In a seminal paper, Janice Moulton once identified the adversary paradigm in philosophical argumentation as a model of research in which we find an "unimpassioned debate between adversaries who try to defend their views against counterexamples and produce counterexamples to opposing views".[1] The adversary paradigm is defended on the assumption that the best test for the truth of a view is to subject it to the strongest form of opposition. This paradigm is justified as a path to truth and knowledge by the claim that it gives us the best of "both sides" of a debate. In her criticism of the paradigm Moulton points out that even argumentation on adversarial terms requires shared assumptions in order to be brought to a conclusion, but that this paradigm tends to obfuscate the very common assumptions which makes it possible. Taken as *the* paradigm of philosophical inquiry, adversarial argumentation fails to account for the ways in which individual arguments are related to a "whole system of ideas"

which underly them, a whole which is seldom significantly altered through the refutation of a single argument (Moulton 1983: 154). And Moulton warned that this paradigm may also lead to a misinterpretation of the 'Socratic method' as philosophy in the adversarial paradigm, when in fact Plato's Socrates is often at pains to distinguish a "more friendly and dialectical" (*Meno* 75c–d) approach to conversation from e.g. the sophistic rivalry we find in the *Euthydemos*, or the contentious argumentation we find in the *Gorgias*.[2]

Moulton's criticism of adversarial argumentation raises an important question: what common things (presupposition, presumptions, or premises) must even the most adversarial type of argumentation require in order to be conclusive? In this paper I wish to address this question through the interpretation of what would become the standard text for the analysis of faulty argumentation, Aristotle's

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✉ Colin Guthrie King
colin.king@providence.edu

1 Department of Philosophy, Providence College, Providence, RI 02918, USA

2 Philosophisches Seminar, Universität Heidelberg, Schulgasse, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany

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[1] Moulton (1983), 153.

[2] As Moulton correctly points out (1983: 163, n. 11), these dialogues place emphasis on contrasting combative procedures with cooperative ones. In the *Euthydemos*, Socrates emphasizes the protreptic function of philosophy (*Euthyd.* 275a–b) and offers his own refutation of Kleinias as a kind of counter-model to that of the sophist brothers Dionysodoros and Euthydemos (*Euthyd.* 278e–279b). In the *Gorgias* Socrates draws attention to a salient difference between his mode of argument and rhetorical proof, namely that he only requires the testimony and consent of his interlocutor for the introduction of premisses, whereas rhetoric argumentation operates on the basis of extrinsic evidence such as reputable opinions (*Gorg.* 471d–472d).

Sophistical Refutations (*SE*). The relevance of this text to the topic of adversarial argumentation is two-fold. First, the *SE* is concerned with specific historical practices of argumentation which Aristotle subsumes under the title of "dialectic" in a general sense. This will cover several sub-types of argumentation, one of which was primarily refutational (standard dialectic), and those which are for the sake of "inquiry and testing".[3] In the *SE* Aristotle seeks to distinguish both of these dialectical settings from another type of argumentation which he subsumes under the title of "eristic", the most adversarial setting of adversarial argumentation and as such distinct from dialectical, demonstrative, and pseudo-demonstrative procedures (*SE* 2, 165a38–b11; *Topics* A1, 100a29–b26). The attempt to make this normative distinction is very much in the spirit of the Platonic contexts which Moulton cited; but the way in which Aristotle makes it is different. Rather than distinguishing between friendly and aggressive dispositions of agents and their objectives, Aristotle assumes that agents in both eristic and legitimate dialectical procedures purport to do the same thing: to refute a thesis forwarded by the adversary through deduction. Genuine dialectical procedures really do this, whereas eristic and sophistical procedures merely seem to do so, or do so upon the basis of what merely seems to be acceptable – merely apparently acceptable premises. The ultimate criterion for the evaluation of a procedure is whether it yields, or does not yield, a real deduction.

Aristotle's distinction between what is really acceptable and only merely apparently acceptable recalls Moulton's important question concerning the requisite basis for even the most adversarial type of argumentation. Herein lies the second aspect of relevance of the *SE* and its theory of eristic to the theory of adversarial argumentation. The *SE* stands at the beginning of a tradition of fallacy theory which itself has been criticized as contributing to the very adversarial paradigm of argumentation which Moulton identified and criticized.[4] There is, however, another aspect of Aristotle's theory which has seldom been appreciated, even within the specialized literature in the exegesis of this text. As stated above, Aristotle views the activity of dialectical argumentation through the lens of a theory of deduction, and seeks to identify in eristic and sophistical refutation mechanisms by which argumentation can merely seem

to be, but not be, deductive. This project involves not only the analysis of what we would today call the abuse of argument schemes, it also involves a theory of the acceptable. The purpose of this theory is to identify features which are constitutive of a particular kind of adversarial argumentation that defeats the purpose of deduction and even meaningful communication. Aristotle does not have a specific term for the basis of successful communication which is undermined by accepting the unacceptable. In this paper, I use the contemporary pragmatic notion of common ground to analyze this role of Aristotle's notion of "acceptable premises"(*ta endoxa*). The main objective of this paper is to show the place of this theory of acceptability or common ground within the matrix of the better-known theory of fallacies, and thus make the resources from Aristotle's study of eristic available for a modern theory of adversarial argumentation.

The article consists of four parts. In the first, I give a brief historical introduction to the practice of eristic, and how Aristotle approached it in the theoretical framework of his study of sophistical refutations, the *SE*. In the second, I relate both the theoretical framework and concrete practices of argumentation to the modern pragmatic notion of context as common ground. In the third section the place of semantic theory in the broader project of Aristotle's theory of dialectical argumentation is considered in light of the notion of common ground. In the fourth and final part, I interpret Aristotle's depiction of "treachery in argument" as evidence for how the normative basis of dialectical argumentation can be understood as consisting in common ground.

