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Volume 5

Argumentation in Political Interviews. Analyzing and evaluating responses to accusations of inconsistency
by Corina Andone

Argumentation in Political Interviews

Analyzing and evaluating responses
to accusations of inconsistency

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Preface

Argumentation in political interviews is the result of a research project on political argumentation I have carried out at the University of Amsterdam. The monograph treats political interviews as argumentative practices and is based on my doctoral dissertation, *Maneuvering strategically in a political interview. Analyzing and evaluating responses to an accusation of inconsistency*. It provides theoretical and empirical insights that are in my view vital to an appropriate understanding of such argumentative practices.

The study of argumentation in political interviews was part of the research programme “Strategic maneuvering in argumentative confrontations: Norms and criteria, manifestations and effects,” subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO project no. 360-80-030). This research programme, initiated and led by Frans van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser, concentrated on theoretical issues pertinent to the study of strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse. The participants, which included three PhD researchers (Dima Mohammed, Yvon Tonnard and me) and one post-doctoral researcher (Jan Albert van Laar) examined various forms and manifestations of strategic maneuvering. The results that were achieved are not only pertinent to argumentation theorists, but have a much wider relevance. In *Strategic maneuvering in argumentative discourse*, published in 2010 by Frans van Eemeren in the book series *Argumentation in Context*, the theoretical starting points of the research are explained.

From the beginning, my research has benefited from the insights of the members of the Department of Speech Communication, Argumentation theory and Rhetoric of the University of Amsterdam and has been supported by the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. I was in the first place advised by Frans van Eemeren, Peter Houtlosser (until his untimely death in 2008) and Francisca Snoeck Henkemans. They not only read carefully all drafts and versions of the various chapters, but always made constructive suggestions for improvement. I am extremely grateful to them for their help, and feel really lucky to have met them. I would also like to thank Frans for encouraging me to submit my manuscript for publication in the book series *Argumentation in Context*.

In conclusion I would like to thank the two reviewers who carefully read my manuscript and commented in detail on the research reported in this book. A special word of thanks goes to Jan Albert van Laar for pointing out to me all his points of doubt, as well as suggesting ways of anticipating possible criticisms. It goes without saying that I am solely responsible for all remaining errors.

Corina Andone
February 25, 2013

Introduction

1.1 Responding to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview

It is nowadays common practice for public figures in general and politicians in particular to inform the citizens of their actions, decisions, and policies and, more importantly, to justify their performance. They realize that their words and actions need to be assessed for their adequacy and that this is only possible if they provide arguments to account for their actions. Doing so is vital for their image, if only because otherwise their credibility and trustworthiness is significantly diminished. A politician cannot expect to be trusted simply on his authority and good will, but he has to make sure at all times that his claims are strongly supported and thoroughly explained to the public. This is true of politicians taking part in various communicative practices, ranging from parliamentary debates and committees of inquiry to media debates.

Politicians feel even more obliged to account for their words and actions in those cases in which criticism is advanced explicitly against their performance. Although the quality of their arguments may leave much to be desired, politicians cannot ignore requests for clarification and justification raised by others, such as political opponents, stakeholders or the public. When doubts are raised about the acceptability of their performance, they need to argue for their actions and thus satisfy the other party's interest in the reasons behind their decisions.

One form of criticism to which interviewers often resort in political interviews consists in pointing out that a politician has taken a position which is contrary to his own actions or to another position he has advanced before. Such forms of criticism, referred to in this study as accusations of inconsistency, are frequent among interviewers. In a political interview, interviewers are interested in gaining information from their interlocutors but, more often than not, their questions require the politician to clarify and justify his views. Questions by means of which an inconsistency is pointed out are an excellent means of urging the politician to justify his views before the listening, reading or television-watching audience, that is, in fact, the primary addressee in a political interview. The audience presumably values political consistency and expects a politician who is inconsistent to account for this lack of consistency.

A charge of inconsistency may affect the politician's image in the eyes of the public negatively. The politician, being well aware of the possible damage, usually

tries to answer in a way that makes him no longer look inconsistent. He will deny that there is an inconsistency, point at a change of circumstances justifying his change in view or avoid discussing the criticism. The following exchange from a political interview between BBC interviewer Jon Sopel and John Hutton illustrates how a politician avoids discussing the inconsistency of which he is accused. At the time of the interview, Hutton was the British Business Secretary of State. The fragment is an extract from an interview broadcast on February 24, 2008 on the *Politics Show* in which the issues of the regulation of small firms, flexible working and agency workers are discussed.¹ In the question below, regarding the protection of agency workers, Sopel seems to suggest that Hutton's party takes a pro- business stance – in line with the party policy – not because this would be most appropriate in the present case, but in order to 'compensate' for frequent non-pro-business stances adopted lately. According to Sopel, the party that Hutton represents has a reputation of being pro-business, but has acted contrary to it lately in areas such as nationalizing Northern Rock, capital gain tax and the status of non-domiciled persons:

Jon Sopel: The reason that you're taking many might say is a pro-business stance is that your reputation as being the party that is pro-business, has taken such a hammering over recent weeks. You look at the nationalization of Northern Rock, you look at the U-turn over capital gains tax, you look at the U-turn over non Doms, it hasn't been exactly a purple patch has it, for you.

