

Reference: Oswald, S. (2016). "Commitment attribution and the reconstruction of arguments". In Paglieri, F., Bonelli, L., & Felletti, S. (Eds.). *The psychology of argument: Cognitive approaches to argumentation and persuasion*. London: College Publications, 17-32.

Chapter 2

Commitment Attribution and the Reconstruction of Arguments¹

Steve Oswald

University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland, steve.oswald@unifr.ch

Abstract. The notion of commitment has been shown to be pivotal in the study of argumentation (see e.g. Hamblin 1970, Walton & Krabbe 1995), in particular as far as argumentative reconstruction is concerned. In this chapter I will consider how the notion of *commitment attribution*, as developed in cognitive pragmatic research (Morency *et al.* 2008, Saussure & Oswald, 2008, 2009), can contribute clear criteria to be used in an analytical task argumentation theorists regularly have to undertake, namely the identification of missing or unexpressed premises.

1. Introduction

The notion of commitment is one of the fundamental concepts argumentation theorists rely on as they engage in the reconstruction of argumentative exchanges. Although definitional consensus has not been reached by linguists, argumentation theorists and philosophers of language across scientific communities (see Boulat, 2014), one of the recurring features of commitment that emerges seems to be its attitudinal import. That is, commitment denotes a specific attitude of the speaker's towards the content of what she has uttered. Extant discussions of commitment touch upon parallel and neighboring notions such as endorsement and involvement (see e.g. Katriel & Dascal, 1989), responsibility (Nølke *et al.*, 2004), or, in the francophone tradition, *prise en charge* (Culioli 1971). While these different notions have been distinguished and to a fair extent theorized (see Dendale & Coltier, 2011), they all seem to converge on one specific point, namely a construal of commitment in terms of – or in relation to – belief and truth (see Boulat, 2014).

In this chapter I adopt a restricted and moderately informal definition of commitment and construe it, following Katriel & Dascal, as a content “which the speaker can be said to have ‘taken for granted’ in making his or her utterance” (Katriel & Dascal, 1989, p. 286)².

¹ I would like to thank Michael Baumtrog for his valuable input on form- and content-related issues on a previous version of this work. Remaining mistakes are my own.

² An anonymous reviewer points out that this definition seems to leave out commitment to explicit contents, in the sense that one could hardly consider that a speaker takes for granted what he utters, to the extent that he needs to utter it. It would indeed make sense to broaden the definition so that it can also include explicit contents. In this paper, I will thus consider that what speakers take for granted include the explicit meaning of their utterances, and would accordingly adapt Katriel & Dascal's definition to stipulate that commitment is what speakers take for

Here the intimate and private nature of commitment as a psychological notion will matter less than its public appraisal in verbal exchanges – and the cognitive mechanisms of interpretation underlying this appraisal. In other words, I will be concerned with the public facet of commitment in discourse, which will lead me to consider the issue from *the perspective of the addressee*.

Commitment is fundamental in argumentative exchanges because it allows conversational participants to keep track of each other's arguments, positions, standpoints – i.e., of each other's performance of relevant speech acts (cf. Hamblin's *commitment stores*, 1970). This means that at the level of argumentative conversation, commitment scrutiny is both what allows participants to keep track of what they have previously said (or implied) and, as a consequence, endorsed, and what allows them to proceed with the exchange. Since I target these very processes, it is only natural for me to be interested in processes of *commitment attribution* (Morency *et al.*, 2008) which are taken to characterize the *naïve* or *pre-theoretical* appraisal of commitment by conversational participants. In a nutshell, I will be concerned with what speakers *mean* when they argue and predominantly with *how* their addressees come to recognize what speakers mean as they utter it, which is a prerequisite for the mere possibility of conducting an argumentative exchange in the first place.

The reason these mechanisms should be of prime concern for argumentation theorists lies in the necessity of being able to assess the reality – in terms of actual meaningfulness – of a given argumentative exchange with clear-cut criteria, in order to minimize the chances of over-, or misinterpretation, as much as possible. This chapter accordingly tackles the naïve more than the normative interpretation of argumentative discourse and provides methodological guidelines to achieve plausible argumentative reconstructions. In particular, the hypothesis that will be defended is that the selection difficulties posed by the reconstruction of implicit premises can be overcome by relying on a cognitive model of human communication with clear comparative criteria.

2. Commitment, Meaning and Commitment Attribution

Walton and Krabbe characterize commitments as follows: “one's commitments are personal – that is, indexed to a distinct person, or individual – and they may even be, in some cases, private and only partially accessible to others” (1995, p. 14). For Walton and Krabbe, the personal nature of commitments does not make them psychological in nature (on this point, see also Paglieri, 2010); besides, even if we were to construe commitment as a psychological state denoting a relationship between an attitude of the speaker's and a propositional content, its assessment in communication would still remain an important feature of the success of communicative exchanges. By this I mean that commitment bears a strong relationship with (speaker) meaning. If, like Grice (1989), we construe communication as a successful exchange of meaning, then we also need to accept that communication is successful only when the addressee has understood speaker meaning. When an addressee has understood the speaker's utterance, he will by default consider that the output of his comprehension procedure – i.e. the proposition(s) he identified as speaker meaning – corresponds to what the speaker has actually meant by her utterance. In other words, understanding comes with the usually implicit and intuitive judgement, on behalf of the addressee, that the speaker has meant precisely what he has understood. I would like to argue that such judgement is the attribution of commitment: when an addressee pairs the

granted in making their utterances and which they cannot retract without causing semantic or pragmatic inconsistencies.

content he derives with speaker meaning, he is ipso facto attributing the speaker a commitment to that content. This is why comprehension straightforwardly involves commitment attribution. Of course, this does not mean that addressees never fail in the process: misunderstandings do occur for a variety of reasons. Interestingly, such cases can also be characterized in terms of commitment misattribution, in which a mismatch occurs between what the speaker means and what the addressee takes her to mean. If an addressee fails to properly recover speaker meaning, he will take the speaker to be committed to a set of propositions she is not actually committed to. Assuming the parallel between interpretation/misinterpretation and commitment attribution/misattribution is relevant, we can hypothesize that commitment is intimately linked to meaning. In principle, therefore, this would warrant the inclusion of a pragmatic theory of interpretation, concerned with the study of contextualized meaning, in any argumentative theory interested in commitment.