2 Ends and means of Aristotle's theory of eristic

Aristotle's theory of eristic argumentation is developed in his *On Sophistical Refutations*. This work, an ancillary to the *Topics* (in the following: *Top.*), presents a theory of "fallacies" employed by participants in a very specific kind of argument-competition, the highly ritualized question-and-answer game known as "dialectic". At the beginning of both the *Topics* and the *SE*, Aristotle calls up the theoretical framework of deduction (*syllogismos*) for understanding the variety of practices which went by this name. He distinguishes within dialectical practices between real dialectical deduction (the premises of which are *endoxa*, i.e. acceptable) and eristic deduction, which Aristotle defines as argumentation from merely apparent *endoxa* or merely apparent deduction (or both) (*Top.* A1, 100a29–b26; *SE* 2, 165b3–8). The salient and interesting feature of Aristotle's distinction for a modern theory of adversariality is that with it he identifies a *legitimate* mode of adversarial argumentation and marks it off from another, illegitimate (but, by Aristotle's

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[3] The distinction between these two types of dialectic is made in *Top.* Θ3–4. An axiom for the acceptance of premises in dialectical inquiry is theorized in *Top.* Θ5, the rules derived from this axiom are developed in *Top.* Θ6.

[4] See Hundelby 2010, who adopts the notion of the adversarial paradigm from Moulton 1983. Hundleby argues that fallacy theory pedagogy in the form of critical thinking textbooks has contributed to this paradigm by (among other things) assuming a dismissive attitude to argument repair.

lights, useful and sometimes even necessary) one.[5] In all types of dialectic, the roles of two interlocutors are distributed in such a way that the questioner seeks to elicit responses from a respondent, answers with which she may deduce the contradictory of the respondent's thesis. The repondent's role is to accept only what is really acceptable, and avoid being so refuted (*Top.* A1, 100b21–101a4). In comments on the proper fulfillment of these respective roles in Book 8 of the *Topics*, Aristotle nevertheless describes this role-distributed kind of argumentation as a "common work" (*koinon ergon*) (*Top.* Θ11, 161a20–21), the obstruction of which is precisely a feature of agonistic and eristic, i.e. defective dialectical, argumentation (161a37–39). The common goal Aristotle sees in properly pursued dialectic is not knowledge, the resolution of a disagreement, or the solution of a problem. The common goal for the two opposing parties just is "completing the work well": that is, really deducing from premises which are really acceptable, and at least in one form of dialectic, from premises which are more acceptable than the conclusion (*Top.* Θ5, 159b8–12; b14–15; b21–23).

There is a puzzle about the basis for such dialectical cooperation in deduction. If the purpose of this common enterprise is not truth, what is the ultimate criterion for the acceptability of the premises? The standard answer to this has been to take Aristotle's determination of *endoxa* at the beginning of the *Topics* to invoke authority or testimony as the warrant for premiss acceptability – he says, after all, that *endoxa* are things that "are deemed true by all, the majority, or the wise" (*Top.* A1, 100b21–23). From the perspective of contemporary theory of argumentation, this would be a remarkably bad answer: as Freeman 2005 has shown, the normative question of premiss acceptability should not be arbitrated by the empirical criterion of premiss acceptedness. In this article I explore a different interpretation. I propose that the ultimate basis for legitimate dialectical procedures is best understood from Aristotle's study of defective ones: *eristic* contexts in which dialectical deduction can fail due to a failure to preserve the meaning intended by the answerer. On this interpretation, a normative feature of legitimate dialectical contexts is the preservation of the meaning of the speaker. This interpretation will be defended here by showing how Aristotle's theory of eristic argumentation shows awareness of a variety of contextual features of argumentation that are captured in the concept of context as "common ground" developed by Stalnaker 2014.

The *Sophistici Elenchi* begins with a specific causal problem concerning defects in deductive argumentation. Sophists employ arguments which seem to be deductive in constructing their refutations, but which are not really deductive; and, as a type of eristic arguers, they also employ real deductions with "merely apparent" *endoxa*. Real refutations are deductions which conclude the logical contradiction of the thesis (*SE* 1, 164b27–165a3). Aristotle sets out in *SE* to explain how the appearance of deduction in sophistical refutation comes about, and the inquiry of this work is guided by research into such causes. This causal inquiry involves in particular exposing the linguistic and extra-linguistic mechanisms of eristic *qua* apparent deduction.[6]

On Aristotle's view, the most "natural and common" cause of specifically sophistical apparent deduction is linguistic and takes place at the sentential level, through words (*SE* 1, 165a4–6). The possibility of linguistic deception is given by the fact that there are fewer items in the lexical base of a language, and fewer statements, than there are *pragmata*: "things" or "objects", but also "states" and thus "what is the case" (*SE* 1, 165a6–17). Now the critique of eristic as merely verbal argumentation directed only to names (*onomata*) is found in Plato, where this mode of argument is contrasted with real conversation (*Republic* V, 454a7–8). But whereas in Plato the proper object of conversation (at least in the passage mentioned) is the forms, in Aristotle it is the *pragmata*, what is under discussion. It has been pointed out by recent interpreters that in certain contexts Aristotle uses '*pragma*' to refer not to a real thing, but to the meaning of items under discussion.[7] One philosophical use of the study of eristic is, according to Aristotle, that such study will make us better at grasping "in how many ways things are said, and in what sorts of items are similar and different in *pragmata* and words" (*SE* 16, 175a6–9). We may understand *pragmata* in this and similar contexts as "meaning", because what words and *pragmata* are here related to is the diversity of meanings of an individual expression: "in how many ways" something is said. Words and things are, as Aristotle knows (*SE* 1, 165a6–16), different in such a basic way that the assumption of their correspondence is set out right at the beginning of the *SE* as a presumption which makes many people succumb to the tricks of eristic. It is thus not only words and things which
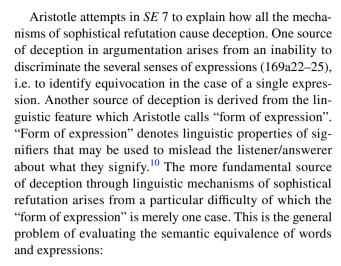
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are similar and different, but meanings and the expressions which represent them.[8]

Departure from the *pragma* is important in the context of the *SE*, as Aristotle's conception of deduction in the theory of dialectical argumentation presumes that a deduction obtains through what is signified, not in terms of the expressions themselves.[9] Aristotle's study of fallacies by means of expression is best understood against the background of this conception. But it will make some difference if the items which are signified are things or meanings, and because Aristotle never systematically distinguishes them (much less "sense" and "reference"), there is a difficulty here. *One* way for an expression to fail to properly signify is when the expression is ambigiuous *and* used in several different meaning/senses in the course of discussion. In this case contradiction between the thesis of the answerer and the conclusion drawn will not obtain, as there will be no semantic stability over the course of the deduction. In his awareness of this feature of eristic argumentation, Aristotle is also alert to the difference between semantic and inferential features of argumentation. His grasp of this difference is apparent in the fact that he distinguishes the *causes* of defective deduction into two classes: by means of expression (linguistic fallacies) and outside of expression (non-linguistic fallacies: *SE* 4, 165b23–24). The first type of cause involves a break with the matter under discussion, so that a deduction in Aristotle's sense cannot even come about. The second type of cause involves a different kind of mistake, a deception concerning the inferential relations between statements. The competent dialectician who would engage Sophists as answerer must therefore know two things. First, the competent dialectician must know what constitutes a real deductive consequence relation (in particular, a refutational deductive consequence), and what merely causes the appearance of deduction. Secondly, the dialectician must know what the mechanisms of linguistic deception are at the level of individual premisses.