1. All examples in this study have been selected from the BBC programme *Politics Show* (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/politics_show/default.stm) last consulted on February 18, 2013. According to the BBC website, "The *Politics Show* interviews senior politicians – ministers, leading opposition figures and other influential people about their views and policies – and hold them to account for their decisions and actions." In this sense, these interviews are typical of the genre and constitute an excellent illustration of a communicative practice which is not only aimed at obtaining information for the public, but also at putting the acceptability of the politicians' words and actions to a critical test. I am aware that other interviews than those analyzed here have different formats (e.g. more than one politician is interviewed) and may take different media forms (e.g. they may be televised or published in newspapers), and are strongly influenced by the political system and cultural aspects specific of the country in which they take place. However, it should not pose particular difficulties to extend and adjust the argumentative analyses and evaluations proposed in this book to interviews from other countries and with a slightly different format. As will be explained in Chapter 3, there are a great many similarities between political interviews in different countries. The examples in this study are presented as transcribed on the BBC website. For my purpose, a transcription that guarantees readability is sufficient, because prosodic and other conversational phenomena are irrelevant for my analysis. The examples are reproduced as they appear on the BBC website (sometimes without question marks, commas, etc).

John Hutton: We've had a consistent view about agency workers over a number of years, about trying to get this balance right. So there's been no change in that position and we are currently trying to find a way forward with the European Commission and other governments in the European Union which is where this issue fundamentally, has to be addressed.

In this example, Soper's question conveys two criticisms. Soper first criticizes Hutton for taking a pro-business stance towards agency workers although this is not the best solution. Second, he criticizes Hutton for acting inconsistently over recent weeks in three areas.² In his answer, Hutton does not address the criticism of inconsistency in the three areas, but concentrates instead on the issue of agency workers. He emphasizes that a consistent view on this issue has been maintained over the years. In addition, the first steps towards a good package of measures have been taken by discussing the issue with the European Commission.

In another interview, which took place on July 12, 2009 between Jon Soper and Sir Gus O'Donnell, at the time Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Gus does not avoid discussing the inconsistency with which he is charged but finds a way to show that acting inconsistently can have a positive side:³

Jon Soper: And you talk about efficiencies that you need to introduce. How efficient is it, the endless re-naming of government departments? We used to have a Department for Education, we now have the Department for Cushions and Soft Furnishings I think the civil servants call it because they can never remember the right way round that it's Children, Schools and Families. We had two years ago the heralding of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills which has been killed off two years later. So lots of letterheads, lots of name plates all changing all the time.

Sir Gus: Well ministers decide and we're a very flexible civil service, one of the things we have to be.

2. It will be clear from the examples presented in this book that the interviewer rarely, if ever, uses the term 'inconsistency' against the politician, but the context makes it possible to reconstruct that an inconsistency is at issue. These inconsistencies are pragmatic, rather than logical inconsistencies (for the distinction, see van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992a).

3. For brevity, the word 'politician' is used to refer to the interviewee in a political interview. In my use, the word includes political decision-makers, people such as trade union leaders, senior leaders or any other public figure playing a role in national or international politics. These people may already hold or seek to hold public office. Sir Gus O'Donnell, whom Soper interviews on the efficiency of the Civil Service, does not hold a political function, but is a British Civil Servant. In the literature on political interviews, the discussions with those who hold public offices without fulfilling political functions fall under the category of a political interview. Throughout the book, 'a politician' will be employed to refer to male as well as female interviewees. For simplicity, the masculine pronoun (he, his) will be used to refer to the politician.

In the discussion, Sopel questions whether Sir Gus is really aiming for more efficiency of the Civil Service, because he has taken measures that seem to point in the opposite direction. To support his charge of inconsistency between Sir Gus' words and actions, Sopel provides the example of two departments, the names of which have been changed several times during the last years. In order to avoid being judged negatively by the audience watching the interview, Sir Gus redefines what the interviewer claims to be a sign of inefficiency as an indication of flexibility, thereby giving the inconsistency a positive character. According to Sir Gus, the service he leads is flexible in the collaboration with ministers, who are in fact deciding about such changes as mentioned by Sopel.

