MANOEUVRING STRATEGICALLY IN RESPONDING TO ACCUSATIONS OF INCONSISTENCY IN POLITICAL INTERVIEWS

Corina Andone

Abstract: This paper examines the consecutive perlocutionary consequences of the illocutionary act of accusation of inconsistency and illustrates how these consequences can be strategically performed in the context of political interviews in what can be reconstructed as the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. This examination is pursued in the framework of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse that accounts for the attempts arguers make to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with the standards for a critical discussion and at the same time to their benefit by employing what has been termed *strategic manoeuvring* (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002).

1. Introduction

This paper examines the consecutive perlocutionary consequences of the illocutionary act of accusation of inconsistency and how they can be strategically achieved in the context of political interviews in what can be reconstructed as the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. I investigate these consecutive consequences in light of the recent interest of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentative discourse to account for the attempts arguers make to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with the standards for a critical discussion and at the same time to do so to their own benefit. In their effort to do this, arguers make use of what has been termed *strategic manoeuvring* (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002). In argumentative practice, the arguers' strategic manoeuvring is affected by the specific type of argumentative activity in which the manoeuvring takes place (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005).

In the first part of the paper, the consecutive perlocutionary consequences of the illocutionary act of accusation of inconsistency are specified in view of the moves that parties are obliged to perform or have the right to perform in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion as represented in the dialectical profile of this stage. In the second part of the paper, having first shown what the constitutive features of political interviews are, I demonstrate with the help of an example how one of the consecutive consequences that may be aimed for can be strategically achieved.

2. Consecutive perlocutionary consequences of accusations of inconsistency

The formulation of the essential condition that must be fulfilled for an utterance to count as an accusation of inconsistency connects the performance of the illocutionary act with the perlocutionary effect of securing a response that answers the charge raised by the speaker against the addressee for having committed himself to two inconsistent propositions.[1] In what follows, a response from the addressee will be interpreted as a consecutive perlocutionary consequence that the addressee is required to perform as soon as an inherent perlocutionary effect of acceptance occurs.[2]

[1] For the formulation of the essential condition of the speech act of accusation of inconsistency in which it is made clear what the point of performing this illocutionary act is, see Andone (2007).

[2] Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) suggest that when a speaker performs a speech act, he wants to obtain at least a perlocutionary effect of acceptance and optimally, he wants to bring about other consequences as an extension of the acceptance. The other consequences are specific to the speech act concerned, while acceptance occurs with all speech acts.

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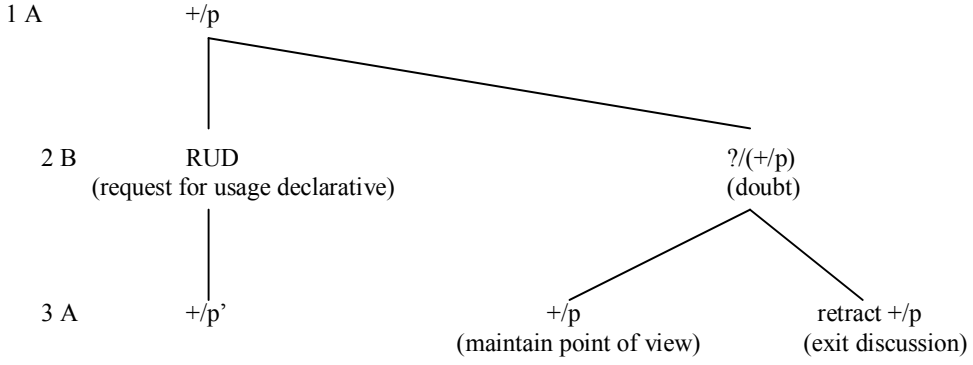
Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 57) point out that in the context of an argumentative interaction acceptance on the part of the addressee amounts to the addressee's performance of the illocutionary act of acceptance, which entails interactional obligations in respect of his further behaviour, verbal or non-verbal. In the context in which an accusation of inconsistency has been performed, acceptance involves two aspects: (a) the performance by the addressee of the speech act of assent by which it is admitted that the speaker's speech act was understandably and correctly performed and (b) an immediate commitment to bring about consecutive perlocutionary consequences.