As they engage in communicative exchanges, conversational participants formulate utterances loaded with a variety of indicators meant to facilitate the addressee's recovery of speaker meaning. The semantic (relative) stability of the linguistic code is trivially a highly reliable tool for meaning encoding, as literal and explicit meaning is usually unequivocal – provided, of course, the speaker has opted for the linguistic units that best convey her communicative and informative intentions. In turn, the relative transparency of explicit and literal meaning allows for straightforward and unproblematic commitment attribution. The problems raised by Moorean utterances such as (1) are a good indication that such is the case, since their inherent contradiction seems to rest precisely on the impossibility of asserting a state of affairs and simultaneously denying being committed to the truth of the propositional content used to express that state of affairs:

- (1) ?? Laszlo is home but I do not believe that Laszlo is home.

Understanding assertions thus goes hand in hand with the possibility of attributing the speaker a commitment to the propositional content.³ While we could thus say commitment attribution to explicit contents is unproblematic, safe and automatic (judging by the difficulties linked to the retraction of commitment from an assertion as illustrated above), the story might be different for commitment attribution to implicit contents, to which human communication very often resorts (e.g., humor, politeness, irony, metaphor, and figurative language more broadly). Although commitment attribution may be trickier in those cases, if only because the addressee is largely responsible for the identification of implicit contextual assumptions that are necessary for the relevant interpretation of speaker meaning, it remains a necessary step of the process. When the addressee infers irony or humor, usually he does so assuming that it was meant as such by the speaker. In other words, implicit contents also come with commitment. From the perspective of the usefulness of communication in the species, it would indeed be pointless for implicit mechanisms of communication to exist in the absence of the assumption that these also serve to intentionally convey meaning. Commitment also goes through with implicatures, for instance, even if the addressee's grounds for attributing commitment are necessarily weaker than the grounds he has for assessing the speaker's commitment to explicit contents (but this does not mean that commitment is weaker, see Morency *et al.* (2008) for a discussion). Further, just because implicatures are typically cancellable does not mean that commitment is too. If a speaker cancels an implicature, she is signaling that the implicature should not have been drawn in the first place and therefore that she is not committed to its

³ There are different types of commitments, even if the view adopted here is moderately reductionist. For a detailed account, see issue 22 of the *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* (2008) and section 2 of the chapter by Morency *et al.* (2008, pp. 199-204).

content, which can be assimilated to a form of mistake acknowledgement/correction on her behalf. However, if she does not cancel the implicature, she can *ipso facto* be taken to intend the addressee to infer it, along with her commitment to its content and to her intention of having the addressee recognizing it.

From this brief discussion, it appears that even if commitment is a psychological state belonging to a set of directly unobservable objects, it can be inferred and follows from the identification of speaker meaning, regardless of whether the latter is explicit or implicit.⁴ This is a direct consequence of the intentional nature of communication: speakers engaging in a communicative exchange not only intend to inform their audience of something, they also intend their audiences to recognize that they are intentionally attempting to inform them of something.⁵

If we now consider what happens in the mind of conversational participants, a corollary of these considerations is that the meaning derivation procedure provides both an interpretation of speaker meaning and a judgement on her commitment. That is, the cognitive operations that are responsible for the identification of speaker meaning are also (perhaps indirectly) responsible for the identification of speaker commitment by virtue of the intentional nature of communication. This means, from an analytical perspective, that we can gain access to mechanisms of commitment attribution by looking at meaning and at the cognitive machinery involved in its interpretation.

3. The Analysis of Argumentation

3.1. Problems in Argumentative Reconstruction

The disorderly and rather untidy format of argumentation as it occurs in natural settings can be a great obstacle for transparent and thorough analysis. For instance, arguers often fail to explicitly provide all components of their argumentations and many times leave it up to their addressees to infer the set of contextual information needed to establish the connections between explicit premises and conclusion (as is the case with enthymemes, for instance). Thus, the justificatory link is often only incompletely provided by speakers. Now, for arguers, this is not a source of great concern, as their cognitive environment contains information that is relevant to the argumentative situation they find themselves in. This, in addition to the obvious possibility of asking for more information to make sure they have understood what was meant, allows them to effortlessly and efficiently fill in the blanks or select the missing information required to make sense of the arguments offered by the speaker. For analysts, however, this may be problematic in many respects, mainly because they do not have the possibility of interacting with the speakers when the identification of speaker commitment turns out to be problematic or when they lack crucial contextual information that was easily available when the original interaction took place.

