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What is This?

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From interpretation to consent: Arguments, beliefs and meaning

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between understanding and believing from the cognitive perspective of information-processing. I promote, within the scope of the Critical Discourse Analysis agenda, the relevance of an account of belief-fixation sustained by a combination of argumentative and cognitive insights. To this end, I first argue that discursive strategies fulfilling legitimization purposes, such as evidentials (see Hart, this issue), tap into the same cognitive mechanisms as (both sound and fallacious) arguments. I then proceed to examine the idea that the most effective arguments are the ones that manage to obscure or make irrelevant counter-evidence and propose, from a cognitive pragmatic perspective, a formulation of rhetorical effectiveness as a constraint on information-selection taking place at the interpretation stage and decisively influencing the evaluation stage responsible for belief-fixation.

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1. Introduction

Christopher Hart's article (this issue) advocates – in line with others, including Chilton (2005), De Saussure (2007), Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011), O'Halloran (2003) and Van Dijk (e.g. 2006b, 2008), to name but a few – the relevance and necessity of a cognitively grounded contribution to the vast field of discourse analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) in particular. Such a stance is usually legitimized in terms of the explanatory advantages that CDA can gain from the import of cognitive insights. Given that i) one of the main goals of CDA is to expose and explain the relationship between language and power, and ii) that power emerges when dominant individuals manage to control the belief-systems and behaviour of other individuals,[1] it stands to reason that at least part of the explanation of these processes should develop an account of how and why people believe what other people tell them (in particular when they should not), that is, some kind of cognitive account.

Hart's article convincingly addresses from this perspective the notion of legitimization as a way of connecting the use of language and belief-fixation, the underlying idea being that the more evidence you have in favour of a specific piece of information, the more it is likely to be true, and thus the more chances it has of making it to your belief-store. In so doing, Hart also tackles the question of knowing how this category can be exploited in discursive strategies in order to further manipulative or deceptive goals. His argument takes on board Sperber's hypothesis of the logico-rhetorical module,[2] according to which our need to possess accurate information, coupled with the fact that communication, despite allowing for deception to occur, has stabilized over time, have favoured the emergence of a suite of dedicated filters that monitor incoming information in order to sort what is reliable from what is not. Presumably, goes the argument, our cognitive systems have evolved so as to give us efficient tools to evaluate the trustworthiness of people and the reliability of what they communicate.[3] Evidentials, according to Hart, are typically the kind of expressions that we focus on as we monitor input information, for they carry decisive epistemic indications about the message's reliability (see section 4 in Hart's article).

There are grounds to construe the relationship between evidentials and the proposition (or representation) they target as an argumentative one: just like arguments provide evidence in favour of a standpoint or conclusion, evidentials provide evidence that will strengthen the epistemic status (i.e. the perceived degree of likeliness) of a given proposition, and thus its chances of being secured as a belief in the addressee's mind. Put more simply, evidentials are expressions that help you assess whether a statement should be regarded as true or not and, by extension, that help you decide whether you should believe it or not. This means that, in some respect at least, and as long as a concern for legitimization strategies holds, it would be relevant for CDA to include an argumentative component in its theoretical arsenal.[4] CDA has been increasingly interested in argumentation theory for some time now (see e.g. Ihnen and Richardson, 2011; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), but, to my knowledge, without any cognitive grip on argumentative strategies yet. The first question I would like to explore (see section 2) is accordingly how a cognitively and argumentatively oriented framework would envisage the evidential relationship between discourse and beliefs.

Having established the rationale for an argumentative take on belief-fixation, I will turn to explore in section 3 the thorny issue of rhetorical effectiveness, which is of great relevance to CDA. To this end, I will try to push the argument further down the cognitive/argumentative line so as to envisage discursive rhetorical success as the result of a constraint on information processing. I will be led to conclude that a pragmatic cognitive account of meaning provides a plausible framework through which language and beliefs can be connected.