Aristotle attempts in *SE* 7 to explain how all the mechanisms of sophistical refutation cause deception. One source of deception in argumentation arises from an inability to discriminate the several senses of expressions (169a22–25), i.e. to identify equivocation in the case of a single expression. Another source of deception is derived from the linguistic feature which Aristotle calls "form of expression". "Form of expression" denotes linguistic properties of signifiers that may be used to mislead the listener/answerer about what they signify.[10] The more fundamental source of deception through linguistic mechanisms of sophistical refutation arises from a particular difficulty of which the "form of expression" is merely one case. This is the general problem of evaluating the semantic equivalence of words and expressions:

T1. [ia] It is difficult to determine which things are said in the same way, and which are said in a different way ([ib] for the one who is able to do this is close to the person able to perceive the truth, and such a person most knows when to give assent). [ii] This is because we assume, when something is said of another, that one particular thing has been said, and we answer accordingly, as if it were one thing. [iii] For being a certain, particular thing seems to be an attribute which most accompanies what is one in number and substance. [iva] That is why we should count this sort of thing to the sophistical refutations by means of expression: [ivb] first, because deception arises more when one is engaged in inquiry with others than it does when people inquire by themselves (for inquiry with another is through statements, whereas inquiry alone is no less through the thing itself); [ivc] secondly, deception can also occur in the case of solitary inquiry, whenever one pursues inquiry through speech; [ivd] and furthermore, deception arises from similarity, and similarity comes from expression (*SE* 7, 169a30–b2).

The passage is an instance of Aristotle's pragmatic approach to argumentation and language in the *Topics* and *SE*. On this approach, the perspective of the answerer is in the foreground, and here we see why. The answerer is responsible for asserting the premiss by determining which of two possibilities are to be affirmed, and this involves a semantic evaluation of the premiss-question presented by the questioner. The theory of sophistical refutations serves, like the theory of dialectical argumentation in *Top*. Θ, to identify norms and acceptable conventions for giving assent in (various)

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[8] Wieland 1962, 160 cites as further examples of contexts in which *pragma* must be thought of as linguistic or propositional *Top*. Z7, 146a6 (where the definition is said, ideally, to be identical to the "thing", i.e. *pragma*) and *Top*. A5, 102a18–19 (where the specific difference is said to be that which belongs to an item alone and which can be predicated in the place of the *pragma*). Clearly in these cases *pragma* is being used to refer to a linguistic item representing what is under discussion. As Wieland 1962, 160 puts it: "Es gehört zur Phänomenologie der Aussage, daß dieses „Worüber "der theoretischen Unterscheidung von Sachbereich und Sprachbereich gegenüber indifferent ist".

[9] This will be seen in the interpretation of the qualified account of refutation which Aristotle gives in *SE* 5, 167a23–27, where the refutation is a contradiction of "one and the same thing, not of the name alone but of the object". See Malink 2015, 269, who cites Alexander, *in An. Pr*. ii.1, 372.29–30: "deduction has its being not in expressions, but in what is signified by them" For an important qualification of this position in *SE* 6, see Malink 2014.

[10] For Aristotle's account of sophistical refutation by form of expression, see SE 4, 166b10–19 and Dorion 1995, 230–232. The example which Aristotle gives there for this type of fallacy involves the use of a present infinitive suffix (−*ein*).

dialectical contexts. One central purpose of the theory of eristic in *SE* is to provide the answerer with the means to identify sources of semantic deception; these are provided in the identification of the forms of fallacy *in dictione*. **T1** approaches this project from the point of view of the dialectical answerer and her task, giving assent. The person who knows when to give assent, i.e. the circumspect dialectical answerer, "is close to the person able to perceive the truth" (**T1**[ib]). The dialectical answerer does have a specific sort of knowledge, but though it is "close to" knowing the truth, it is something else. With respect to the linguistic mechanisms of sophistical refutation, the dialectically competent answerer's epistemic ability is to discern ambiguity: the answerer is able to determine which expressions are semantically equivalent, and which are not (**T1**[ia]).

T1 begins with the statement that doing this very thing is difficult. The difficulty lies in a basic feature of linguistic representation, and not just communication. For as Aristotle puts it in **T1**[ivc], we may be deceived by the use of language even when we are communicating only with ourselves. One deceptive feature of linguistic representation is traced in this passage to a shared presupposition on the part of language-users: that statements (and in particular "something said of another", i.e. predicates) are semantically determinate – that they refer to, or individuate, "one particular thing" (*tode ti*) (**T1**[ii]).[11] This is the presupposition that predicates are always applied to one thing which they serve to individuate. Deception by various forms of "equivocation" (*ditton*) works by means of exploiting the default presupposition of semantic determinacy: "it is convention that all things signify a certain, definite item (*tode ti*)" (*SE* 6, 168a25–26). In **T1**[ii] Aristotle refers to the presupposition of semantic determinacy as our tendency to "assume" that predicates refer to certain, individual items, and the fact that "we respond" as if one thing had been stated. The response behavior is directed not merely to the predicate, but to a statement. We should therefore understand Aristotle's meaning here in relation to the presupposition of semantic determinacy not only of predicates, but also of statements.

