

# Accounting for transformations in the dialectical reconstruction of argumentative discourse

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## Abstract

In this paper, an argument is made for the importance of taking into account the social interactional aspect of argumentative discourse, when reconstructing such discourse as a critical discussion. The analysis of a particular problem-solving discussion shows how dialectical transformations can be accounted for by an appeal to social practices, especially with regard to the maintenance of a status balance between the participants.

In order to enable an adequate evaluation, in pragma-dialectics, argumentative discourse is subjected to a dialectical reconstruction, highlighting those elements which the evaluation will address. Dialectical reconstruction entails looking at argumentative discourse from a particular, theoretically motivated point of view: the discourse is viewed as an attempt to attain the rational resolution of a conflict of opinion. The reconstruction is guided by a conception of what is necessary for the rational resolution of a conflict of opinion, represented in an idealized model of critical discussion. It abstracts those (and only those) elements in the discourse which are relevant with regard to this particular goal. The reconstruction results in an analytic overview in which the differences of opinion, the distribution of dialectical roles, the expressed and unexpressed premises which make up the arguments, the argumentation structure and the argumentation schemes of the arguments are laid out (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs 1993).

In order to arrive at such an analytic overview, a number of dialectical transformations are carried out on the discourse, which bring into focus those elements in the discourse which potentially contribute to the resolution of a conflict of opinion. These transformations are: deletion, addition, permutation, and substitution. The transformation of deletion selects those elements that are immediately relevant to the resolution, omitting what is irrelevant to this goal. The transformation of addition makes explicit those elements that are immediately relevant to the resolution but which have been left implicit in the discourse. The transformation of permutation rearranges elements in the discourse in such a way as to mirror the order in which the resolution

ideally is attained. The transformation of substitution, finally, reformulates relevant elements, in such a way as to most clearly show up their function in the resolution.

It is important to realize that pragma-dialectical reconstruction, like, indeed, any reconstruction, necessarily is an abstraction, even if it is a legitimate one for an analyst who is interested in evaluating discourse with a view to its dialectical rationality. The discourse is regarded as directed at the attainment of one particular goal, the rational resolution of a conflict of opinion. In actual fact, discourse usually is aimed at realizing a multitude of goals.

In this paper, I will argue that in reconstructing argumentative discourse, it is important to be aware of the existence of these other goals. I will argue that such an awareness is necessary to account for the presence of other elements in the discourse than those that are dialectically relevant, and so to justify their deletion in dialectical reconstruction, as well as to account for the fact that elements which are dialectically relevant sometimes do not look as if they are, and so to justify their reconstruction as relevant elements through substitution or addition.

I will focus on one particular type of goal, namely, one that is a corollary from the fact that argumentative discourse, being discourse, is a form of social interaction.<sup>1</sup> For a perspective on what this implies, we may look to the literature on conversational interaction.

Cheepen (1988) is a particularly relevant source here, since she specifically focusses on the social aspect of conversational interaction. In her study of informal spontaneous conversation, she convincingly argues that the establishment and monitoring of an appropriate interpersonal framework account for much of the linguistic work done by speakers. In her view, 'the interpersonal component is the basis on which other strands of meaning are built' (1988:3).

Of central importance in this interpersonal component is the concept of status. Cheepen holds that status, or the power relationship obtaining between the participants in an interaction, is central to the way in which the discourse is developed. Controlling the direction of the talk, for example, is the prerogative of the superior speaker. This may be done by such means as changing the topic or performing a framing move.<sup>2</sup> Or, to mention another example, repair actions, often profoundly influencing the subsequent course of the conversation, have to be undertaken when the status balance is disturbed. This happens, for instance, when one participant bluntly tells the other one what to do, or openly mocks him or disagrees with him.

<sup>1</sup> In the literature about problem-solving discussions we find a reflection of the insight that discourse serves social and interactional goals in addition to other goals, in the distinction which traditionally is made between task-related and socio-emotional goals (Bales 1958, Maier 1963, Fisher 1980). While some authors view the social-emotional preoccupations of participants as a potential danger for the achievement of the task-related goals (e.g. Maier 1963), others, such as Fisher (1980) take a more positive view.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of framing moves are: 'Right!', 'Okay'.

