

Strategic manoeuvring by retracting a standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency

Maniobrando estratégicamente mediante retractación de un punto de vista en respuesta a una acusación de inconsistencia

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Abstract: This paper explains the strategic function of a protagonist's confrontational move of retracting an earlier standpoint when he is confronted with an accusation of inconsistency. First, the retraction of an earlier standpoint will be characterized pragmatically as an illocutionary act that creates a number of commitments both for the protagonist and the antagonist. Second, I will describe how the protagonist exploits the incurred commitments to his advantage in order to achieve an opportunistic outcome of the discussion. As an illustration, I will analyze an argumentative exchange from a political interview in which a politician strategically retracts an earlier standpoint that is declared by the interviewer inconsistent with another standpoint on the same issue.

Keywords: Illocution, inconsistency, political discourse, strategic maneuvering.

Resumen: Este trabajo explica la función estratégica de la movida confrontacional de un protagonista cuando se retracta de un punto de vista expuesto con anterioridad al momento de enfrentarse con una acusación de inconsistencia. Primero, se caracterizará pragmáticamente la retractación de un punto de vista expuesto con anterioridad, en tanto un acto ilocutivo que crea compromisos tanto para el protagonista como para el antagonista. Segundo, describiré cómo el protagonista explota a su favor los compromisos adquiridos para alcanzar una salida oportunista en la discusión. Como ilustración, analizaré un intercambio argumentativo en una entrevista política en la que un político estratégicamente se retracta de un punto de vista expuesto y que es

declarado por el entrevistador inconsistente con otro punto de vista ya utilizado en el mismo tema.

Palabras clave: Discurso político, ilocución, inconsistencia, maniobra estratégica.

1. Introduction

In a BBC political interview dating from December 9, 2007, Jon Sopel interviewed Alan Duncan, then Shadow Foreign Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in Britain on the issue of nuclear energy. At some point in the discussion, Sopel accuses the politician of being inconsistent with regard to the use of nuclear energy. According to the interviewer, in a previous interview on the same topic, Duncan has been of the opinion that nuclear energy is not a solution to the problem of energy sources, yet in the current interview the politician states exactly the opposite. In principle, the politician has two possibilities to respond to the accusation: either he maintains his current standpoint or retracts his current standpoint.¹ In the present discussion, merely maintaining his current position is not an option for Duncan. Sopel backs up his accusation of inconsistency with a quote from an earlier interview on the basis of which the interviewer attributes to the politician the view that nuclear waste is not a solution to the problem of energy sources. The attributed view is obviously inconsistent with the view that nuclear waste is the solution to the problem of energy sources, which Duncan advances in the current interview. Therefore, Duncan's current position cannot be maintained. The politician is thereby obliged to retract his standpoint in order to resolve the inconsistency.

Examples such as the one just presented are common in public political discussions such as a political interview. From a pragma-dialectical perspective on argumentation, in such discussions the arguers can be said to maneuver strategically in order to achieve a favorable outcome of the discussion within the bounds of reasonableness (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002). The interviewer, who assumes the role of the antagonist in the discussion, may try, for example, to do so by advancing an accusation backed

¹ In a characterization of an accusation of inconsistency as an illocutionary act, I have shown that maintaining a standpoint or retracting a standpoint are the possible interactional effects of such an accusation (Andone 2009).

up with a fact which cannot be denied by the politician. The politician, acting as the protagonist, may attempt to obtain a favorable outcome by resolving the inconsistency and remaining engaged in the discussion. In this paper, I shall concentrate on explaining the strategic function which the protagonist of a standpoint attempts to achieve when he is confronted with an antagonist's accusation of inconsistency and has no other choice but to retract his current position and he does so.

The paper will be organized along the following lines. First, I shall specify the commitments which the protagonist and the antagonist in a discussion incur when the illocutionary act of retraction is performed. Second, I shall describe how the protagonist can exploit the incurred commitments to his advantage in order to achieve an opportunistic outcome of the discussion when he is accused of an inconsistency. As an illustration, a detailed analysis is provided of the argumentative confrontation mentioned in the beginning, in which Duncan retracts a standpoint that is declared by Sopel inconsistent with another standpoint on the same issue.

2. Retraction and commitments

In the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse, the arguers' moves are seen as the performance of illocutionary acts which realize analytically relevant moves of a dialectical procedure (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984). As an illocutionary act, every move creates commitments for the speaker and the interlocutor, which become clear from the felicity conditions applying to the act. For a correct identification of such commitments in the case of the move at issue, *retraction* needs to be characterized as an illocutionary act for which two groups of felicity conditions apply: (1) identity conditions defining what makes an utterance an instance of retraction, and (2) correctness conditions defining what a correct performance of that illocutionary act amounts to (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984: 42).