Aristotle renders the notion of simple statement as 'one thing be said of one thing' explicit in the *De interpretatione*.[12] There he also clarifies that the predicate need not refer to an individual in order for a simple statement to obtain.[13] In the *Topics* and *SE* the technical term for a simple

statement (*apophansis*) is absent.[14] There is however a definition of elenctic deduction in *SE* 5 which expresses the notion of a simple statement as part of the condition that an argument be deductive. Aristotle states in that passage that a refutation is "the contradiction of one single thing, not of the word alone but also the object, and with a word which is not different in definition but the same" (*SE* 5, 167a23–24). This explicit reference to the "object" of the terms featured in a refutation is a further instance of the conception of deduction as consisting in the things signified. This more explicit semantic qualification of a deduction takes into account the fact that sophistical refutations often fail to be deductive in this respect, while maintaining the appearance of being deductive by exploiting the presuppositions of normal language use. What Aristotle is forced to articulate in confronting this particular feature of eristic argumentation is one of a number of aspects of linguistic communication theorized more recently in literature on pragmatics as "common ground".

3 Common ground and context-sensitivity

Common ground describes the store of statements which form the background or context of a situation of communication.[15] On the notion of common ground which we can use to understand the basis of dialectic on Aristotle's conception, it is constituted of mutually accepted statements presumed to be "common knowledge" between the interlocutors. Unlike common knowledge, the context for an utterance determined through common ground is not factive: "False propositions may be *presumed* to be common knowledge, and false propositions may be part of the common ground either because of error, or by pretense" (Stalnaker 2014, 25). The context shared by interlocutors shifts through the entering of assertions; this is how common ground can change in the course of a dialogue. But this context can only change through moves that are mutually accepted. In theorizing the way that common ground is constituted and changed, factors regarding the acceptance of premises are particularly important. One way in which the common ground can be changed is through presupposition: by making a statement which presupposes the truth of another statement, we can

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[11] See Fait 2007, 132 *ad loc.* on the role of the *tode ti* in explicating the function of a predicate.

[12] A simple statement is "significant spoken sound about whether something does or does not hold (in one of the divisions of time)" (*De Int.* 5, 17a23–24).

[13] *De Int.* 7, 17a38–b3: "Since some things are universal and others are particular – by universal I mean things which can be predicated of many, and by particular I mean that which cannot; for example man is a universal and Callias is a particular – so it must be the case that

Footnote 13 (continued)

when one says one thing holds of another, this is sometimes of a universal and sometimes of a particular".

[14] On the text, see Hasper 2013, 53–54 (which lists Hasper's deviations from Ross' edition).

[15] The notion of context as common ground is developed in a series of publications by Robert Stalnaker. For the purposes of understanding Aristotle's theory, concept of common ground given in Stalnaker 2014, 24–25 will be sufficient and appropriate.
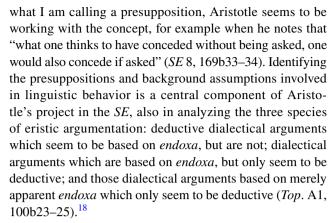
introduce the further statement without making it explicit.[16] The tendency of interlocutors to adopt presuppositions as required by the context is described as accommodation.[17]

The notion of common ground (and related pragmatic notions) help us better understand central concepts and claims in Aristotle's theory of eristic argumentation. In **T1** we can see that Aristotle clearly is working with a notion of presupposition, in making explicit a presupposition which dialectical answerers (and language-users in general) tend to have in their common ground. This is the presupposition that a given predicate is determinate in its reference, "that one particular thing has been predicated" (**T1**[ii] = 169a33–34). As Aristotle observes, this presupposition is basic to practices of giving assent, and to assertion. When we are presented with a predicative statement in conversation, "we give assent as if to one thing" (169a34–35). There is a further presupposition involved in such linguistic behavior; it is the presupposition that particular predicates signify real things. With regard to particular existing things, we presuppose that they are one and real (**T1**[iii]). Noting these two presuppositions in the "common ground" of answerers in normal, non-defective dialectical settings is necessary in order to understand the linguistic mechanisms of eristic arguments. In particular, the common ground of the victims of sophistical refutation contains the following unexpressed presuppositions:

> Predicates apply to individuated items (**T1**[ii]).
>
> Individuated items, individuals, have the attributes "one-in-number" and "real" (**T1**[iii]).

Upon the basis of these two widely shared presuppositions, it is rational for participants in dialectic (and in communication in general) to assume that the particular predicates used by their sophistical interlocutors signify some one, real entity or state of affairs by means of a simple statement. Identifying this and other presuppositions which constitute the common ground of normal, non-defective dialectical exchanges is an important part of the causal analysis of dialectically defective, i.e. eristic and sophistical, refutations *in dictione*. Though there is no specific Aristotelian term for

what I am calling a presupposition, Aristotle seems to be working with the concept, for example when he notes that "what one thinks to have conceded without being asked, one would also concede if asked" (*SE* 8, 169b33–34). Identifying the presuppositions and background assumptions involved in linguistic behavior is a central component of Aristotle's project in the *SE*, also in analyzing the three species of eristic argumentation: deductive dialectical arguments which seem to be based on *endoxa*, but are not; dialectical arguments which are based on *endoxa*, but only seem to be deductive; and those dialectical arguments based on merely apparent *endoxa* which only seem to be deductive (*Top.* A1, 100b23–25).[18]

Aristotle is making a different and more general point when he goes on to say, in sentence [iv] of **T1**, that language is in general a source of error (i.e. of innocent, involuntary error) – particularly in situations of "inquiry with others", but also in the case of solitary inquiry insofar as such inquiry is conducted through speech [iv-c]. The point is familiar from the beginning of *SE*, where the problem of merely apparent deduction is first addressed (*SE* 1, 164a23ff.) and Aristotle argues for the claim that there is a specific type (*genus*) of arguments which consists of apparent deductions (165a32–33). There Aristotle explains that the problem of appearances with regard to determining what is real in the physical world (e.g. real or merely apparent beauty, gold, and silver) also extends to items such as arguments and deductions. The cause of not being able to detect the difference is, in both cases, "a lack of experience: for the inexperienced are like those who observe from far away" (*SE* 1, 164b26–27). Aristotle's account of deception in argumentation involves both the linguistic theory of signification we have been discussing and a further component, which may be called a psychology of argumentation.

The visual metaphor of looking at a distance at small things occurs several times in the psychology of argumentation in the *SE* and the *Topics*.[19] Aristotle claims that in sophistical refutations which depend on a deficiency in the account of deductive argument (i.e. refutations which fail to be deductive in one way or another), deception comes about "by means of something small" (*para mikron*: *SE* 7, 169b11, b15). With regard to the falsehood of the premises

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[16] Stalnaker 2014, 55–56 summarizes the notion of pragmatic presupposition as a relation between a speaker and a proposition. If a speaker takes a proposition to be common ground, she makes a pragmatic presupposition. The objective of pragmatic presupposition theory is then to explain what sort of constraints are in force with regard to the context, i.e. the common ground of the discourse situation at any given moment in time.