In this paper, I will examine a fragment of a real-life problem-solving discussion in which the participants are trying to solve a conflict of opinion. Generally, the interactional work participants do is most conspicuously present in the opening and closing stages of the interaction, when they are exchanging greetings etc. But I am particularly interested in the more task-related parts of the discussion in which the problem-solving and conflict resolution activities proper are being conducted. It will soon become clear that, there too, status work is all-pervasive.

The discussion which I will examine is one of a series of conversations in which two members of the management of a hospital deliberate with an outside PR adviser on the best strategy to pursue in negotiations with a nearby hospital, Verana, regarding future collaboration. Pressure is being exerted by the Ministry of Health to arrive at some form of collaborative agreement in the short term.

The discussion bears many of the features of ordinary everyday conversation. There is no institutionally determined, predictable sequence of events as might be found in, say, a court hearing or local council meeting. There is no chairman allocating turns to speak, there is no fixed order in which speakers have the floor, there is no pre-determined agenda, and there are no particular rights or obligations regarding who is entitled to perform which speech acts. The conversationalists are all of equal status. They are on Christian-name terms.

There are, however, a number of functional differences between the participants, relating to their role in the negotiations and the nature of their work: participant A is conducting the negotiations on behalf of the hospital management and is writing a draft plan of collaboration which will be the hospital's basis for negotiation, participant C is the second member of the hospital management, and participant B is the external PR adviser who is not a part of the hospital's management structure, so a relative outsider. Most of the conversation takes place between A and B.

The discussion centers on a problem raised by B: there is a risk<sup>3</sup> that the negotiators on the other side will deliberately try to delay the collaboration, so that the Ministry will gain the impression that 'the whole thing is too complicated' and accordingly impose amalgamation.<sup>4</sup> B raises this problem at the beginning of the fragment (lines 18-41).

<sup>3</sup> The word *risk* which B uses, is an indication of the fact that a problem is being raised (cf. Jordan 1984). Amalgamation is evidently regarded by the conversationalists as an undesirable option.

<sup>4</sup> In problem-solving discussions, of which the present one is an instance, the participants try to reach a solution to a problem through discussion. During the various phases of the problem-solving process, participants have to resolve various differences of opinion. These differences of opinion can relate to all stages of the problem-solving process: the participants may disagree on whether a problem exists at all, what it is (if it exists), what the potential solutions might be, by what criteria these solutions ought to be judged, and what the judgement ought to be. The present discussion concerns the first of these questions.

- 18 B: but what what you were saying Frits, (.) I thought you well that we would get  
 19 to that, the risk (.) that they er that maybe they deliberately, by er now once  
 20 again well just as we were saying dragging their heels in the sand and slowing  
 21 things down and [er not doing  
 22 A: [yes  
 23 B: anything (.) that i-if you found yourself in the situation that even at the ministry  
 24 you had to say that you still hadn't really got anywhere at all with the  
 25 collaboration, huh, with filling in the details of the collaboration, and still had  
 26 no more than what er whatsisname er (.) Boom called that sherry er  
 27 [agreement  
 28 A: [yes yes, that's what I told them again this afternoon. yes  
 29 B: that at some stage a sort of er (.) unease or uneasiness or or er irritation will set  
 30 in for people who actually do have something to say about the collaboration,  
 31 A: yes  
 32 B: and they say okay, cut the cackle, this is getting no-one anywhere, you people  
 33 want (.) to set up a form of collaboration that no-one's [got any experience of at  
 34 A: [that's not going to earn  
 35 anything  
 36 B: all, er er that's much too complicated, and and you clearly haven't got anything  
 37 down on paper, er it's not going to work, one party is working in quite a different  
 38 direction from the other, (.)  
 39 [cut the cackle, [amalgamation  
 40 A: (yes but) [yes yes but  
 41 B: hey, at least we know that model

During B's introduction of this problem, A several times throws in a 'yes', and twice provides a supportive elaboration. Now, how should we reconstruct A's contribution? Should we, for example, reconstruct it as an expression of agreement?

There are several reasons not to do so. For one thing, in what follows, we shall see that A does not at all agree with B's claim that there is a problem. Now of course, maybe in that case we should impute inconsistency to A. But I don't think so.

To begin with, A's utterances are in accord with what the general principles of turn-taking in conversation require. A's behavior is the conventional way of showing listenership, that is, displaying his understanding of B taking an extended turn and his willingness to let him do so (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974, Schegloff 1982, Bublitz 1988).