2. Arguments, meaning and beliefs

Arguments come in discourse under the form of combined (explicit or implicit) propositional premises yielding a conclusion. This procedural argumentative path is thus fed by input (the premises) and generates an output (the conclusion, or standpoint), which, in case the inferential shift from premises to conclusion is deemed acceptable, usually results in the individual believing the truth of the conclusion. Now, if we develop the analogy between what happens in discourse and what happens in the mind by construing them as comparable procedures, meaning that some of the processes that lead to belief fixation are argumentation-like, then we can postulate a similarity between the evidence supporting a belief and the premise supporting its conclusion. From such a perspective, evidence is to belief what premise is to standpoint/conclusion, in an argument where the standpoint would be something like 'I should believe P', the premise being something like 'because there is sufficient evidence that P'.

The study of argumentation usually tackles two different questions: argument validity (what makes an argument valid?) and argument effectiveness (what makes an argument effective?). Argument validity is usually assessed by checking whether the conclusion follows from its premises.[5] Yet checking formal aspects is not sufficient to assess argument effectiveness:[6] the addressee must also consider that the premises mobilized in the argument make sense and are representative of actual or at least relevant states of affairs. In other words, premises should be intelligible but also relevant to the communicative exchange. Rhetorical effectiveness is accordingly not limited to formal validity but also builds on content adequacy.

Let us take an example: in 2007 the Swiss people had to decide whether to approve the introduction of a public health care system or to keep the status quo.[7] The insurance company I was affiliated to at that time sent a letter to all its customers, warning us of the catastrophe that would ensue from a vote in favour of public health care – it mostly meant a catastrophe for all the private health insurance companies. In the letter, among several arguments pointing to the undesirability of a public health care system, the following premise was advanced:

(1)   In fact, the introduction of a premium calculated according to income is equivalent to the introduction of a health tax.[8]

Although formally questionable, given that the premise is part of a global fallacious argument known as the *argumentum ad consequentiam*, or appeal to consequences, which consists in accepting or rejecting a belief by virtue of one of its (respectively) positive or

negative consequences (see Walton, 1999), I suggest that the rhetorical effectiveness of (1) resides in referring to the measure submitted to popular vote as a *tax*, thereby exploiting the negative connotation associated to the term. Come to think of it, whether this measure indeed qualifies as a tax is far from straightforward: more detailed information is required to pass judgement on the issue. But, more crucially, even if it were to become an additional tax, this would still not be sufficient evidence to reject it, since taxes also have positive consequences for society. The 'trick' here consists in prompting for *ad hoc* concept formation (see Allott, 2005; Carston, 2002) by extracting only the negative connotation of the concept and to make it so salient that it obscures potential positive ones. Whether the argument is convincing or not might therefore depend on whether the addressee fails to mobilize alternative positive consequences; what the example illustrates is thus that rhetorical effectiveness is driven by some kind of *information-selection dynamics*. On a theoretical level, (1) indicates that rhetorical effectiveness may be due to content more than to form, and thus that there are grounds to seek a pragmatic explanation for these phenomena. Even more specifically, it points to the need of a pragmatic theory that is equipped to account for how information is selected as we process it.

This implies that *meaning* plays a fundamental role in argument evaluation and that the study of the relationship between understanding and believing is extremely relevant for CDA. This link incidentally happens to be explicitly addressed in the evolutionary approach Hart builds on; work on epistemic vigilance considers nowadays that comprehension and belief-fixation are parallel processes that take as input the same communicative material: 'understanding is not believing, but nor is it adopting a sceptical position. Comprehension involves adopting a tentative and labile stance of trust; this will lead to acceptance only if epistemic vigilance, which is triggered by the same communicative acts that trigger comprehension, does not come up with reasons to doubt' (Sperber et al., 2010: 368–9). The last part of the quote is crucial, as it supposes that accepting a belief as true occurs when no reasons to reject it are considered; achieving rhetorical success, from this perspective, involves the speaker making sure that her message does not raise scepticism. In what follows I try to provide a cognitive pragmatic formulation of this idea.

