

Editorial

On Pragma-dialectics and Pragma-dialecticians: Notes on an inconclusive theoretical itinerary¹

Is there a code of conduct that natural language users follow when they argue in daily life? Are natural language users aware that they pass through different stages during a discussion with friends, colleagues or relatives? Is it necessary to be aware of fallacious moves in order to avoid unreasonableness? If these questions were addressed to lay arguers, none of them might make any sense. The complaint would be that it is not clear what the meaning of 'code of conduct' is; the same would go for 'different stages' of a discussion, or for the maxim 'if you want to have a critical discussion then you must avoid fallacious moves'.

The above first paragraph is often the easiest beginning for a not-so-well informed reviewer of pragma-dialectics within the field of argumentation theory; a reviewer who, of course, wants to appear smarter than she is. All these critical questions are, nevertheless, very important at the empirical level. These questions/criticism of the pragma-dialectical theory at the empirical level are important when the theory as a whole is put into perspective, considering all its components. This has been, in fact, one of the main achievements of the pragma-dialectical theory: to convince us of the feasibility of a particular program for the study of argumentation.

The pragma-dialectical research program is constituted by five components, dimensions or estates: the philosophical, theoretical, analytical, empirical and the practical one. Pragma-dialecticians seem committed to the notion that this multi-dimensional approach is the only way to achieve a comprehensive overview of argumentation.

¹ I thank Steve Patterson and Frank Zenker for their comments and fine revision of this editorial text. Any mistakes still remaining are mine.

Perhaps one critical remark one could make here is that pragma-dialecticians have placed too much emphasis on their theoretical structure. Certainly they have repeated constantly, in each main book (1992, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2010), that their theory has five components, that there are four analytical stages for a critical discussion, that the code consists of 10 commandments (at a practical level) or 15 rules (at a technical level) and that fallacious moves are “derailments”, etc. But this critical remark could easily be answered by acknowledging the many papers in which pragma-dialecticians have discussed specific problems in argumentation theory and in pragma-dialectics, have confronted criticisms, have shown, step by step, the progress of the theory in terms of adding new concepts like “strategic maneuvering”, “dialectical power”, “derailments of strategic maneuvering”, and by working towards a synthesis of dialectics, linguistics, rhetoric, philosophy, and other disciplines.

But, to what extent do all these new concepts and recombinations count as real progress, or development of the pragma-dialectical theory? Could it not be the case that the new concepts only constitute a repackaging of rather old ideas, and that the pragma-dialectical theory has found itself compelled in that direction because of its commitment to its “research program”? One possible route to the answer takes us back to the beginning, to the theory’s earliest days.

One might assume that the initial ideas (and perhaps also speculations) of the two main scholars of pragma-dialectics, Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, flourished in the liberal Amsterdam of the 1970s. Similarly, one might say that everything started when those initial ideas and speculations resulted in the appearance of a book with a rather grand title: *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions: A Theoretical Model of the Analysis of Discussions Directed towards Solving Conflicts of Opinion*. This was in 1984 – the Orwellian year.

Twenty-six years later, and throughout all the intervening years of constant academic production, we can say with full confidence that the pragma-dialecticians have used all the means available to develop their theory and, at the same time, the entire field. They have established one of the main conferences in the field, ISSA, and founded one of the field’s main journals, *Argumentation*. They have also fostered the growth of the field by produc-

ing some of its best academic masters and Ph.D. programs, by constantly organizing colloquia on different topics with different guests, by engaging the main scholars of the field, including those who from the beginning criticized the theory and a long list of other activities too that, even if strategically carried out to improve their theory, certainly were done with a generous disposition.

These are some of the reasons why *Cogency* dedicates this issue to the ‘1984 book’, bringing together some of the research lines that have since been part of its agenda. In this special issue, *Cogency* has accepted only papers from former students and current researchers of the Amsterdam School. Our wish is to have a future special issue with papers commenting on these.

In more than one sense, at a theoretical level, the 1984 book marks the stance from which the theory has been guided: normative pragmatics. As Bart Garssen, our guest editor, points out in the *Introduction*, in this seminal book five main aspects of the theory were addressed: 1) argumentation as an illocutionary speech act, 2) the perlocutionary effect of argumentation, 3) the analytic model of a critical discussion, 4) the explicitization of implicit elements in argumentation, and 5) the code of conduct for rational discussants.

Thus, from the very first moment, one could reasonably ask why a normative theory of argumentation appeared in a liberal country where, one could imagine, there is little or no need for such rules. Perhaps the Protestant spirit, perhaps the Dutch “poldermodel” can explain this. Whatever the reason, the important matter is that, before the 1984 book, there was no systematic view on argumentation in which the pragmatic, dialectical, linguistic, and normative insights were combined in a single framework to study argumentation.

Normativity is one of the central topics of argumentation theory, likewise for pragma-dialectics, yet to many scholars the normative aspect of the Dutch theory is not yet well accounted for. In fact, today there is an open discussion about this issue. For example, to touch upon one of the richest dialogues between critics and supporters of pragma dialectics, Siegel and Biro (2008) have pointed out that the norms that configure the pragma-

dialectician's model do not ensure rational resolutions; Garssen and van Laar (2010) have replied that this critique is a misconception. The discussion is very much a live one.

In the middle of this motivating and challenging exchange, and as in any human enterprise, the Amsterdam School also had to live through tragic moments. Two of the greatest scholars of the core group passed away: Rob Grootendorst in 2000 and Peter Houtlosser in 2008. Their passing was not merely a loss to the pragma-dialectical school, but to the entire community of argumentation theorists.

Since 1984, and despite these painful losses, the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation has become perhaps the most influential approach within contemporary argumentation studies to developing a theoretical account of our natural competence as arguers. Then again, being the most influential attempt is not necessarily the same thing as being the most complete or the most useful. Today, for example, we can still ask why the important links to evolutionary theory or the cognitive dimension have yet to be explored.

No matter what one's judgment on the ultimate merits of the theory, its disciplinary importance is clear. It is the first perspective that attempted to function as a bridge between formal and informal logic, discourse analysis and argumentation theory. For this we should thank the Amsterdam School. It was, is, and for the foreseeable future will presumably remain one of the main impulses for our field.

Cristián Santibáñez Yáñez
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