[17] Lewis 1979, 340 formulates a first, working version of the rule of accommodation for presupposition as: "If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *P* to be acceptable, and if *P* is not presupposed just before *t*, then – ceteris paribus and within certain limits – presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*.".

[18] Cf. the slightly abridged, two-fold definition of eristic argumentation in SE 2, 165b8–9: "Eristic arguments (λόγοι: see 165a38) are those upon the basis of items which seem to be endoxa but are not, and which are either deductively conclusive, or seem to be".

[19] The visual metaphor features in Aristotle's introduction of the notion of merely apparent refutation in SE 1. As he puts it following a comparison between argumentation and real and false gold, "In the same way, one thing is deduction and refutation, the other only seems to be, and this on account of inexperience, for the inexperienced are like those who look from further away" (164b25–27).

of eristic argumentation, we are told at the beginning of the *Topics* that it is apparent "to those who are also able to perceive small things" (*mikra*: *Top*. A1, 100b29–101a1).[20] The mechanisms of sophistical and eristic argumentation are small but consequential, and the capacity to detect them is not trivial, for even experts are refuted at the hands of eristic specialists because they do not see such details. The ability to see linguistic details, reading the "small print" of an argument, is a skill or capacity required by answerers so as to be able to defend themselves against sophistical refutation and its "small" but effective mechanisms for creating the appearance of deduction.

It is worth noting at this point that a student of dialectical answering would be ill-advised, in eristic contexts, to admit a premiss as acceptable if only it is endorsed by all, the majority, or the wise, etc. For surely among such premisses there will be some that are subject to the kind of semantic manipulation which is the object of study in the *SE*. It is more realistic to suppose that what is acceptable as a premiss in a given dialectical situation is determined in part by pragmatic considerations, i.e. considerations that are particular to that context. There is good evidence that Aristotle conceived of dialectical contexts in terms of communication not only between questioner and a respondent, but also in terms of an audience which would evaluate the performance of both. In several passages of the *SE* Aristotle refers to the "auditors" of argumentation and is concerned with the impression which given moves in the argument make on them.[21] This should not be thought of as, say, an "ideal" or "universal" audience, but as a group which could decide how certain types of utterance are to be construed. Thus in advising on the use of an eristic strategy in inductive procedures Aristotle states that "when in proceeding by cases someone concedes a particular case, you should not ask for the universal but use the concession of the particular case as if it the universal had been conceded, since sometimes people think themselves they have conceded it and appear to have done so to the audience because of the memory of the induction and their assumption that the questions would not have been asked in vain" (*SE* 15, 174a33–37). The use of these and similar strategies for changing the common ground of

argumentation without the explicit consent of the answerer is a hallmark of eristic argumentation. Importantly, Aristotle notes that in the dialectical practice of his time the respondent could withhold assent to premisses featuring ambiguous terms and require that they be disambiguated before answering "yes" or "no" (*Top*. Θ7, 160a17–34). If the respondent failed to enter an objection against the equivocal use of a term, the right to use the term in several senses seems to have been granted. The perfusion of such strategies seems to have created the need for a more developed theory of premiss-acceptability, and prompts Aristotle to distinguish right at the beginning of the *Topics* between acceptable and acceptable-seeming premisses, i.e. between *endoxa* and *phainomena endoxa* (*Top*. A1, 100b21–101a1). The notion of "merely apparent acceptability" is important, for its very presence in the *Topics* is substantial evidence against the widely shared interpretation that premisses are acceptable in dialectical contexts on account of their endorsement, i.e. on being accepted or having "repute". The acceptability of dialectical premisses depends on factors which include, but are not limited to, endorsement, or "being reputed". The determination of *endoxa* as items which seem true to all, the majority, or the wise articulates an ideal type of dialectical premiss to which, given the pragmatic constraints of argumentation, the dialectical premisses actually used need not necessarily correspond.[22]

I have argued in this section that *via* the theory of sophistical refutation Aristotle recognizes something like common ground as a constitutive element of dialectical procedures of deduction. One way to approach the common ground of deductive argumentation is through the theory of argument schemes, as it is done in the *Topics*. But the general theory of deceptive dialectical argumentation, i.e. eristic, requires a theory of signification, because sophistical and eristic refutation employ mechanisms of deception at this level already, whereas deviation from the conventional use of language is explicitly set down as a "mistake" in normal dialectical procedures, as is reflected in a remark at the outset of the treatment of the *topoi* (*Top*. B1, 109a27–33). In the following sections we will see how Aristotle further develops a theory of dialectical common ground with a view to language-use and premiss-acceptability in dialectical argumentation.

4 Homonymy and common ground in dialectical practice

If a deduction, on Aristotle's understanding, consists in relations between objects signified (where "objects" or "things" are the items under discussion), a primary concern for

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[20] The usual translations of *Top*. A 1, 100b29–101a1 as describing some minimal cognitive capacity – "those capable of even modest discernment" (Smith 1997, 1); "even to persons with little power of comprehension" (Pickard-Cambridge in Barnes 1984, 167) – are thus misleading in light of the importance of perceiving "details" on the Aristotelian psychology of argumentation. More on this passage in the discussion of eristic argumentation below.