Unlike the previous examples, in which the interviewer's accusations attribute an inconsistency to the politician between his words and his actions,⁴ the following argumentative exchange is a case in which the politician responds to an accusation of inconsistency between his words.⁵ The interviewer claims that the proponent of a standpoint cannot be committed to the current standpoint because he is also committed to another standpoint with which this standpoint is inconsistent. The discussion took place on December 9, 2007 between Jon Sopel and Alan Duncan, at the time Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in the following way:

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

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.

4. The actions are reconstructed in terms of propositional commitments. In the first example, the commitment attributed to the politician concerning Northern Rock can be reconstructed as *you have accepted to nationalize Northern Rock*. Aikin (2008: 155–156) makes a distinction between charges of inconsistency which are cognitive – in which a contradiction is derivable for the arguer's overt (or suppressed) commitments – and charges of inconsistency which are practical – in which the arguer points out that the actions of the accused contradict his proposals. Aikin reduces, in fact, Woods and Walton's (1976) fourfold distinction into logical, assertional, praxiological and praxiological-deontic to these two types.

5. There can also be an inconsistency between one's words or actions and one's principles. Such inconsistencies are particularly frequent in a political context: a politician says something or acts in a way that is incompatible with, for example, party policies.

- 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.

According to Sopel, Duncan’s opinion expressed in the first turn of this exchange that he is in favor of “getting on with nuclear waste,” seems to suggest a view that favors the use of nuclear energy. This view, the interviewer claims, is exactly the opposite of what the politician said in a previous interview. Sopel quotes Duncan’s earlier words which indicate that earlier he did not favor the use of nuclear energy, but instead advocated that it should be the last option. Sopel suggests therefore that one of the two inconsistent commitments should be given up. To avoid losing the discussion, Duncan responds by making a dissociation. Without doing so explicitly, he assumes a distinction between the nuclear energy *policy* (of which he now approves) and nuclear energy *practice* (which he earlier had opposed).⁶ The introduction of the dissociation enables Duncan to give a particular interpretation of his standpoint – presented as the less important one (concerning the practice) – in which he gives up this standpoint, while maintaining another interpretation of the standpoint (concerning the policy) presented as the most important one.

The three examples presented so far show that a politician may respond to an accusation of inconsistency in various ways. Possible responses are avoiding discussing the criticism of inconsistency (Example 1), giving the inconsistency a positive connotation (Example 2) and retracting the earlier standpoint (Example 3) so that the politician is no longer committed to two inconsistent standpoints. In all these cases, in the context of a political interview the politician’s response constitutes an attempt at turning the discussion in his favor by trying to create a positive

6. Van Rees (2009: 31–44) provides various kinds of clues that can serve as indicators for the existence of a dissociation. Two of these clues are present in Duncan’s response: (a) it comes in an attempt to resolve an inconsistency pointed out by the other party (*But you were completely different, you were very skeptical there*), and (b) one of the dissociated terms is valued as being more important (*what’s important with nuclear is to explain the policy*).

image before the public. Because the public is in fact his primary addressee rather than the interviewer, who judges the outcome of the discussion in the long term (say, when deciding how to vote later), the politician designs his moves in a way that makes them more easily appealing to them. For example, Sir Gus portrays the inconsistency pointed out by Sopel between claiming efficiency and frequently renaming departments as a sign of flexibility in order to make his actions acceptable to the public. Sir Gus realizes that someone who cannot act consistently in such minor matters cannot be expected to manage the Home Civil Service well.

This study will be undertaken to gain insight into the kind of advantages a politician may obtain in responding to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview. In addition, the study will evaluate the quality of responses as they occur in the argumentative practice of a political interview. This evaluation will be carried out by applying criteria for identifying moves as reasonable or unreasonable. Such an evaluation is vital to judge whether the politician's responses make a constructive contribution to the exchange or obstruct the exchange in which the participants are involved. In 1.2, I will outline my theoretical framework for providing an analytic and evaluative account of responses to an accusation of inconsistency.

1.2 A pragma-dialectical perspective on argumentation

In order to analyze and evaluate a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency from an argumentative perspective, I will make use of the pragma-dialectical theoretical framework developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) and extended by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002a, 2003, 2009) and van Eemeren (2010). The view of argumentation advocated in this approach and the tools developed for the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse make this theoretical framework particularly suitable for the purpose of this study.⁷

In the pragma-dialectical approach, argumentation is viewed as part of a critical discussion in which the participants try to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 1) define argumentation as "a verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint." This view of argumentation makes it possible to study the argumentative moves at issue as part

7. For a succinct presentation of the basic pragma-dialectical tenets, see van Eemeren (2012). In this article, the author outlines the principles which are at the basis of this approach to argumentation and responds to points of criticism which have been raised against the pragma-dialectical theory.

of an argumentative discourse in which standpoints are defended and refuted so that they are tested for their acceptability. This means that in the kind of cases dealt with in this study a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency are seen as part of an argumentative exchange in which the politician attempts to convince the interviewer and the audience at home that his standpoint is acceptable. In the context of the institutional expectations inherent in a political interview, the politician's responses can be seen as refutations of the interviewer's criticism.