The difficulty involved in attributing commitment on the basis of incomplete argumentation is in turn problematic for at least two (interrelated) reasons: (i) analysts may fail to do justice to argumentative reality by misinterpreting arguers' utterances, and (ii) as

⁴ Walton (1993) adopts this perspective when he positively answers the question of whether commitment is or not "an inference to be drawn from what you say and how you act when you are interacting with another participant in a social situation" (1993, p. 93). Crucially, thus, whether speakers are sincere or not is a separate question; the notion of commitment attribution as will be used here allows us to leave the question aside and to focus on the communicative features of commitment, that is, on communicated commitment.

⁵ Note that this idea echoes Sperber & Wilson's distinction between informative and communicative intention (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

a consequence, analysts may end up ‘wrongly’ – or at least illegitimately – evaluating the arguments they analyze, thus running the risk of committing the straw man fallacy.

One of the tasks of argumentation theorists has thus been to formulate clear-cut criteria to reconstruct plausible representations of the argumentative exchange as it has been carried out by actual participants, so that the margin of error in the reconstruction can be reduced to a minimum. One way of tackling the issue consists in finding the right balance between naïve and normative interpretations of argumentative exchanges (see Lewiński, 2012; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; and Oswald & Lewiński, 2014). Crucially, the question of reconstructing argumentative exchanges could be formulated as follows (see also Paglieri, 2007): when there is doubt as to which contents should be identified as adequate/correct/intended in order to reconstruct the argument provided in an incomplete form (as with enthymemes), should we go for those that seem to be the ones that participants have made use of (i.e. should we find reliable ways of identifying the speakers’ commitments), or should we go for those that logically make sense in the argument, with no particular regard to whether they correspond to what the arguers effectively had in mind? That is, should we consider arguments as the result of a specific intention of arguers that needs to be contextually specified, or should we consider arguments as inferences needing to comply with some normative standard? The answer to this question boils down to a choice of perspective: either (i) we decide to address what we think the arguers meant, and thus the naïve level of interpretation or (ii) we focus on the argument’s value and merit and strive to make the most of it, even if we risk overlooking some crucial pragmatic aspects of argumentation. Here I will try to assess how far we can go into the development of option (i).⁶

Both logical and pragmatic considerations have been put forth, for instance by pragma-dialecticians, to provide a sound method of argumentative analysis – and reconstruction in particular: “[t]o establish precisely what someone who has advanced argumentation can be held to if the argumentative discourse is analyzed as a critical discussion, an analysis must be carried out both at a pragmatic and at a logical level” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 60). Both perspectives become complementary in the analysis and reconstruction of arguments because each of them targets a distinct aspect of argumentation: pragmatic tools (inspired mainly from Speech Act Theory, *à la* Austin, 1962 and Searle, 1969) allow us to come up with a sensible and plausible reconstruction meant to provide a reliable representation of arguers’ respective argumentative moves (i.e. an interpretation of the linguistic material), while logical norms provide the means to reconstruct the line of reasoning of the argumentation being analyzed. According to pragma-dialecticians, the pragmatic and the logical levels of analysis are related in such a way that “[i]n practice, the logical analysis is instrumental for the pragmatic analysis” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, p. 60). In the analysis of unexpressed premises, for instance, the identification of implicit material will first apply a criterion of logical validity to single out possible candidates for the implicit premise, which will then be assessed pragmatically to single out the optimal candidate among them.

Moreover, a criterion of charity has been put forth to provide a way of settling the question when the balance between logic and pragmatics falls short of providing the optimal solution. This basically amounts to choosing, among possible alternatives, the one that favors best the arguer in terms of argumentative strength (see e.g. Snoeck Henkemans, 1992). Following Lewiński (2012) and Lewiński & Oswald (2013), however, it appears that charity should not be blind, but attuned to contextual constraints dictating the appropriate

⁶ See Walton & Reed (2005), Lewiński (2012) and Lewiński & Oswald (2013) for alternative accounts which cater for both options. In this chapter I am however only concerned with the first layer of analysis, centered on naïve interpretation.

amount of charity to be adopted by analysts in their reconstruction. This line of argument will not be further explored here, as extant discussions on the principle of charity abound (see Lewiński 2012 for a comprehensive review) and are not directly concerned with the level of naïve interpretation I am focusing on here.

3.2. *The Pragmatic Optimum*

Reliance on pragmatic research in order to deal with the identification of commitments, and those concerning missing premises in particular, is not a new idea in argumentation studies (see e.g. van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992; Gerritsen, 2001; Becker, 2012). Pragma-dialectics has specifically elaborated a detailed procedure meant to identify unexpressed premises, namely the procedure to determine the *pragmatic optimum*.

As seen in the previous sub-section, according to pragma-dialectics, a meaningful reconstruction of arguments that have been presented in an incomplete form should be conducted in such a way as to make them logically valid. In this sense, analysts should strive for the *logical minimum* first, defined as “the premise that consists of the ‘if...then’ sentence that has as its antecedent the explicit premise and as its consequent the conclusion of the explicit argument” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, p. 64). In many cases, however, this yields reconstructions that do not seem to do justice to the original format of the argument or that leave out some relevant aspects of meaning (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, pp. 60-72 for a discussion). For this reason, pragma-dialecticians have introduced the notion of *pragmatic optimum*, which they define as “the premise that makes the argument valid and also prevents a violation of (...) any other rule[s] of communication”, adding that “[p]redominantly, this is a matter of generalizing the logical minimum” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 64). Assessing the pragmatic optimum in an argument, as indicated by its name, involves considering pragmatic aspects of meaning that should help the analyst figure out the contents that seem to best fit the context in which the argument took place. Also, it allows the analyst to identify unexpressed constituents of the argument that are optimally formulated to fulfil their argumentative function.