[21] Ebbesen 2011, 78 n. 4 cites several passages in which Aristotle mentions a "listener" or "listeners": *SE* 1165a15–17; *SE* 8, 169b30–32; *SE* 15, 174a35–36; *SE* 22, 178a20–23. He convincingly makes the case for an audience-sensitive (and thus in this sense context-sensitive) conception of argumentation in the *SE*.
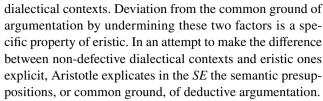
[22] See Reinhardt 2015 and in particular Fait 1998.

theorizing deduction in dialectical (and generally: linguistic) contexts will be that things are stably – though not necessarily truly – signified. The difference between stable and true signification is important for Aristotle's theory of dialectical argumentation. Dialectical deduction requires common ground, or *presumed* common knowledge; it does not require truth (i.e. real common knowledge). One condition for common ground is semantic stability. The requirement that word and object are stably coordinated is of particular interest in the theory of eristic argumentation, and is reflected in the following more explicit account of refutation as deduction:

> **T2.** [a] A refutation is the contradictory of one and the same item, not merely of the word but of the object (*pragma*), [b] and using a word which is not synonymous but is the same, [c] which results from premises by necessity and does not include as premiss the thing which was to be proved in the first place, [d] and by the same thing, in relation to the same thing, in the same way, and in the same time (*SE* 5, 167a23–27).[23]

T2 gives an account of refutation as contradiction, through deduction, of the "one and the same thing" [a]; the remaining parts of the account [b–d] spell out in semantic terms what this means. Real refutational deduction obtains with respect to an object signified, *not only* a word or formula [a].[24] This is a salient feature of deduction as Aristotle conceives it. Even in the syllogistic of the *Prior Analytics* deduction is not conceived by Aristotle in terms of a logical form or schema in which any variables may be substituted within a valid argument scheme.[25] Because deductions obtain with respect to objects, semantic conditions for the stable reference to these objects must be satisfied in order for a deduction to obtain.[26] Aristotle assumes that the norms of conventional language-use and the constraint to follow speaker meaning will at least tend to make speakers satisfy these semantic stability conditions in normal, non-defective

dialectical contexts. Deviation from the common ground of argumentation by undermining these two factors is a specific property of eristic. In an attempt to make the difference between non-defective dialectical contexts and eristic ones explicit, Aristotle explicates in the *SE* the semantic presuppositions, or common ground, of deductive argumentation.

T2 is a substantial contribution to this project. The annotated definition of refutation reflects on several types of fallacy identified in the . It also helps us understand Aristotle's claim that all thirteen forms of fallacy may be "reduced" or brought back to *SE ignoratio elenchi* (*SE* 6, 168a17 ff.). This particular fault in argument consists not just in "ignoring" refutation in a psychological sense, but in failing to meet the requirements expressed in the definition of refutation.[27] Many of the ways to fail to deduce have a semantic cause. In **T2** Aristotle identifies for an elenctic (i.e. legitimate dialectical) refutation-deduction both semantic requirements and requirements concerning the implication relation between the premises and the conclusion. The requirement in **T2**[a] that the refutation be a deduction of a contradiction of one and the same item, "not in word but in the object" (167a23–24), is a semantic condition. The further comment in **T2**[b] that the word not be "synonymous" (i.e. identical in name and sharing the definition of their being, as 'man' and 'ox' are beings with a common definition insofar as they are 'animals') but "the same" in a stricter sense, requires identity of the items referred to in the answerer's thesis and the contradiction of that thesis through refutation. We will return to the conditions for deduction expressed in **T2** below; for the moment, we can concentrate on how the semantic requirement for stability, a central feature of common ground, is developed in Aristotle's theory of dialectical argumentation.

The requirement for semantic stability is addressed in Aristotle's theory of the mechanisms of sophistical refutation *in dictione*. Concern for this condition is evident already in Aristotle's extensive remarks in *Top.* A15, where he describes various means for detecting ambiguity, in particular: homonymy. This is the dialectical *organon* of determining "in how many ways" a certain item is said. The method for determining a case of being said in many ways begins at the level of what is signified, i.e. items or things. The procedures given in *Top.* A15 for finding such items employ e.g. considering the case of the item's "opposite", where we first look to the species and "name" of the item in question to see if they "disagree" (106a10–12). If the opposites of the item differ in species or name, we have established a case of homonymy, i.e. a case in which several items have only a name in common, but not the definition of their

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[23] ἔλεγχος μὲν γάρ ἐστιν ἀντίφασις τοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἑνός, μὴ ὀνόματος ἀλλὰ πράγματος, καὶ ὀνόματος μὴ συν-ωνύμου ἀλλὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ, ἐκ τῶν δοθέντων ἐξ ἀνάγκης (μὴ συναριθμουμένου τοῦ ἐν ἀρχῇ), κατὰ ταὐτὸ καὶ πρὸς ταὐτὸ καὶ ὡσαύτως καὶ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ χρόνῳ. See Dorion 1995, 239; Fait 2007, 120; Malink 2014, 155–156. Whereas elsewhere συνώνυμον refers to *things* which have the same name and definition, here, as Fait points out (ad loc.), συνώνυμα are different words which signify the same thing. For this use of συνώνυμον see also *Rhet.* Γ2, 1405a1.

[24] Dorion 1995, 239.

[25] See Morison 2011, 187, in speaking of Aristotle's treatment of *Barbara*: "he locates the explanation of the validity of such arguments in what the premises say: if things are to be as the premises say they are, then such-and-such must be the case".

[26] But see Malink 2014, 164–168, who persuasively argues that in *SE* 6 Aristotle also considers deduction as a consequence relation between linguistic items, i.e. expressions of a language.

[27] Fait 2007, xvii–xxi; Malink 2014, 169–173.

being.[28] For example, what is good in the case of an animal is opposed by a property denoted as "ugly", whereas the opposite of the good in the case of a house is "in bad condition" (106a21–22); this establishes the homonymy of items which are goods across the stated contexts of use. This and other procedures for determining homonymy described in *Top.* A15 are of interest for Aristotle's dialectician as semantic-pragmatic tools which identify and distinguish relevant contexts of use for certain terms. When in *Top.* A18 Aristotle comments on the use of this *organon*, he relates semantic inquiry concerning homonymous items to the practice of dialectical deduction:

> **T3.** [i] Having investigated how many ways a thing is said is useful both for clarity (for one would rather know what the answerer is positing if the many ways something is said have been clarified) and for having deductions come about according to the matter itself (*auto to pragma*) and not according to the word (*pros to onoma*). [ii] For if it is unclear in how many ways something is said, then it is possible that the questioner and answerer do not bring thought to bear on the same object. [iii] When it has been clarified in how many ways a thing is said and to which of these the answerer is bearing his thought when positing something, then the questioner would be ridiculous if he should fail to make his argument with a view to this (*Top.* A18, 108a18–26).