3. Information-selection and rhetorical effectiveness

Relevance theory's construal of the interpretative procedure (see Sperber and Wilson, 1995) is ideally suited to technically give shape to the idea previously exposed because it explicitly postulates cognitive constraints of information processing. It provides a cognitive pragmatic account of communication grounded on the principle that people understand each other the moment they have established in what way the utterance they are processing is *relevant* in the context of interpretation. Relevance is conceived as a relationship between an utterance or the representation of an utterance and a context – itself conceived as a set of assumptions – and receives a technical definition, notably expressed in the following two extent conditions of relevance:

(2) Extent condition of relevance n°1 'an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large'.[9] (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 125)

(3)   Extent condition of relevance n°2: 'an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small'. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 125)

We can connect these two extent conditions to rhetorical effectiveness broadly defined as a constraint on information selection under the assumption that since a rhetorically effective argument is one which has been kept after completion of the interpretative and evaluative procedure, it is the one the addressee has considered to be optimally relevant in the context of interpretation. Consequently, it is the one the conclusion of which both took little effort to be derived and generated significant contextual effects, that is, the one which best fulfils (2) and (3).

Rhetorical success is presumably the result of two scenarios: i) the argument is such that it has successfully withstood (possibly all) counter-arguments, or ii) the argument is such that no counter-argument is triggered or made available, thus leaving the standpoint unthreatened. In scenario i), rhetorical effectiveness is achieved a) when all relevant pieces of information have been weighed against each other in order to establish the epistemic advantages of the conclusion of the argument over other available possibilities, or b) when the conclusion of the argument matches an overwhelmingly epistemically advantageous representation that is already part of the subject's cognitive environment, usually by exploiting a relationship of consonance between old and new information.[10] In scenario ii), rhetorical effectiveness will depend on a) there being no counter-evidence at all, and/or b) there being no reason to summon counter-evidence. In all these cases, rhetorical effectiveness depends on the presence and epistemic quality of counter-evidence: in information-processing terms, this means that the latter is harder to represent (less accessible) and/or less believable (i.e. epistemically weaker).

If you want to enjoy rhetorical success, you therefore need to increase the chances that your utterance will be found relevant in the context in which it appears. This can be done by attempting to mould the context of interpretation (which is an online and dynamic construction) accordingly, so that the assumptions it contains make the conclusion appear to be optimally relevant (see the *contextual selection constraint*, Maillat and Oswald, 2009, 2011). Additionally, it would be advantageous in this respect to make sure that the informative context in which the argument is evaluated does not contain any assumption that would potentially defeat the argument. Those problematic contextual assumptions should thus be made irrelevant, that is, following (2) and (3), *less accessible* and *epistemically weaker*, while the contextual assumptions that are consonant with the argument should be made relevant, that is, *more accessible* and *epistemically stronger* – epistemic strength and contextual accessibility being in turn definable in terms of cognitive salience. To simplify: a convincing argument is one which is evaluated against an easily accessible and epistemically strong context devoid of counter-evidence (which has been made less accessible – if not completely obscured – and/or epistemically weaker). This formulation has the advantage of capturing the effectiveness of both sound and fallacious arguments; an important consequence of this is the idea that it is not the intrinsic quality of the argument that makes it effective, but how relevant the audience perceives it to be.[11]

Looking now at discursive realizations of these mechanisms, it should come as no surprise that many well-known fallacies can be reinterpreted within this framework.

For instance, the *argumentum ad populum*, which instantiates that many people holding a given belief is decent evidence in its favour, is crucially targeted at strengthening the epistemic status of a given assumption, making it relevant in a context where the addressee is looking for evidence in favour of the conclusion it supports. The *argumentum ad verecundiam* targets the same mechanism by making the epistemic status of an assumption stronger through an appeal to what appears to be a relevant and recognized authority. The abusive variant of the *argumentum ad hominem*, also known as the personal attack, conversely, is targeted at weakening the epistemic status of an assumption by expressing the unreliability of its source. These are examples of fallacies which determine the fate of assumptions in the addressee's cognitive environment,[12] either by weakening or strengthening their epistemic status; other fallacies, particularly those which rely on appeals to emotion, such as the *argumentum ad baculum* (appeal to force) or the *argumentum ad misericordiam* (appeal to pity) for instance, exploit the extent condition of relevance n°2 (see [3] earlier), namely the accessibility condition, to the extent that emotions have been shown to function as attention-grabbers (see Clément, 2006; Ekman, 2003). A first step in accounting for the effectiveness of these would be to consider that they concentrate attention on the assumptions that are consonant with the emotion felt at a given moment, thereby making them excessively salient and accessible, at the expense of other potentially relevant information (typically those pieces of information that would jeopardize rhetorical success).[13]

4. Conclusion

The cognitive framework outlined here to account for rhetorical success in information processing terms builds on the idea that in order to evaluate the likeliness of a given piece of information, you first need to understand it, and that the constraints on information selection at work during the interpretative procedure can already influence its evaluation.