The literature on perlocutionary effects suggests that any response on the addressee's part can count as a perlocutionary effect, more precisely as a consecutive perlocutionary consequence. The nature of consecutive perlocutionary effects can be clarified on the basis of a threefold distinction that van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) make, closely linked to their view on argumentative discourse. The first distinction pertains to accidental and intended effects. In view of the pragma-dialectical principle of externalization, my focus is on the externalized commitments that speakers undertake, i.e. on the intentions communicated verbally in the utterance performed. The second distinction indicates a difference between those effects brought about on the basis of understanding the illocutionary act and those brought about in a different way. As the pragma-dialectical approach suggests, the achievement of the illocutionary effect of understanding the speech act previously performed is preliminary to the achievement of perlocutionary effects. The third distinction refers to effects brought about on the basis of the rational considerations of the addressee and effects that are not the result of rational decision-making. In line with the pragma-dialectical critical-rationalist stance, only those effects that are brought about on rational grounds are relevant to a regulated exchange that is aimed at resolving a difference of opinion.

The desired consecutive perlocutionary consequences can be further specified with the help of the dialectical profile, which is a normative representation of the sequential patterns of the analytically relevant moves that the parties in a critical discussion can make to achieve an outcome of a particular stage of the discussion (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2007b). Being derived from the ideal model of a critical discussion, the moves in the profile are potentially, i.e. analytically, sound, but in argumentative practice they can have both sound and fallacious instantiations. The use of the dialectical profile as a tool for the specification of consecutive perlocutionary consequences of accusations of inconsistency has the advantage of restricting their number in a way that is theoretically motivated by taking into account only those effects that contribute towards resolving a difference of opinion.

As an example, the first three turns of the dialectical profile of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion (Mohammed 2007) indicate the moves that comply with the sequential order of the dialectical procedure and that are necessary for the achievement of the outcome of this stage:



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Each slot in the profile can be filled by different kinds of speech acts that can potentially contribute to the resolution of a difference of opinion. For instance, at turn 2, the slot in which it is shown that party B, acting as opponent in the discussion, casts doubt on the standpoint put forward by party A, acting as proponent, can be filled by an accusation of inconsistency.[3] By performing this speech act, an opponent casts doubt on a standpoint brought forward by a proponent whose position contradicts positions he assumed or behavior, reconstructable in terms of propositional commitments, that he manifested on a different occasion.[4]

Two possible intended effects of this illocutionary act stand out: either the proponent *retracts* his previously advanced standpoint or he *maintains* it in order to be entitled to justify it. The performance of either move by the proponent of the standpoint is conditional on his acceptance of the illocutionary act of accusation of inconsistency performed by the opponent. Once he has accepted this illocutionary act, he has assumed a commitment to fulfill the intended consequences.

When the opponent puts forward an accusation of inconsistency and the proponent responds to it, they have the opportunity to manoeuvre strategically with the aim of resolving the discussion while realizing their persuasive intent by making a choice from the topical potential that may lead to reaching a favorable outcome of the confrontation stage, by adapting themselves to each other's perspective and by using presentational devices that enable the continuation of the discussion to their benefit.[5] Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005: 76) suggest that strategic manoeuvring is "strongly situation-dependent" and as such, the argumentative activity type in which the arguers' manoeuvring takes place affects all three aspects mentioned. In the next section, I will show by way of an example how achieving one of the consecutive consequences of accusations of inconsistency in the context of political interviews is affected by the specific features of the activity type. As a preliminary step, political interviews are characterized along four parameters corresponding to the four stages of a critical discussion.

3. Political interviews as conventionalized activity types

In political interviews, a politician's statements are met with doubt by an interviewer for the purpose of holding the politician accountable for his words and actions.[6] Under the organizing principle of question-answer (Fetzer 2000, 2007, Greatbatch 2001, Lauerbach 2004, 2007, Johansson 2005), participants in political interviews do not just ask for and give information about certain issues, but they make also abundant use of arguments in their attempt at rational resolution of a conflict of opinion (van Rees 2007).

[3] It might seem as if accusations of inconsistency are always fallacious, i.e. *tu quoque* moves, but this is not the case. General soundness conditions need to be formulated in order to determine whether this instantiation of the move – in a particular context – represents or violates the relevant discussion rule. For the formulation of the general soundness conditions of accusations of inconsistency, see van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2007a).

[4] Because the move of accusation of inconsistency is situated in the confrontation stage in which the roles of protagonist and antagonist have not yet been distributed, the party who puts forward a standpoint is here referred to as a proponent and the party who reacts to it is an opponent. I focus on the case of a non-mixed dispute in which the opponent accuses the proponent of an inconsistency at turn 2.