In this passage Aristotle is partially explicating the normative force of speaker meaning for (non-defective) dialectical conversations.[29] He introduces a context in which the dialectical questioner has invoked an item said in many ways in the question-premiss, and the answerer has accepted some version (either affirmative or negative) of the question-premiss. When the intention of the answerer is clarified by identifying the sense in which the item mentioned in the premiss is meant, the questioner is no longer entitled to make the argument against any other sense of the term than one endorsed by the speaker/answerer. Doing so would make the questioner seem "ridiculous" (108a25), which is to say that speaker meaning – here: answerer meaning – exercises a constraint for the common ground of the procedure. The source of the questioner's appearing ridiculous in dialectical context lies in ignoring this constraint. It is a constitutive rule of linguistic communication, and thus also dialectical conversation, that participants accommodate the meanings of other speakers.[30] This holds all the more so when the speakers state their meanings explicitly, as in the case entertained by Aristotle in **T3**. Tracking speaker's meaning is a constraint on dialectical deduction because the notion of deduction here is "material" in the sense that a deduction expresses a relation among things signified, i.e. the "matter itself" (**T3**[ii]) and not *only* the linguistic item used to refer to it (*to onoma*).

From **T3** we can appreciate that the "matter itself" is determined not solely as a state of affairs, object, or item, but as the object according to the answerer's meaning. If the answerer's meaning is not directed to the relevant items for establishing the deductive relation sought by the questioner, and the questioner nevertheless attempts to use a different meaning of a term occurring in the answerer's utterance to reach the desired conclusion, then the questioner's behavior is ridiculous. The reason for this does not lie in the truth or the acceptability of the premiss accepted by the answerer. Such a questioner's behavior is ridiculous because it fails to track a statement entered into the common ground of the argument, which is determined in part by the intended meaning of the answerer in giving assent. Dialectical participants who subvert the meaning of the speaker/answerer are engaged in eristic.

Argumentation "with a view to the word" may be understood, then, as an attempt to make the common ground of the conversation unclear, and to defeat the meaning of the speaker/answerer. Respect for common ground will be a constitutive feature of legitimate dialectical procedures. But as Aristotle immediately points out in the passage which follows, the study of argumentation with a view to the word is important for dialecticians, because of the prevalence of this kind of practice. The ability to argue in this way will enable the dialectician to "mislead interlocutors by means of false reasoning". Such argumentation will employ the *organon* of clarifying the many ways in which something is said, but not in order to clarify or establish the common ground of the argument. The purpose here is agonistic: to avoid being

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[28] See *Cat.* 1, 1a1–6: "Things are said to be homonymous when they have only a name in common, but the definition of their being is different according to the name. For example: both a human being and a drawing are called an animal, but they only have the name in common, whereas the definition of the being which corresponds to the name differs for each. For if one gives a definition of what it is for each of these things to be an animal, one will give each its own definition". On the notion of homonymy in Aristotle, see Shields 1999 and Barnes 1971, 75–79. Barnes distinguishes five uses of the adjective ὁμώνυμος (based on Bonitz's *Index* and Aristotle's *Topics*) and defends the interpretive thesis that none of them force us to understand "homonymous" items as linguistic ones. I accept his conclusions, and therefore have chosen to refer to homonymous "items", even if (as Barnes notes: 77–78) *Top.* A15 is one of the places in the *Organon* where such items seem to be conceived linguistically. On the tests for homonymy in *Top.* A15, see Shields 1999, 50–56.

[29] The concept of speaker meaning was introduced by Grice 1957. For a helpful introduction to the concept and its history, see Kemmerling 2013.

[30] On the notion of a constitutive rule and its application to communication, see Searle 2018.

misled by the mention of homonymous items, or to invoke them in order to mislead others.

> **T4.** [i] It is useful also for avoiding being misled by false reasoning (*paralogizesthai*), and for misleading others in this way. [ii] For knowing in how many ways a term is used, we will not be so misled, but if a questioner is making his argument with a view to a different thing, we shall know this. [iii] And we ourselves as questioners shall be able to lead others astray through false reasoning if the answerer happens not to know in how many ways something is said. [iv] This is not possible in all cases, but only in those instances of items said in many ways where some are true, and some are false. [v] But this manner of argument is not proper to dialectic, and dialecticians should by all means beware of this sort of thing – arguing with a view to the word – employing it only if there is no other way to discuss the matter at hand (*Top*. A18, 108a26–37).

This context of application for the research-tool for homonymous items is eristic and sophistical. The study of such techniques is a legitimate part of the theory of dialectical argumentation, even if the use of them is "marginal" with a view to genuine dialectical procedures, since typical of eristic and sophistical ones. As we saw, Aristotle states at the outset of *SE* that the most clever and common type of sophistical refutation is "through words" (*SE* 1, 165a4–6), by which he clearly means the misleading use of words as symbols for things (165a6–10). In **T4**, the use of willful linguistic deception is reserved as a last resort of the dialectician, to be employed "only if there is no other way to discuss the matter" (108a36–37). Knowledge of homonymous items is central for dealing with questioners which use them, and so it is also a part of Aristotle's theory of dialectical argumentation, which boasts as its particular contribution to the study of dialectic a method for the answerer. The study of homonymy will be required for the student of dialectic and peirastic, who will prepare to engage in the role of answerer to pretenders to peirastic practice, i.e. sophistical and eristic questioners. The epistemic basis of dialectical answering thus will include knowledge of homonymous items.[31] And this is why the study of such items plays a prominent role in both the *Topics* and in *SE*. In the *Topics* for example, the acceptance of words or statements said in many ways may be used to defeat a definitional claim as "not well assumed" (*Top*. E2, 129b32). And homonymy is the first of the mechanisms of sophistical refutation by means of expression which Aristotle considers (*SE* 4, 165b30–166a6). As Aristotle states in

T4[iv], the use of statements with homonymous items will only be successful for the refutation of the interlocutor if the truth of the statements is affected by the multivocity of such items. In **T4**[v] we find the normative claim that such a procedure is not appropriate to dialectic, but without further justification. The *SE* is the place where Aristotle gives an account for this normative claim, i.e. for why arguments which employ homonymy are eristic.