I suggest that this fundamental mechanism is not limited to argumentative uses of language, but that it applies to virtually all discursive strategies that exploit some form of legitimization. The underlying idea is that legitimization has greater chances of succeeding the moment you are able to prevent your audience from identifying reasons to doubt. The account presented here is not meant to undermine other accounts exploring other facets of domination in discourse, but to enrich them by providing a cognitively grounded answer to the thorny question of knowing why discursive strategies may be effective in terms of belief-fixation. Evidentials, as Hart's article showed, belong to the category of such strategies; I have tried to establish some of its cognitive underpinnings and have suggested that argumentative fallacies (and many other strategies for that matter, among which extended metaphors, see Oswald and Rihs, submitted) also belong to this category.

My motivation behind the incorporation of cognitive insights into CDA echoes CDA's social concern. Indeed, I assume that if we are able to understand why it is that manipulative or deceptive communication is effective, why certain fallacies manage to convince despite their departure from validity standards, and moreover if the models used to describe and explain these phenomena are based on a deeper understanding of how communicative input are processed by our brains, then we will be one step closer to

resistance to ideology, social domination and manipulation. More generally, I take knowledge on how these phenomena operate – derived from a descriptively and explanatorily powerful scientific model of human cognition – to be crucially valuable information if we are to avoid falling victim to them.

Notes

1. As noted by Van Dijk, 'such control is first of all a control of the mind, that is, of the beliefs of recipients, and indirectly a control of the actions of recipients based on such manipulated beliefs' (2006a: 362).
2. The workings of the logico-rhetorical module (Sperber, 2001) have most recently been reformulated in terms of epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al., 2010).
3. What Sperber (2001) terms assessing internal coherence is translated as scanning the content of the message in epistemic vigilance terms, and assessing external coherence translates as looking for evidence of the source's reliability/competence (see Sperber et al., 2010).
4. I draw attention here to the two fallacies mentioned by Hart: the so-called *ad verecundiam* fallacy and the *ad populum* fallacy. Hart notes that these are regularly spotted in political discourse; I will argue that it is not by chance that these are effective and propose that their functioning and effectiveness can be modelled in cognitive terms (see section 3 later).
5. The study of this formal operation has traditionally been the province of formal logic ever since Aristotle. However, informal logic approaches, across the 20th and 21st centuries (e.g. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2008 [1958]; Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1984, 2004; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2007; Walton, 1987, 2008, among others) have advocated a shift from the rigidity of formal logic to the contextuality of pragmatically inspired theories of communication, and therefore focus on argumentation in its actual context of occurrence.
6. An argument may be formally valid and yet still be rejected, while formally invalid (i.e. fallacious) arguments might still be convincing.
7. The Swiss health insurance system is composed of approximately 90 private companies providing medical insurance; insurance is compulsory but each citizen can choose which company s/he wants to be affiliated with. This is the option which prevailed after the vote.
8. In French: '*Dans les faits, des primes en fonction du revenu équivalent à l'introduction d'un impôt de santé.*'
9. Contextual effects are defined as the formation of new beliefs or the deletion or strengthening of existing beliefs.
10. This encompasses blind adhesion but also self-deception, as both involve some kind of refusal, on behalf of the subject, to take into account the relevance of counter-arguments or more generally any kind of counter-evidence.
11. This idea is precisely behind Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* (1958), which construes the audience's preferences and beliefs as the most important parameter in rhetorical effectiveness.
12. The notion of cognitive environment is conveniently defined in Relevance Theory as 'a set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true' (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 46), and more generally as 'a set of facts that are manifest to him' (p. 39); these are therefore easily accessible to the individual, either perceptually, inferentially or through communication.
13. For a more detailed account of a cognitive approach to argumentative fallacies, see Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011) and Oswald (2010).

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