In the second place, A's acquiescence is in accord with what is known about the various stages of the social aspects of the process of decision-making. As, for example, Fisher (1980) has shown, in the first stage of this process, the orientation stage, contributions of the participants are aimed at avoiding open conflict and keeping the social climate friendly. They are not meant to express standpoints which the speaker is prepared to defend.

Finally, there is a third consideration: in these contributions, in addition to the work just described, A is doing status work as well: he is demonstrating his being in the

know and in control. This becomes especially clear in lines 28 and 34-35. In line 26, A emphatically agrees with B, adding that he told 'them' so several times himself. In line 34-35, A himself supplies the information on what the Ministry might say, which B is in the course of providing.

So all in all there is good reason not to reconstruct A's contributions as an expression of agreement, but to consider them as relevant to other goals than that of resolving the conflict of opinion, and so to delete them in the reconstruction.

Once A takes over the floor (after a couple of interruptions by C which are not rendered here), we can clearly see that his position is one of putting forward an opposing standpoint: he argues (in lines 59-65) that the problem B raises does not exist.

59 A: but don't worry, if I can just if I can just talk about him

60 C: yes

61 A: Egberts has tackled that point very well. he was clearly looking strictly for  
62 simplification, of the formula. for the collaboration. and to start with it wouldn't  
63 work out the way we wanted but later it did, and you'll see it will end up a véry  
64 simple, clear, lucid, binding formula. and the rest of it is all verse eighty-three,  
65 and *that* formula will go there and *then* their lordships will be satisfied.

Contrary to B's allegation, A claims that the Ministry will not think things are too complicated. To support this contention he advances the argument that Egberts will work out a very simple formula for collaboration in agreement with the wishes of 'our' side, which will be presented to the Ministry.

Clearly, a lot of reconstruction work is required in order to represent A's contribution in this way. We have to reconstruct 'but don't worry' as the standpoint 'there is no such problem', and 'their lordships will be satisfied' as the argument 'the Ministry will not think things are too complicated'. How can we warrant such a drastic move?

One very obvious justification is that we may assume A is trying to make his contribution be one that is relevant to the ongoing course of the talk - in accordance with Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975). And since B has just put forward the standpoint that there is a risk that the Ministry will think things are too complicated, a relevant sequel would be either to agree or to disagree with this standpoint.

But we can add to this justification by pointing out that the fact that A formulates his contribution in this particular way, can be accounted for in terms of status work. 'Don't worry' is an instantiation of a particular status-gaining strategy which consists, as Cheepen suggests, in displaying other-attentiveness while the other person is not in a position to reciprocate. A, in other words, is patronizing. 'Their lordships will be satisfied' is another formulation in which A is taking a superior stance, in this case, towards the Ministry. This same superior stance is manifested in the way in which he phrases the argument as a whole, which is one big display of control and superior knowledge: evaluating Egberts's behavior, elaborating on the development of the

negotiations which he himself conducted, assuring B ('you'll see'), and, finally, predicting and evaluating how it will go in the end. All these are status-raising techniques, not immediately relevant to the resolution of the conflict of opinion as such.

In the reconstruction, then, A's contribution would be stripped of these authoritative overtones, and pared down to the core of his standpoint and the arguments that he puts forward in support for it.

Turning to B's reaction to A's opposition against his standpoint, we find that it also stands in need of reconstruction. B's contribution runs like this:

- 70 (---)  
 71 B: ye-es, that is of course [ I think it is *vèry* important  
 72 A: [ yes  
 73 B: that that [ *Egberts* should stay on our *side*  
 74 A: [ and that part that's exactly his line and we agree to that and Bob's  
 75 your uncle. yeah you have to ram it down their throat that's all I can  
 76 say about it

At first sight, when looking at B's reaction, we might think we have to do with an expression of agreement. But there are several reasons for not reconstructing it so.

B's initial reaction to A's argument that the problem is non-existent is silence (line 70). Moreover, once he embarks on a reply, he does so by starting out with a concession, signalled by the hesitantly drawn out 'ye-es' and the expression 'of course'. In addition, this concession refers to only part of A's argument, namely that Egberts is taking the same line as 'us'. B says nothing about whether Egberts's support offers a solution for the problem he has presented.

Silence, concessive start and the absence of explicit, direct agreement all are in accordance with a general conversational strategy for expressing disagreement. The strategy is aimed at minimizing the threat to the social face of the interlocutor which is inherent in producing a dispreferred second pair-part such as disagreement (cf. Pomerantz 1984).