[5] An account of the possibilities for manoeuvring for the proponent and the opponent in the confrontation stage when an accusation of inconsistency is put forward is given in Andone (2007).

[6] According to Blum-Kulka (1983: 136), the goal of such interviews is to merely sharpen the different opinions on political issues, but, as has been shown in various studies, argument constitutes a characteristic of such verbal interactions.

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3.1 Characteristics of political interviews

Political interviews can be characterized as an argumentative activity type in which the interviewer, a representative of a media organization, addresses questions to a political figure on a matter of public interest for which he can be held responsible.

Similar to the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, in the initial situation of political interviews the interviewer initiates a discussion concerning a position on an issue of public importance that the politician has expressed before or asks the politician to express a viewpoint on such an issue. The choice of topics can be made only by the interviewer.

Similar to the opening stage of a critical discussion, in political interviews there are various rules and roles assigned to the speakers.[7] According to these rules, the only allowable contribution from the politician is to defend his viewpoint by answering questions, albeit that he is allowed to ask rhetorical questions. The interviewer can only pose questions on issues that fall under the responsibility of the politician. In addition, the politician cannot make any topical shifts unless initiated by the interviewer. Unlike the politician who can hold and defend positions, the interviewer must remain impartial and express no viewpoints, albeit that he can present the views of others by refraining to endorse or reject these views.[8]

Similar to the argumentation stage of a critical discussion, the argumentative means that participants can make use of are determined by the rules of political interviews. The interviewer does not advance any argument and the politician answers the interviewer's questions by advancing arguments in support of the position expressed in the initial situation or against another position that is attributed to him. The interviewer can question aspects of his argumentation, for instance, by employing wh-questions or questions that require a yes-no answer. By posing questions, the interviewer elicits concessions from the politician.

Similar to the concluding stage, the discussion ends with a certain outcome, but unlike in the case of a critical discussion, in the case of political interviews the interviewer decides when the discussion ends and it is left to the audience to judge the outcome.

3.2 Example

The specific characteristics of the activity type of political interviews pose constraints and open opportunities on the way in which the opponent can put forward an accusation of inconsistency and the way in which the proponent can respond to it in what can be reconstructed as the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. For instance, the journalist, who, according to the rules for political interviews, has the choice of topic, will choose precisely that topic in relation with which the politician has expressed inconsistent positions by making it clear that the politician should justify his positions. In turn, the politician, who, according to the rules for political interviews, has to answer the charge of inconsistency, can give an explanation, pretending that there is nothing to justify.

A suitable example to illustrate how both parties can manoeuvre strategically in what can be reconstructed as the confrontation stage of a critical discussion under such constraints has been selected from a BBC political interview broadcast on April 29, 2007. In this interview, Jon Sopel interviews Menzies Campbell, leader of the British Liberal Democrats, concerning the issue of a referendum in Scotland. The extract is a follow-up to a previous discussion between the journalist and the leader of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond.

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[7] Although Fetzer (2000: 424) points out that in political interviews there is a "clear-cut division of labor," according to which interviewers and interviewees have "clearly defined rights and obligations", she does not further specify what these roles are except that the interviewer asks questions and the politician answers them.

[8] Clayman (2001: 173) elaborates on this aspect in his empirical qualitative research concerning footing shifts in interviews.

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Jon Sopel:

I wanted to pick up on some of the things that Alex Salmond was saying there. Are you really going to block the people having a say on whether they want a referendum or not.

Menzies Campbell:

Well let's be clear, it's presumptuous of politicians to anticipate the results of elections and of course the issues which affect the lives of people in Scotland are health and the environment but Nicole Stephen has made it perfectly clear…we do not believe in independence, we would not support a referendum on independence and we don't believe that it's in the interests of Scotland to spend the next three or four years, engaged in constitutional disruption, because one thing is certain, that if Alex Salmond were to be First Minister, all that talk of sweetness and light with Gordon Brown, everything he would try to do would be designed to advance the cause of independence, against the referendum he was going to hold.

Jon Sopel:

So if the SNP come out as the biggest party, do you rule out a deal, I mean would a referendum be the deal breaking issue.

Menzies Campbell:

Well let's be clear about this. We have not only institutional devolution in party but political devolution and it will be for Nicol Stephen and the other Liberal Democrat MSPs to decide what arrangement, if any they think is the right to enter into. You can be certain that they will approach that on the basis of what is best for the interests of the people of Scotland.