A 5-step procedure for identifying the pragmatic optimum is accordingly formulated as follows (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, pp. 66-67):

- (i) Determine what the argumentation is in which a premise has been left unexpressed.
- (ii) Determine how well-defined the context is in which the argumentation occurs.
- (iii) Determine which added premises could validate the argument underlying the argumentation.
- (iv) Determine which of these added premises may, in the context at hand, be considered to be part of the commitments of the speaker.
- (v) Determine which of the added premises to which the speaker is committed is the most informative in the context at hand.

Steps (i), (ii) and (iii) involve decoding and inferring the meaning of the argumentative material that has been explicitly uttered and listing the argumentative material that has potentially been left by the speaker for the addressee to infer. Step (iii) may consist in an exhaustive survey of every possible proposition plausibly related to the argument and plausibly fulfilling the role of premise, following a criterion of logical validity meant to identify all candidates that are instrumental to making the argument logically valid. Steps (iv) and (v) are the most interesting for my purposes in that they explicitly target the

identification of commitments (step (iv)) and the criteria that allow us to select which ones are appropriate among those available (step (v), criterion of informativeness).

While the last two steps of the procedure tell us what to do to precisely identify the pragmatic optimum, much more can be said about *how* it should be identified, beyond the requirement of non-violation of any “rule of communication”, mentioned by van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992, p. 64), and presented as a condition for the identification of implicit contents. The rules of communication alluded to by pragma-dialecticians refer to Searle’s theory of indirect speech acts (1969) and Grice’s conversational maxims (Grice, 1989, p. 26-27). Yet, in their pragma-dialectical interpretation, these are presented as normative rules enjoining speakers to contribute utterances that comply with rational conversational conduct – itself instrumental to the resolution of a difference of opinion.⁷ While these rules undoubtedly have clear descriptive and normative value (they provide a clear-cut norm of rationality envisaged in terms of their instrumentality to fulfil a specific goal), whether they constitute solid guidelines for the reconstruction of argumentative *meaning* remains to be seen.

The psychological reality of these rules of communication is also controversial: Grice himself did neither claim that his model was psychologically plausible nor that his ‘working out schema’ reflected the actual cognitive computation of implicatures. His system of maxims, together with the principle of cooperation, allows us to identify the contents that *can count as* conversational implicatures, but this does not *ipso facto* mean that conversational participants actually use these principles (Grice, 1989, p. 31). While the rules of communication as formulated in pragma-dialectics can assist the analyst in the normative reconstruction of arguments, they have little to contribute to commitment attribution at the level of naïve interpretation. Pragma-dialectics does not say much about the latter, which seems to suggest that the criteria to be used rest somewhere in our intuitions about meaning. Yet, stage (iv) in the determination of the pragmatic optimum seems to be targeted at assessing speaker meaning (i.e., prior to a normative reconstruction); the question of how this is done is left open. Additionally, since all judgements about commitment, as stipulated in stage (v), have to be contextually grounded, the method to identify commitments needs to involve some sort of operation meant to assess the adequacy of commitments relatively to the context in which they are identified. Pragma-dialectics mentions in this respect a criterion of informativeness, but what is meant by ‘informativeness’ remains vague and intuitive in the theory. The following proposal is accordingly meant to cognitively ground steps (iv) and (v) above.

4. A Cognitive Pragmatic Take on Interpretation – and Commitment Attribution

While pragma-dialectics gives us insights on normative reconstructions, it only provides limited insights on naïve reconstructions. The perspective defended here is thus that a meaning-informed take on commitment attribution can be instrumental to the reconstruction of arguments. Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2012) represents a solid theoretical choice in this respect because it formulates precise criteria defining what it means for a language user to contextually understand any given utterance. This cognitive account of communication considers that

⁷ These rules are formulated in order to enforce a general principle (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 50): “Be clear, honest, efficient and to the point”.

understanding is identifying the information meant to be communicated by the speaker. In turn, this is defined as identifying the contextual relevance of what is communicated.

Given the resource-boundedness of our cognitive systems, we have neither unlimited time nor unlimited resources as we process verbal messages to take into account all available information in order to reach an interpretation of a speaker's utterance. We take shortcuts, mobilizing only the most relevant information. Sperber & Wilson postulate that we are naturally equipped with cost-effective means to do that. That is, whenever we interpret speaker meaning, we go straight for the interpretation that seems to be the most relevant within the context in which the utterance was uttered. A *cognitive principle of relevance* has been formulated to reflect cost-effectiveness under such constraints:

- (2) Cognitive principle of relevance: "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 254)

According to this principle, our mind is guided by considerations of relevance which determine how and to what extent resources should be allocated to the processing of any given stimulus. Applied to the case of information processing within communicative contexts, this principle is accompanied by the *communicative principle of relevance*, which is formulated as follows:

- (3) Communicative principle of relevance: "Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 256)

Following this principle, ostensive stimuli in communication carry a presumption of relevance: if you recognize that the speaker has uttered something and moreover that she meant for you to recognize that her utterance was meant to be recognized by you as an intentional stimulus, this constitutes a trigger for you to infer whatever needs to be inferred from the utterance. Relevance, thus, is a property of utterances; the recognition of the intentional character of utterances gives your cognitive system an indication that effort should be spent in the search of the utterance's contextual relevance.

The capital contribution of RT to the study of meaning can be said to lay in its technical and precise characterization of what relevance is in cognitive terms. Relevant information (for a cognitive system) is defined along two conditions called the *extent conditions of relevance* (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 125):

- (4) "Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.
- (5) Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small."