In a pragma-dialectical approach, the politician's responses are analyzed and evaluated by applying an ideal model of critical discussion. This model is a normative representation of how an exchange could proceed if it was aimed solely at resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. In the exchange, the politician adopts the role of protagonist of a standpoint and exposes it to the critical scrutiny of the interviewer acting as antagonist in the discussion. The pragma-dialectical model specifies the various stages that are to be distinguished in the resolution process, in each of which a particular aim is pursued. Thus, in the *confrontation stage* of a critical discussion, the aim is to make clear the difference of opinion that is at stake: clarity must be achieved as to which standpoints are disputed and the kind of criticism that the protagonist has to overcome. In the *opening stage*, the purpose is to establish the shared material and procedural starting points in accordance with which the tenability of the standpoint will be put to the test. The aim of the *argumentation stage* is to systematically test the arguments advanced in support of the standpoint. Finally, in the *concluding stage*, the outcome of the discussion is established: if the standpoint has been defended conclusively, the antagonist withdraws his doubt; if that is not the case, the protagonist retracts his standpoint. In either case, the difference of opinion can be said to have been resolved.

For each of the four analytically distinguished stages, the model of critical discussion specifies the speech acts that are analytically relevant, i.e. those speech acts that are used to perform argumentative moves that potentially contribute to the resolution process. The different kinds of speech acts specify the rights and obligations each party has in the critical exchange. For example, in the confrontation stage the protagonist who advances a standpoint has the right to maintain or retract his standpoint when he is confronted with the antagonist's doubt. In case the antagonist requests a clarification, the protagonist has the obligation to provide a 'usage declarative.'

As an analytic tool, the ideal model of critical discussion is an instrument for reconstructing argumentative discourse as it occurs in reality. For this purpose, a discussion as it is actually conducted must be reconstructed in terms of the ideal model. The reconstruction results in an analytic overview of the argumentative moves that the parties have made in the discussion. For example, because an accusation of inconsistency by the interviewer in a political interview is a criticism

in response to a standpoint of the politician that is being interviewed, it constitutes an instantiation of the moves of casting doubt and advancing an opposite standpoint. In terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion, such moves are reconstructed as occurring in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. The politician's responses to such criticism can be analyzed as playing a role in the definition of the difference of opinion. For instance, in Example 2 presented in Section 1.1, Sopel's accusation of inconsistency is a way of casting doubt on Sir Gus's claimed efficiency. Should the accusation have pertained to an inconsistency in starting points, it would have been reconstructed as a challenge in the opening stage and the interviewee's response as a reaction to that type of challenge. Possible reactions to the challenge include accepting the challenge, not accepting it or accepting it conditionally (van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans 2007a: 90).⁸

In addition to casting doubt and advancing the opposite standpoint, an accusation of inconsistency may instantiate a request for usage declarative, by means of which the antagonist demands from the protagonist to enlarge or facilitate understanding of other illocutionary acts (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 64). The examples discussed in this book will make clear that in his answer to such charges, the protagonist sometimes clarifies an earlier advanced standpoint in order to take away a seeming inconsistency. However, seeing an accusation as a simple request for clarification does not do full justice to the argumentative reality. An antagonist who charges the protagonist with being inconsistent does not just aim at obtaining clarification, but a justification for advancing a standpoint which is inconsistent with a standpoint advanced earlier. It may turn out that the antagonist might have misunderstood and therefore the protagonist provides a clarification which indicates that there is no inconsistency, but by advancing an accusation the antagonist believes in the first instance that more is at issue than a lack of clarity.

8. Inconsistencies can be pointed out at various stages of a critical discussion. In the confrontation stage, an inconsistency is pointed out between the current standpoint and a standpoint which the protagonist has advanced on another occasion. In the opening stage, inconsistencies concern an incompatibility between starting points. In the argumentation stage, inconsistencies may be pointed out between an argument and a starting point in accordance with which the discussion takes place. In this study, I focus on responses to accusations of inconsistency in the confrontation stage, because in order to have a clear idea of their strategic function in the other stages, it is first necessary to understand the role they play in the definition of the difference of opinion. Such an understanding paves the ground for explaining the effect they can have on the resolution of the difference of opinion. In this way, justice is done to the protagonist who first tries to reach a favorable definition of the difference of opinion before moving on to the next stages.