Jon Sopel:

But you're the party that believes in democracy and letting people have a say and here you are, sitting here with me saying, well we're not going to let them have a referendum.

Menzies Campbell:

They can have, well if they can get legislation through the parliament, they're going to have a referendum but if they can't they're not, they can't look to us to give them support in order to embark upon a course of action, which we oppose.

I have – there some interesting parallels here, for example, Quebec has been stymied for twenty years because of this obsession with a referendum and with independence. Just think what those three or four years would be like.

In this exchange, reconstructed as part of the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, the interviewer raises the issue whether the Liberal Democrats, represented here by their leader Menzies Campbell, are going to block the Scottish people having a referendum concerning independence. Campbell reacts by suggesting that independence is not really what the Scottish people should be concerned about when saying that "the issues which affect the lives of people in Scotland are health and the environment". As regards independence of Scotland, Campbell makes it clear that, through the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, they have expressed the following standpoints: "we do not believe in independence" and "we would not support a referendum on independence". In saying this, he suggests that independence for Scotland would lead to "constitutional disruption" for the next three or four years, the main reason why they would not like independence.

Jon Sopel returns to the issue of the referendum and whether it is going to be a breaking issue if the SNP gets most votes in elections. Campbell expresses the view that any decision will be in accordance with the good interests of the people of Scotland. In reply to Campbell, Sopel explicitly accuses him of being inconsistent when saying that "you're the party that believes in democracy and letting people have a say and here you are sitting here with me saying, well we're not going to let them have a referendum". By putting forward this

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accusation, Sopel questions previously expressed standpoints according to which the Liberal Democrats think "that people should have the freedom to have a say on matters of public interest", suggesting that he holds now a position that is contradictory to previously expressed positions. Sopel thereby implicitly casts doubt on the reason already presented by Campbell that independence leads to constitutional disruption and calls into question his new point of view, because it is contrary to previous positions. The journalist implies that Campbell should retract his new point of view by suggesting that it would be fair to act in line with the democratic principle of liberty rather than impose things on people.

In reply to the accusation, Campbell retracts his point of view to a certain extent by admitting that people can have a referendum, on condition that they get legislation through the parliament, but Liberal Democrats do not give them any support since they oppose independence. He further attempts to justify his view by making an analogy with the case of Quebec, where, in his view, people have been obsessed with the idea of referendum and this has had disastrous consequences for twenty years.

As explained before, the proponent and the opponent have a chance to manoeuvre strategically in a way that is most beneficial for them by exploiting the available means as concerns the choice of topic, adaptation to the addressee and the choice of style, taking into account the opportunities and the constraints imposed by the specific features of political interviews. In accordance with the specific features of the initial situation of political interviews, the journalist, acting as the opponent in the discussion, chooses a topic of public interest that falls under the concerns and responsibility of the politician. In accordance with the rules, he does not express any personal view, but discusses positions that the politician has held before and a newly adopted position on the matter. The interviewer formulates his questions in such a way that problematic aspects in what the politician says come to the fore, putting pressure on the politician to answer them. In line with the rules of political interviews, the politician, acting as proponent in the discussion, does not ask questions, but limits himself to answering questions, meanwhile trying to change the focus of the topic from the idea of the referendum to the idea of independence and whether that is to the advantage of the Scottish people. The interviewer keeps the discussion under control and returns to the issue that he would like to discuss when accusing the politician of holding inconsistent positions on the issue of the referendum. In this way, he acts in accordance with the rules of political interviews and tries to do so in a manner that becomes problematic for the politician. He attempts to make Manzies Campbell retract his new standpoint that is contradictory to the previously expressed standpoints.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that accusations of inconsistency as illocutionary acts produce perlocutionary effects that consist in an inherent perlocutionary effect of acceptance and consecutive perlocutionary consequences deriving from it. Exactly what counts as a consecutive perlocutionary consequence of accusations of inconsistency has been determined by analyzing the moves that parties are obliged to perform or have the right to perform in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion as shown in the dialectical profile of this stage. Finally, I have been concerned with demonstrating that the specific features of political interviews can pose constraints and create opportunities on the way in which parties manoeuvre strategically when achieving consecutive perlocutionary consequences of accusations of inconsistency. The analysis of an example has shown how that happens in discourse.

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Corina Andone
Department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric
University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
C.Andone@uva.nl

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