Contextual effectiveness (4) is defined in epistemic terms, through three effects generally discussed in RT: the addition of new reliable information, the suppression of old and unreliable information, and the revision of old but uncertain information already stored in the system. This means that contextual effectiveness as referred to in (4) can be characterized as instrumentality to secure a more adequate and reliable cognitive environment (the cognitive environment being defined as the set of all assumptions that are manifest to an individual, which is made of the set of assumptions that she takes to be true or probably true, see Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 39). In parallel, the second extent condition of relevance targets processing effort and specifies that relevant information is information that requires little processing effort to be represented. In other words, the second condition of relevance stipulates that relevant information is information that is

easily accessible in the context of interpretation. Such a cost-effective construal of the cognitive mechanisms at play in interpretation yields the general assumption that the most relevant of all pieces of information are those that best satisfy the effort-effect ratio.

RT assumes *optimal* relevance to obtain when communication is successful. Given the constraints in effort and effect induced by the utterance the speaker has chosen and the communicative principle of relevance (3), the addressee is entitled to expect that the way the speaker has phrased her utterance is the best of all possible ways of phrasing it to convey exactly what she means. It follows that successful communication can be described as a situation in which the output of the comprehension procedure of a speaker's utterance, this output being defined as the set of assumptions that the utterance has contributed to the cognitive environment of the addressee, resembles the set of assumptions that the speaker meant to convey in formulating her utterance. This has strong implications for the analysis of argumentative material: it means that the contents the analyst is likely to identify, comparatively, as the most contextually relevant contents, are probably the ones the speaker has intended to go through – and also the ones the addressee considers that the speaker has intended to go through.⁸

Looking at actual interactions and taking into account their context of occurrence – context being here construed as the sets of relevant information both speaker and addressee mobilize to make sense of each other's utterances – the RT model of information processing gives us tools to plausibly assess (i) what speakers mean as they communicate and (ii) what each is likely to consider that the other has meant. In other words, once we have identified speaker meaning by evaluating which interpretations are contextually optimal along the effort-effect dimensions, we will be able to identify plausible interpretations of their utterances. To the extent that those interpretations can be taken to correspond to speaker meaning, they are *ipso facto* good candidates to represent the conversational participants' commitments.

In what follows I try to illustrate how RT can be used in argumentative reconstructions.⁹ I also believe that such a model can be used for other tasks in the study of argumentation – but this merely follows from the fact that RT is a general theory of cognition and communication in particular, and that argumentation is one particular instance of communication. I have argued elsewhere (Oswald, *forth.*) that RT can tentatively be used for rhetorical analysis, trying to elaborate on Paglieri's intuition that “rhetorical persuasion is partially dependent on our cognitive limitations in assessing rational criteria for argument evaluation” (Paglieri, 2007, p. 5). In what follows, however, I will restrict my contribution to methodological considerations and illustrate them with a clear example in which the

⁸ An anonymous reviewer points out that a similar argument could be made for pragma-dialectics, as it could be claimed that the contents that the pragma-dialectical analyst is likely to identify, namely those that are optimal in persuading the addressee on reasonable grounds, are probably the ones the speaker has intended to go through. While this proposal has merit, I do not think the parallel would hold, mainly due to the difference in scope of both theories. RT targets actual cognitive mechanisms, while Pragma-Dialectics neither needs nor wants to postulate the cognitive reality of the phenomena it tackles (see this idea explicitly formulated in van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 74). Pragma-dialectical reconstructions are tailored to fit an externalised model of argumentative interaction and inherit their plausibility from agreement with the theory's normative claims, while RT-based reconstructions, which are based on a naturalistic account of cognitive processes, inherit their plausibility from a cognitively-grounded model of human cognition which lends itself to experimental testing (see e.g. van der Henst & Sperber, 2004). While disagreement is possible with both accounts, its nature and scope will therefore differ.

⁹ There have been a few attempts to integrate the insights of RT into argumentation theory in the past: Tindale (1992) argues that RT's notion of cognitive environment can provide “a framework for assessing candidates for the hidden premise” (1992, p. 185). Paglieri (2007) and Paglieri & Woods (2011) try to go beyond what RT has to offer as they focus on the virtues of parsimony to model arguers' behaviour in argumentative practices. Woods (1992) critically discusses RT's notion of relevance while recognising the merits and limitations of the theory.

choice of unexpressed premises is highly problematic for subsequent argumentative evaluation.

5. Analyzing Arguments and Determining Unexpressed Premises

5.1. A Procedure to Identify Unexpressed Premises

One might hold that the reconstruction of naïve interpretations might yield biased representations of the argumentative moves being analyzed, since intentions and commitments are private and only indirectly accessible. There is a simple way of replying to this objection, which consists in acknowledging that the analyst's results are based on her own hypotheses about meaning (i.e., on the output of her own psychological processes), and that as such they are at least as plausible as the actual arguer's own hypotheses about the particular meanings that are being exchanged in conversation. It is assumed that the analyst is a competent language user just as any actual arguer, meaning that both of them are in principle equipped with the same cognitive information processing devices. What the analyst is doing is taking an extra reflective step, which, if properly guided by a cognitive theory of communication, will allow her to assess meaning. To make an analogy with reasoning (as per Mercier & Sperber, 2009), what the analyst concerned with meaning assessment is doing is soliciting the same cognitive mechanisms as the arguer, only *reflectively*, which allows her to go beyond the intuitive representations yielded by the comprehension mechanism, whereas actual arguers usually do not need to take that step (comprehension is automatic) and thus remain within the bounds of intuitive inference. Accordingly, there is no reason to suspect that the analyst is less competent than any actual arguer in meaning assessment. In fact, analysts have more time and more resources to devote to the cognitive operations underlying comprehension, without this making them 'different' interpreters. This line of argument, which to my knowledge was first defended by Saussure (2005), legitimates recourse to a cognitive pragmatic theory in the analysis of discourse.