Crucial for a proper account of the identity and correctness conditions is that retraction involves an illocutionary negation of an earlier illocutionary act performed by the speaker. By retracting an earlier illocutionary act the speaker explicitly makes it clear that he no longer regards himself as com-

mitted to the propositional content expressed in the earlier illocutionary act.² Taking this view as a starting point, the following conditions can be formulated for a happy performance of the illocutionary act of retraction:

Identity conditions

Essential condition

Retraction counts as the withdrawal of a commitment to the propositional content of an earlier illocutionary act by the speaker.³

Propositional content condition

The propositional content of a retraction is identical to the propositional content of the earlier illocutionary act.

Correctness conditions

Preparatory conditions

- (1) The speaker believes that the addressee will be prepared to accept that the speaker is no longer committed to the earlier illocutionary act.
- (2) The speaker believes that the addressee does not already know or believe that the speaker is no longer committed to the earlier illocutionary act.

² This view is based on van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1984) observation concerning the retraction of an assertion. By retracting an assertion the speaker "no longer regards himself as committed to the propositional content expressed in the assertion" (1984: 101). This view coincides with Peetz' (1979) interpretation of an illocutionary negation as withdrawal.

³ The essential condition of an illocutionary act relates to the interactional aspect of the act by including the response which a speaker hopes to elicit from the addressee (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984: 21). Unlike other illocutionary acts, retraction brings with it an end to the discussion in which the interlocutors are involved and a response is no longer expected from the speaker. An interactional purpose is not specified in the formulation of the essential condition, because strictly speaking, a response is no longer possible from the addressee. As will be shown, this does not mean that no commitments are created for the interlocutor.

Sincerity conditions

- (1) The speaker no longer wants to assume responsibility for the earlier illocutionary act.
- (2) The speaker believes that the withdrawal of the earlier illocutionary act is needed.

What commitments are created when a speaker retracts an earlier illocutionary act? To answer this question, the identity and correctness conditions just formulated can provide clues. These conditions indicate both what the speaker is committed to having performed an illocutionary act of retraction and what the addressee is committed to when accepting the speaker's illocutionary act as understandably and correctly performed.⁴ The identity conditions for a felicitous performance of retraction indicate that the speaker is committed to withdrawing exactly the propositional content of the earlier illocutionary act. The addressee who accepts the speaker's illocutionary act, i.e. achieves the minimal perlocutionary effect, commits himself to the implicit consecutive consequence of no longer holding the speaker committed to the earlier illocutionary act which is being withdrawn. The correctness conditions point to the speaker's commitment to act in accordance with the consequences of giving up the earlier illocutionary act. In addition, the correctness conditions require that the speaker be committed to assuming that the addressee is ready to accept the speaker's withdrawal of earlier illocutionary act.⁵

The commitments resulting from the performance of the illocutionary act of retraction are useful starting points for establishing what participants

⁴ This idea is based on the view that the performance of any illocutionary act implies that a set of commitments is created (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984). For a detailed discussion of other views, see de Brabanter and Dendale (2008).

⁵ The identity conditions usually point to the addressee's commitments, because the essential condition, which is one of the identity conditions, includes the interactional aspect of the act. The propositional content condition can be taken, however, to indicate the speaker's commitment to a particular 'content'. The correctness conditions provide most of the times clues about the speaker's commitments. The sincerity conditions, in particular, which indicate some of the conditions under which an act can be considered correct, relate to the responsibilities which a speaker assumes by performing a particular illocutionary act (cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, who propose that the sincerity conditions could more aptly be called responsibility conditions).

commit themselves to in an argumentative confrontation when a standpoint is retracted in response to an antagonist's accusation of inconsistency. Particularly important to indicating the relevant commitments is that the retraction of a standpoint realizes an analytically relevant move that responds to an accusation of inconsistency instantiating an expression of criticism. The antagonist's criticism expressed by means of an accusation of inconsistency conveys that the protagonist's standpoint is unacceptable because it is inconsistent with another standpoint advanced earlier. Drawing on the concept of illocutionary negation, the accusation of inconsistency involves the illocutionary negation of acceptance, i.e. the non-acceptance of the protagonist's standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984: 102). By retracting a standpoint, the protagonist admits that the allegedly inconsistent standpoint is unacceptable and implicitly accepts the accusation. In accepting the accusation, the protagonist expresses that the correctness conditions of the antagonist's illocutionary act have been fulfilled (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984).⁶

Given the identity conditions for retraction, a protagonist who accepts an accusation of inconsistency may be considered committed to giving up one of the allegedly inconsistent standpoints (in exactly the scope and force with which it has been initially advanced). The antagonist commits himself to no longer holding the protagonist responsible to the expressed opinion which constitutes the propositional content of the standpoint which is being given up. In this way, the antagonist admits that the protagonist's response is one of the intended interactional effects of the accusation of inconsistency.