In other words, there is a clear justification for reconstructing B's utterance, not as agreement, but as disagreement with A's argument that the problem no longer exists.

Unfortunately for the analyst, B is interrupted by A and unable to finish his contribution. But then, the interruption itself lends support to the above reconstruction, because A most certainly appears to interpret B's contribution as an expression of disagreement: he advances support for his assertion regarding Egberts's position ('that's exactly his line').<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Note, by the way, how, here too, A takes a superior role, in unilaterally closing the subject through his concluding generalization in lines 75-6 (cf. Polyani (1985) for this technique of topic closing).



Moreover, B's subsequent actions are consistent with this reconstruction. The first time B gets the floor again is in line 103. At that point A had been responding to C, who had brought up a concern of his own, not related to B's warning. C had been saying that 'we' don't have to talk to 'them' at all. A was objecting that we can't avoid talking to them because there will be a tug-of-war about the outpatient departments.

- 96 A: we've already worked out what [they] can have. (.) that's easily worked out, it's  
 97 twenty outpatients departments. I'm not familiar with their hospital. that may be  
 98 crazy but I'm not familiar with it. not, that's something they've never revealed,  
 99 in figures. but if you ask me they're looking for well over twenty outpatients  
 100 departments. in all, and *that's* when the tug-of-war starts. because then *we'll*  
 101 have too many.  
 102 (-)  
 103 B: well *exactly*, yes but *that's* the point at which it *is* relevant again what they're  
 104 going to do with all those outpatients departments  
 105 A: ye-es  
 106 B: and for *them*, the *way* the collaboration is worked *out*  
 107 in detail is *also* [ going to be important again,  
 108 A: [ *yes*  
 109 B: [ if they haven't yet [ realized it [ then they soon will  
 110 A: [ *yes* [ *yes* [ *yes*

Latching onto A's response to C, B, after a short pause, begins his turn with 'well *exactly*'. Initial *well* is usually a means of distancing oneself from a previous position, but it is followed here by a strong expression of agreement, which would lend support to reconstructing it as agreement to A's position in regard to C's claim. However, this initial agreement is immediately followed by an opposition-indicating 'yes but', and the assertion that at *that* point for *them* it *is* going to be important how the collaboration is worked *out* in detail. In other words, B is agreeing with A's statement, while at the same time distancing himself from the direction the discussion is taking. He uses A's assertion as a lever for taking the discussion back to his own earlier point about the other side's evil intentions regarding the collaboration. The two *agains* (lines 103 and 107) indicate that these are the same intentions which he alluded to before, when he raised the problem for the first time.

Further support for this analysis can be found in B's reaction, in line 124, to A's subsequent response (which is not rendered here).

- 124 B: yes but let me put the question differently, okay,  
 125 A: yes  
 126 B: d'you think, [ (-) maybe they've somewhere (.) got a  
 127 A: [ *yeah*  
 128 B: secret agenda after all that they actually want a full amalgamation?

The issue B raises here ('d'you think maybe they've got a secret agenda that they actually want a full amalgamation?') ties up with his own initial introduction of the problem in which he indicated that the other side was deliberately obstructing in order to get the Ministry to impose an amalgamation. By means of this question B attempts to elicit as a concession from A the assertion that Verana is in effect trying to bring about a full amalgamation, thus getting A to formulate the main argument for B's own position. With 'let me put *the question differently*', he lets it be known that his previous contribution was intended to be interpreted in the same vein.

All this lends support for reconstructing B's contributions as providing support for his initial standpoint, that there is a problem, and as an effort at refutation of the argument which A brought forward in opposition to that standpoint.

Now, of course, in none of the three utterances of B which we just examined this position is explicitly or directly present. At no point does B provide an explicit link to his initial standpoint or to A's opposing standpoint.

Yet, the substitution and addition transformations which the reconstruction requires can be justified, if we take into account that this implicitness and indirection of B serve social, interactional goals. They are an instantiation of the general face-saving strategies which were mentioned above, in the discussion of lines 70-6. B is at pains to avoid a direct expression of his dissatisfaction with the way the discussion is going and of his disagreement with A's opposition to his standpoint, because direct and explicit expression would mean a strong threat to A's social face.