At this point I am ready to propose a rather simple procedure to identify unexpressed premises. A simple two-step procedure, which incorporates the assessment of relevance as defined in section 4, can be formulated to identify implicit argumentative material:

- (6) Procedure to identify unexpressed premises:
 - a) focus on meaning at the level of the arguers' management and exchange of meaning
 - b) based on considerations of cognitive effort and effect, identify speaker meaning that is contextually relevant
 - b1) take into account different candidates for the unexpressed premise and assess which one yields the best ratio between cognitive effort and contextual effect in the context of the utterance
 - b2) select the optimally relevant candidate as the one corresponding to speaker meaning

(6) states that analysts should be something like 'informed arguers': their own competence as language users, together with enabling circumstances such as increased time and cognitive resources available for reflective processes, should allow them to reach plausible assumptions on speaker meaning, i.e., on what the speaker has meant and what the addressee assumes the speaker has meant. In turn, this should mirror the addressee's

commitment attribution processes. Once this is done, the next stage of analysis can be considered, namely evaluation, which is where the normative component of argumentation analysis comes into play.

5.2. Identifying an Unexpressed Premise: An Example

The data I will be analyzing to illustrate how the abovementioned framework can be used to reconstruct unexpressed premises comes from an article published in the Swiss tabloid *20minutes* in November 2011.¹⁰ In the article, the journalist reports that Hollywood actor Ashton Kutcher had given marital advice in a men's magazine at a point where his wife, Hollywood actress Demi Moore, was actually filing for divorce, thereby calling into question Kutcher's credibility as a marital counsellor. (7) below is a literal translation of the title and (8) of the headline:

(7) Ashton's love lessons leave much to be desired.

Les leçons d'amour d'Ashton laissent à désirer.

(8) Ashton Kutcher has given marital counselling in the press. Demi Moore has however just filed for divorce.

Ashton Kutcher a donné des conseils matrimoniaux dans la presse. Demi Moore vient pourtant de demander le divorce.

The argumentative nature of the example is given away by the presence of the connective *pourtant* ('however'), which, in the terms of Anscombe (2002), is used to fulfil a counter-argumentative function: *pourtant* introduces a piece of information whose argumentative orientation runs contrary to the argumentative orientation of the sequence (or of its implications) that precedes the connective. Moreover, if we think about the fact that *20minutes* is a tabloid and that tabloids are known for regularly making a business out of exposing (and many times mocking) the life of celebrities, an argumentative relationship between the title and the headline is not hard to infer based on genre considerations.

The standpoint is explicitly mentioned in (7). One explicit (minor) premise is explicitly available in the second half of the headline in (8), which I will number below as (9) for exposition purposes:

(9) Demi Moore has just filed for divorce.

In order to evaluate the argument, we need to make explicit a major premise that connects (7) and (9). The logical minimum (see section 3.2 above) would yield something like (10):

(10) If Demi Moore has just filed for divorce, then Ashton's love lessons leave much to be desired.

(10) would render the argument logically valid, but does not quite do the job in terms of meaning, to the extent that it seems overly specific: furthermore, there seems to be something missing, for the connection between being a poor marital counsellor and going through a divorce is not yet explicit enough.

The tabloid is manifestly trying to make fun of Ashton Kutcher by exposing the irony arising out of a mismatch between his status as someone who has been asked by a magazine

¹⁰ The article can be found online at <http://www.20min.ch/ro/entertainment/people/story/10899919>, last accessed 27.03.2015.

to give love advice (which should say something about his credibility as a marital counsellor) and his personal life (in terms of marital situation) which indicates an inability to maintain a marriage. The tabloid can therefore be taken to communicate (and defend) that Kutcher's personal circumstances are an obstacle to his credibility. To reflect this idea, I suggest that the standpoint in (7) should be reformulated in the following way:

(11) Ashton Kutcher is a poor marital counsellor.

The support for (11) given in the headline hints at Kutcher's own unsuccessful marriage through the mention of Demi Moore's action in view of divorcing; the argumentative pivot here rests on the connection between getting a divorce and being a credible marital counsellor. The explicit premise in (9) could thus be rephrased as follows, granted we assume that in our culture divorce is a symptom of an unsuccessful marriage:

(12) Ashton Kutcher's marriage is not successful.

The missing (major) premise should thus be something that connects (11) and (12) in a relevant way. Quite a few parameters render the search for the missing premise arduous, since theoretically speaking, and regardless of the context, many candidates are in principle possible. (11) and (12) could both be taken to be either the antecedent or the consequent of the conditional premise we are looking for, which already yields two options. The presence of negation, drawn from the fact that we are considering an unsuccessful marriage, might further complicate things, for a positive or negative formulation may multiply candidates. Moreover, the degree of generalization to be expected in the premise is unspecified: should it be about Ashton Kutcher, or about the larger set of people with unsuccessful marriages? And finally, some *topoi* (e.g., (21), (22), and (23)) might be considered as well, to the extent that they seem to straightforwardly relate to the issue under discussion in the article. Below is a list of propositions that could act as a potential major premise:¹¹

- (13) If AK is a poor marital counsellor, then (it would be expected that) AK's marriage is not successful.
- (14) If AK is a credible marital counsellor, then (it would be expected that) AK's marriage is successful.
- (15) If AK's marriage is successful, then AK is a credible marital counsellor.
- (16) If AK's marriage is not successful, then AK is a poor marital counsellor.
- (17) If X is a poor marital counsellor, then X's marriage is not successful.
- (18) If X is a credible marital counsellor, then X's marriage is successful.
- (19) If X's marriage is successful, then (it would be expected that) X is a credible marital counsellor.
- (20) If X's marriage is not successful, then (it would be expected that) X is a poor counsellor.
- (21) Happily married people give good love advice.
- (22) If you preach what you practice, you advice is credible.
- (23) Don't preach what you don't practice.