The correctness conditions point to the protagonist's commitment to assuming that the antagonist is ready to accept his response as an answer to

⁶ The preparatory conditions of an accusation of inconsistency are: (a) the speaker believes that the addressee will accept that he has committed an inconsistency; (b) the speaker believes that the addressee will acknowledge that the presence of an inconsistency obstructs the argumentative exchange he and his interlocutor are engaged in, and (c) the speaker believes that the addressee will take on the obligation to provide a response that answers the charge of inconsistency (Andone 2009: 156). The sincerity conditions stipulate that (a) the speaker believes that the addressee has committed an inconsistency, (b) the speaker believes that the presence of an inconsistency constitutes an obstruction to the exchange and (c) the speaker believes that a response that answers the charge needs to be provided (Andone 2009: 156).

the charge. The antagonist is committed to accepting the assumption that the protagonist's response is an answer to the charge.

The consequence of the commitments which a protagonist's move of retracting a standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency brings in an argumentative confrontation is specified in the ideal model of a critical discussion: if the protagonist retracts the current standpoint the discussion ends, because in the absence of a standpoint, there is nothing which the antagonist can criticize (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984).⁷ This outcome is to the protagonist's disadvantage, because the antagonist can maintain his doubt. In public political discussions, such an outcome damages the protagonist's image in the long term: he shows that he cannot be trusted because he is someone who acts inconsistently. In order to repair this image, a protagonist maneuvers strategically in an attempt at achieving a favorable outcome while allowing for the critical testing procedure to unfold. The analysis of the argumentative exchange between Sopel and Duncan, mentioned in the introduction, will illustrate the strategic function which the politician, as the protagonist in the discussion, attempts to achieve in a political interview when he has to retract his current standpoint in response to an interviewer's accusation of inconsistency.

3. Exploiting commitments

In the fragment below, introduced in the beginning of this article, Alan Duncan retracts a standpoint in response to the accusation of inconsistency from the BBC interviewer Jon Sopel. The argumentative confrontation between the two participants runs as follows:

Jon Sopel:

And on nuclear, the government says that obviously has to be part of the mix. Are you on that page as well.

⁷ For an overview of possible outcomes resulting from following a particular dialectical route, see van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984).

Alan Duncan:

Our policy is absolutely clear and it's again, very similar, we want approval for sites and designs. We want a proper carbon price, we want honesty about costs, with no subsidy. Get on with the decision to do something with the waste, again, David Cameron said that this week, and I think the government has been a bit slow on working out what to do with nuclear waste. So then people can invest and I think probably they will.

Jon Sopel:

You were rather more skeptical the last time I spoke to you when you were on this programme – we can just have a listen to what you said last time.

‘we think that the nuclear power sector, should be there as a last resort in many respects. We want to explore every conceivable method of generating electricity before we go to nuclear’.

Alan Duncan:

so fluent.

Jon Sopel:

Yes. But you were completely different, you were very skeptical there. It has to be the last option, now you're saying, we're on the same page as the government and yes, let's get on with it.

Alan Duncan:

I think what's important with nuclear is to explain the policy. I think it's unhelpful to get hooked on two words and I think the policy as it has always been is exactly as I've just explained.

Jon Sopel:

So, you're fine about nuclear. [...]

In this argumentative exchange, Duncan advances in his last contribution to this exchange a move of retraction by manoeuvring strategically with dissociation: *I think what's important with nuclear is to explain the policy. I think it's unhelpful to get hooked on two words and I think the policy as it has always been is exactly as I've just explained.* The politician dissociates between two new notions that are derived from the notion of nuclear energy, originally considered as a conceptual unity. Each of the two new notions contains part of the original notion: one of them concerns aspects of nuclear energy that belong to the realm of the practical, the other one concerns aspects which belong to the realm of the policy. Duncan seems to suggest that as far as the policy is concerned, his position has remained unchanged. His original standpoint concerned an entirely different matter, namely the practice of using nuclear energy, which implies that the alleged inconsistency no longer exists.