5 Mistakes in usage and "treachery" in argument

In the main books of the *Topics* we find statements which reflect a certain regulation of language-use in dialectical exchanges, in order to limit the use of semantically opaque expressions. In *Top*. B1, Aristotle defines two "mistakes" made in the formulation of dialectical problems: falsehood, and using strange names for things in "going against established language" (109a27–34).[32] In *Top*. Z10, homonymy is featured as an operative notion for participants in dialectical disputation. There Aristotle recommends a strategy for resisting those who define homonymous items in such a way that the definition does not cover all cases of use of the term, and who then simply deny that the item is homonymous and claim that it does not "refer" to all the things to which it is applied (148b16–22). Aristotle recommends for such a case the rejoinder: "it is necessary to employ established and transmitted language, and not innovate in these sorts of things, even if in some cases one should not talk like the majority" (b19–22). Aristotle's rejection of the reform of conventional usage by invoking its authority reflects the tendency to defer to what is established as common ground.

This is more than just a strategic recommendation. Changing conventional language is from Aristotle's point of view in his theory of dialectical argumentation an indication of eristic tendencies. The reluctance to permit moves such as this in dialectical contexts, and the commitment to existing language-use even in the case of items said in many ways, reflects the orientation of dialectical practices on convention as a source of common ground in dialectic (and in communication generally). Convention is also understood as basic for linguistic signification in the *De interpretatione*, where a name (*onoma*) is "spoken sound significant by convention" (*De int*. 2, 16a19–20).[33] The anchoring of discourse to

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[32] The example Aristotle cites in this connection is strange: "calling a person a plane-tree" (109a31–32). It is reasonable to assume that stipulative but aberrant expressions like this were employed not just to be bizarre, but to set up a refutation through an argument scheme which employed the term introduced.

[33] *De int*. 2, 16a26–28: "I say "by convention", because no name is a name by nature, but only when it becomes a symbol. Even inarticulate noises, for example of beasts, indicate something, but not as a

established usage serves to limit semantic opacity. We find a concern with semantic opacity in connection with the statement of definitions. It is a fault in stating the definition if one does not use established names, for "each thing which is not according to custom is obscure" (*Top*. Z2, 140a3–5). Lack of clarity, i.e. obscurity, is one way in which a definition can be materially correct but "not well defined"; it comes about by using unclear expression (*Top*. Z1, 139b12–15). One *topos* of obscurity is when the item mentioned is in some respect homonymous (Z2, 139b19–31). In this case it is unclear which of the things indicated by the homonymous item the speaker intends to say (b22–23), thus in effect undermining the constraint of the speaker's meaning by making it opaque.

Participants in dialectical debates seem to have invoked homonymy in order to retract or revise existing commitments. Aristotle warns of a strategy of certain agents (presumably answerers): they accept something said in many ways without distinction, but then "bring false charges" or "commit treachery" against the argument by denying that a term in the definition refers to all the things included in the definition (b23–27). (Presumably such interlocutors will have sometimes resorted to the sort of language reform maneuver which Aristotle rejects in *Top*. B1.)) In this case an undetected homonymy is a pitfall for the questioner, who may nevertheless succeed in making the deduction even if the definition given is shown to have been defective (b27–31). Aristotle also warns against a similar possible tactic in the case of the use of metaphor (139b32–140a2). Metaphor gives the answerer a means to retract a commitment from the dialogue board, for it is possible for an interlocutor who has offered or accepted a premiss involving metaphor to "bring a false charge by saying that he had spoken literally" (139b35–36). The particular negative evaluative connotations of "bringing a false charge" or "committing treachery" indicate that the speakers who employ such strategies are doing wrong by breaking an earlier agreement. The implication is that dialectical agents should stand by the commitments which are involved in established language, because conventional usage is deemed to be part of the common ground of argumentation in dialogue, and fundamental to the process of communication through signification.

The expression "committing treachery" (*sukophantein*) captures the specific sort of harm inflicted by undermining common ground in argument. Aristotle sometimes uses the objectified form of this verb (*sukophantêma*) in a way which has been rendered as a "quibble":

T5. The appearance of having been refuted is most, and most often, accomplished by the highly sophistical piece of treachery (*sukophantêma*) of questioners who, though they have not made a question for their drawing of an inference, finally simply say, as if they were drawing an inference: 'so and so is not the case, then' (*SE* 15, 174b8–11).

The normative dimension of the word rendered here as "treachery" is meant to denote not just any "quibble" or petty distinction, but real infidelity to the constitutive rules of dialectical argumentation. The reason for Aristotle's adoption of a word associated with practices of extortion, in these argumentative contexts, is related to the effect of such practices for the common ground of the argument. In treacherously presuming a premiss which is not based on the assent of the answerer and thus not part of the common ground, a sophistical questioner undermines the common ground itself. Common ground and dialectic is held through the norm that the items entered really have their basis in the set of statements held in common through the procedure. This particular bit of treachery accomplishes this by omitting the question-premiss through which one must secure the acceptance of the statement into the common ground. The sophistical questioner thus by-passes the requirement that the answerer actually accept the "conclusion", namely the *inference* to the conclusion.

6 Conclusion

Much deception in argumentation happens even before the business of inference gets off the ground. With the requirement that the statements in a dialectical exchange be authorized by the acceptance of the interlocutor in such a way as for the *pragma* to remain stable in the course of dialogue, Aristotle managed to formulate a regulative norm for dialectical argumentation and deduction which appeals neither to "the facts" nor an epistemic *telos*, but something required for either of these: semantic stability and preservation of common ground. His study in eristic ways with words can be seen as a part of his the larger project of the study of multivocity, i.e. words "said in many ways" and their respective meanings. For the joint work of cooperative dialectical argumentation, namely deduction, meaning stability is a minimal requirement. I have used the modern pragmatic notion of common ground to theorize a bundle of factors – semantic stability in orientation to the *pragma* of discourse, premiss acceptability, context-sensitivity – to which Aristotle is evidently alive in his theory of dialectic, and which he faults eristic arguers for undermining. In articulating these norms for the regulated and role-dependent *legitimate* adversarial

Footnote 33 (continued)

name of that which they indicate". Aristotle thus takes a side in an already existing debate on the nature of signification which we find in Plato's *Cratylus*. On convention in Aristotle's theory of signification, see Crivelli 2009, 83–88.

argumentation which was dialectic, Aristotle sought to find the fault not in the intention of agents of argument, but in what they do. This approach identifies what even those with opposing roles must hold in common if they are to jointly accomplish a deduction. Today, perhaps, we may hardly expect to find such argumentation outside of scientific contexts. But learning to see how the *pragma* under discussion may be lost is still a worthwhile task, and perhaps even imperative for understanding argument in which facts are no longer the ultimate warrants for acceptance.

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