¹¹ I am not saying that all of these are equally plausible, but merely envisaging theoretical possibilities to show how problematic the identification of implicit premises can turn out to be. Items numbered (13) to (23) below represent a subset of the set of all possible implicit premises an analyst might come up with and do not consequently constitute an exhaustive closed list.

In light of all these possibilities, a crucial question arises, since some possibilities would make the argument formally fallacious, while some others would not: how do we determine whether the journalist is guilty of providing a formally fallacious inference? Consider the contrast between (15)/(19) on the one hand and (16)/(20) on the other – respectively represented in (24) and (25) below:

(24) If AK's/X's marriage is successful, then AK/X is a credible marital counsellor [(15)/(19)]
 AK's/X's marriage is not successful [(12)]
 Therefore, AK/X is not a credible marital counsellor [(11)]

(25) If AK's/X's marriage is not successful, then AK/X is a poor marital counsellor [(16)/(20)]
 AK's/X's marriage is not successful [(12)]
 Therefore, AK/X is not a credible marital counsellor [(11)]

(24) is an instance of denying the antecedent, while (25) is a canonical instance of the *modus ponens*. The example discussed here is interesting precisely because our choice of unexpressed premise in the argumentative reconstruction will itself determine our evaluation of the argument in terms of (non)fallaciousness.

I claim that the conditions of relevance discussed earlier can help with the argumentative reconstruction of unexpressed premises and thus prevent us from misattributing the responsibility of a fallacy to the speaker. This means that in order to have a plausible and complete interpretation of the journalist's intended argument, we need to assess which of all possible options seems to be the optimal one in terms of processing effort and cognitive effect. For reasons of space and because I see them as representative of the type of problems an analyst might encounter in the reconstruction of arguments, I will only compare assumptions (19) and (20).¹²

From the perspective of cognitive effect, (19) and (20) could be considered to be rather equivalent: there is *a priori* no reason to assume that the two sides of the story (i.e. a successful marriage boosting the credibility of a person in terms of love counselling, or an unsuccessful marriage weakening their credibility in the same domain) yield any significant difference in terms of the consequences of adding either of the two representations to an individual's cognitive environment. Both (19) and (20) are about the connection between marital success and love counselling credibility. Knowing that if someone's marriage is unsuccessful, it usually means that they are not credible love counsellors seems *prima facie* to be equivalent to knowing that if someone's marriage is successful, it also usually means that they can be credible love counsellors. It is quite hard to imagine that one would yield more cognitive benefits than the other. Furthermore, if we recall Geis & Zwicky's (1971) work on *invited inferences* and conditional perfection, it appears that many times conditional statements are interpreted as triggering a biconditional reading, where 'if P, then Q' is interpreted as also meaning 'if \neg P, then \neg Q'.¹³ Following this line of research, it would appear that (19) is also interpreted as (20), which is another argument in support of the claim that from the perspective of cognitive effect, (19) and (20) do not significantly differ: if (19) is uttered, (20) will also be very likely to be inferred and vice-versa. It

¹² Though in principle all assumptions mentioned from (13) to (23) could be equally assessed with the tools drawn from RT.

¹³ Geis & Zwicky's original example, 'If you mow the lawn, I will give you 5\$' is pretty straightforward, and it is not difficult to imagine that the addressees of that utterance will also infer that if they do not mow the lawn, they will not get 5\$.

therefore seems that the extent condition related to cognitive effect does not play a role in our example.

Now what about processing effort? Is (19) easier to process than (20)? The piece of information explicitly provided in (9) tells us that Demi Moore just filed for divorce, and represents a strong indication of Ashton Kutcher's unsuccessful marriage [(12)]. We can argue that assumptions that are consonant with (12), which is already present in the cognitive environment of the reader of the news article, will be easier to process than assumptions that are not, in particular assertions about the opposite state of affairs. So, given that the reader is already entertaining (12), we can hypothesize that (20) will be easier to process than (19), since (20) is precisely about *unsuccessful* marriages, while (19) is about successful marriages. We could in fact hypothesize that (9) primes (20) but not (19), and that as a consequence (20) is easier to process than (19). Another way of looking at this is to assume that within a cognitive environment, incoming information that contradicts some assumptions that are already present and active in the cognitive environment require more processing effort because some adjustment needs to be made to accommodate the contradiction. This is not the case with information that is not contradictory or problematic – i.e. this is not likely to happen with (20).