Duncan's response realized by means of retraction of a standpoint is a confrontational strategic maneuver aimed at balancing a clear definition of the difference of opinion with doing so to his advantage (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2004).⁸ By dissociating between the practice and the policy of using nuclear energy, the politician advances a modified version of the standpoint put forward in the beginning of the exchange.⁹ Although strictly speaking retracting a standpoint and replacing it with a modified version results in ending the current discussion and beginning a new confrontation, in this example the discussion can be considered as being continued. That is so because the arguments advanced to support the original standpoint are not

⁸ In the pragma-dialectical view, the arguers' dialectical concern in the confrontation stage is to define the difference of opinion without hindering the critical testing procedure. The arguers, for example, are dialectically interested in clearly defining the issues that are at the heart of the difference of opinion as well as making explicit the positions they assume in relation to these issues. The arguers' rhetorical concern is to steer the confrontation towards a favorable definition of the difference of opinion. The arguers, for instance, try to achieve an advantageous definition of the difference of opinion and to assume a position that increases the chances of making their standpoint acceptable (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002).

⁹ The retraction of the original standpoint is implicit in the advancement of the modified standpoint. Advancing a modified version of the original standpoint implies that the original standpoint has been withdrawn. The first sincerity condition for retraction, which states that a speaker who retracts no longer wants to assume responsibility for an earlier illocutionary act, provides a sufficient clue for identifying an illocutionary act as retraction.

withdrawn.¹⁰ The dissociation is made precisely in an attempt at resolving the inconsistency and remaining engaged in the discussion.

By retracting a standpoint, Duncan accepts the criticism raised by Sopel in an accusation of inconsistency. Because simply accepting the criticism implied in the accusation would expose the politician to a negative evaluation by the audience, Duncan employs dissociation to give up a standpoint in an effective way by replacing it with another one that is more acceptable by means of dissociation.¹¹ In this way, the politician lives up to the commitment of giving up one of the allegedly inconsistent standpoints, and he does so to his liking. The use of dissociation opens up, in addition, an opportunity for Duncan to use the commitments the interviewer incurs to his advantage. As the antagonist in the discussion, Sopel commits himself to no longer holding Duncan responsible to the expressed opinion constituting the propositional content of the standpoint which is being given up. The dissociation is probably the best available means for the politician to escape being held responsible for an earlier standpoint, but at the same time remaining engaged in the discussion and holding a more acceptable standpoint.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how the protagonist in an argumentative confrontation can strategically retract a standpoint when he is accused of

¹⁰ This view relies on Snoeck Henkemans' remark that when arguments have not been withdrawn and still serve as a defense of the original standpoint, "the new discussion can be seen as a continuation of the original discussion" (1997: 88, footnote 15). A closely related way to decide whether the discussion is continued or represents a new discussion would be to examine whether the modified standpoint is a new standpoint or the same standpoint presented differently. Van Rees (2006) proposes that a decision could be arrived at only if due attention is paid to the consequences of the newly formulated standpoint on argument evaluation: if the modified standpoint has consequences for the evaluation, strictly speaking it is a new standpoint, and implicitly the discussion is a new discussion. Taking a decision by following van Rees' proposal requires an evaluation of the arguments, and that is beyond the scope of this paper. An additional difficulty in taking a decision in this way would arise from the fact that "there could be empirical arguments so that in case of different formulations it is possible to speak of the same standpoint, also when, strictly speaking, they have different evaluative consequences" (van Rees 2006: 111, footnote 4, my translation).

¹¹ For a detailed account of the rhetorical advantages which dissociation can create for the protagonist of a standpoint, see van Rees (2009).

an inconsistency. The analysis of an example from a political interview has shown that, although the discussion should end as soon as the protagonist retracts his standpoint, he makes an attempt at resolving the inconsistency and remaining engaged in the discussion. The protagonist's strategic manoeuvring has been described as exploiting the commitments created when the illocutionary act of retraction is performed. The commitments which a protagonist can exploit to his advantage have been derived from the felicity conditions applying to the act at issue.

The analysis of the protagonist's strategic manoeuvring can become more specific if attention is paid to the activity type in which it is carried out (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2007). For instance, in the activity type of a political interview, from where the argumentative exchange in this paper has been selected, the fact that the politician is expected to provide an account of his words on the use of nuclear energy plays a vital role in understanding the strategic function of the move: it counts as an attempt at giving an account, while a mere retraction would show precisely that such an account is not possible. By taking into account the influence of the characteristics of the activity type on the argumentative moves, the function of the strategic manoeuvring can be better accounted for. Finally, an analysis of the argumentative exchange is not enough on its own, but needs to be followed by an evaluation of the discussion. After all, the ideal model of a critical discussion is not just a tool for analysis, but provides a normative ideal of rational resolution of differences of opinion that serve an evaluative purpose.

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