In what follows, a lengthy debate arises about whether the other side is aiming for amalgamation. B keeps asking questions trying to elicit a concession on the part of A that the other side is actually striving for amalgamation, and A consistently keeps answering them in the negative. During this debate, A once again broadly displays his superior knowledge and control by detailed elaborations on the course of the negotiations and his part therein, once again determining the direction of the conversation to a large degree by unilateral topic closures and interruptions.

But I will refrain from discussing these sections in detail and focus instead on the moment when A finally concurs with B (line 300, 'but actually you're right you know').

- 300 A: but actually you're right you know, if er friend Van Denen happens to say,  
 301 during any other business, let's just think about this regional OR for a moment,  
 302 then that means that we haven't *yet* given up that point about training you  
 303 know, not even for those three years (.) forget it (.). I sometimes think in that  
 304 subcommittee, with Van Denen, er that can easily get derailed. (-- ) what I  
 305 mean is, that's just when Van Denen will start saying that kind of thing about  
 306 amalgamating, and er  
 307 C: no you're absolutely right  
 308 A: hey, you know? all that kind of pushing  
 309 C: yes



A certainly does not formulate his agreement as one acceding to the argument of his opponent. Rather, he brings it forward as one who knew it all to begin with, providing an argument of his own, based on his experience in the negotiations. Does that mean we should reconstruct this contribution as the expression of an evaluative standpoint for which argumentation is advanced?

I don't think so. Again, there are various reasons for this.

For one thing, it is a well-documented conversational procedure, when expressing agreement, not to just claim agreement, but to demonstrate it as well, for example, by formulating considerations of one's own (cf. Sacks 1992, Houtkoop-Steenstra 1987). This is what A is doing here.

Second, according to what is known about the pattern in which the social process in decision-making discussions evolves, in the final stage of the discussion, the confirmation stage, participants aim to express and strengthen agreement. Argumentation in that stage does not serve to overcome disagreement, but to confirm agreement (Fisher 1980).

And, finally, A's particular way of phrasing his agreement, once again, can be accounted for as the result of status work. Status-gaining strategies can be seen to be at work in formulations like 'actually', claiming to possess superior information about how things really are, and 'friend Van Denen', showing ironical condescension, and in A's detailed elaboration of his experiences in the negotiations which he conducts.

All these considerations support reconstruction of A's contribution, not as a speech act belonging to the opening or argumentation stages of a discussion, but as a speech act belonging to the concluding stage of a discussion, *in casu* the withdrawal of doubt and of an opposing standpoint.

In the above, I have justified particular dialectical transformations in reconstructing contributions of the participants to a problem-solving discussion, by showing that the way in which these contributions take shape can be accounted for in terms of the interpersonal work which the participants are doing.

So far, this explanation has been quite general in nature, pointing to general face-saving and status-establishing strategies which are operative in all conversation. But a more specific explanation for the verbal behavior of the participants to the discussion can be given, as well. This verbal behavior can be tied to the differing interests which are implied by the different positions which the participants hold in the organization to which they belong. A, who as a member of the board of directors of the hospital carries authority in the negotiations which he conducts, requests the advice of B, who, as an external PR advisor, doesn't stand in any hierarchical relationship to A and carries his own weight in PR matters. For B, this means that he has to be careful not to infringe on the authority and substantial right of decision which A possesses. B thus has to manoeuvre carefully. Hence the indirectness and implicitness of his contributions. A, on his part, has to show that as a negotiator he is capable and informed.

Hence his taking ample time to expand on the negotiations and his own role therein. Hence, also, his presenting himself as someone who has everything under control.

What we can learn from all this, is that in all forms of discourse, language use is geared towards serving several purposes at once. Some of these are social in nature, such as establishing and maintaining a balance of status, some representational, such as trying to resolve a difference of opinion in a rational way. Only the latter kind provides a context for dialectical reconstruction and evaluation.<sup>6</sup> But, in carrying out these tasks, we cannot afford to ignore the former.

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, status interactions as such need in no way form an impediment to dialectical rationality: B and A don't try to gloss over or conceal their conflict of opinion, but try to resolve it through a regular exchange of arguments and critique. B finds the 'solution' A thinks to have provided unsatisfactory and tries throughout the discussion to show that the problem still exists. His concern to keep the status balance undisturbed does not induce him to cover up the lack of agreement or to abandon the issue. A, for his part, does not let his concern to protect his status prohibit him from giving up his standpoint in the end.

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