Summing up, processing effort is lower for (20) than for (19), while cognitive effect is equivalent for both. The optimally relevant candidate for the unexpressed premise is thus (20). Assuming that the human cognitive system, in communication, is geared towards the production and the identification of optimally relevant representations, we can conclude that the intended unexpressed premise, i.e. the one the journalist/arguer is committed to, is (20). Subsequently, the argumentative inference presented in the title and headline of the article can be evaluated as formally and deductively valid, for it turns out to be a *modus ponens*. The reconstruction of the argument thus looks as follows:

- (26) If X's marriage is not successful, then X is not a credible marital counsellor
AK's marriage is not successful
Therefore, AK is not a credible marital counsellor

One clarification is in order as to the psychological reality of this intricate reconstruction. While this type of analysis lays down a step-by-step procedure which justifies reconstruction by resorting to well-defined comparative cognitive criteria, I do not claim that this procedure, in particular its comparative dimension, corresponds to what went on in the journalist's mind as he wrote his article. The comprehension procedure is said to follow this effort/effect dynamics, but this does not necessitate a comparative assessment, as, at least in theory, the addressee is supposed to get to the most relevant one right away. However, we can *a posteriori* model this procedure to explain why (20) is the most contextually relevant premise, and thus the one both the journalist and the reader are likely to have gone for.

6. Conclusion

The main assumption the framework for argumentative analysis presented here builds upon is that analysts are competent language users and that as such they are legitimated to rely on their own comprehension mechanisms, although perhaps only reflectively. In other words, analysts are just like addressees: they understand verbal stimuli with the same cognitive mechanisms, with the difference that they have more time and processing resources. They can spend as much time as they want in figuring out and precisely assessing what speakers

mean, they can make some inquiries about context to have a better grasp of the communicative situation, and they have the material possibility of comparing competing candidates to identify unexpressed premises.

While I do not challenge the idea that argumentative evaluation ultimately has to rely on normative criteria, I have tried to show that prior to evaluation, argumentative reconstructions could be carried out on the assumption that it is possible to work out plausible interpretations of the argumentative data, even in cases involving unexpressed premises.

The type of analysis performed here involves an assessment of the relative weight of two cognitive parameters regulating verbal information processing, namely processing effort and cognitive effect. While it is probably impossible (and it would make little sense anyway) to determine in absolute terms whether a given piece of information is easy to process or able to trigger significant cognitive effects, a *comparative* assessment can be performed, which enthymemes afford due to their inherent incomplete form. Within such a cognitive pragmatic framework, the reconstruction of unexpressed premises will become more likely to correspond to the actual argumentative data. The methodology described here, which builds on cognitive modelling of spontaneous information processing mechanisms, can therefore benefit from psychologically-grounded assumptions.

References

- Anscombe, J.-C. (2002). Mais/pourtant dans la contre-argumentation directe: raisonnement, généricité, et lexique. *LINX*, 46, 115-131.
- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Becker, T. (2012). The pragmatics of argumentation. Commitment to implicit premises. In A. Schalley (Ed.), *Practical theories and empirical practice: a linguistic perspective* (pp. 257-272). Amsterdam, Benjamins.
- Boulat, K. (2014). Are you committed? A pragmatic model of commitment. Paper delivered at The 8th Days of Swiss Linguistics, 19-21 June 2014, Zurich. Available at <http://www.linguistics-phd.uzh.ch/zling/index.html?page=archive>.
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances. The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dendale, P. & Coltier, D. (Eds.). (2011). *La prise en charge énonciative: études théoriques et empiriques*. Paris, Bruxelles: De Boeck, Duculot.
- Eemeren, F.H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (1992). *Argumentation, communication, and fallacies: A pragma-dialectical perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eemeren, F.H. van & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geis, M. & Zwicky, A. (1971). On invited inferences. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 2, 561-566.
- Gerritsen, S. (2001). Unexpressed premises. In F. H. van Eemeren (Ed.), *Crucial Concepts in Argumentation Theory* (pp. 51-79). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Grice, H.P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hamblin, C. (1970). *Fallacies*. London: Methuen.
- Henst, J.-B- van der & Sperber, D. (2004). Testing the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance. In I. Noveck & D. Sperber (Eds.), *Experimental Pragmatics* (pp. 141-171). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Katriel, T. & Dascal, M. (1989). Speaker's commitment and involvement in discourse. In Y. Tobin (Ed.), *From Sign to Text: A Semiotic View of Communication* (pp. 275-295). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- Lewiński, M. (2012). The paradox of charity. *Informal Logic*, 32(4), 403-439.
- Lewiński, M. & Oswald, S. (2013). When and how do we deal with straw men? A normative and cognitive pragmatic account. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 59B, 164-177.
- Mercier, H. & Sperber, D. (2009). Intuitive and reflective inferences. In J. S. B. T. Evans & K. Frankish (Eds.), *In Two Minds* (pp. 149-170). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morency, P., Oswald, S. & Saussure, L. de. (2008). Explicitness, implicitness and commitment attribution: a cognitive pragmatic account. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, 22, 197-219.
- Nølke, H. Fløttum, K. & Norén, C. (2004). *ScaPoLine. La théorie scandinave de la polyphonie linguistique*. Paris: Kimé.
- Oswald, S. & Lewiński, M. (2014). Pragmatics, cognitive heuristics and the straw man fallacy. In T. Herman & S. Oswald (Eds.), *Rhétorique et cognition: perspectives théoriques et stratégies persuasives / Rhetoric & Cognition: theoretical perspectives and persuasive strategies* (pp. 313-343). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Pagliari, F. (2007). No more charity, please! Enthymematic parsimony and the pitfall of benevolence. In H.V. Hansen et. al. (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground, CD-ROM* (pp. 1-26). Windsor, ON: OSSA.
- Pagliari, F. (2010). Committed to argue: On the cognitive roots of dialogical commitments. In C. Reed, C. Tindale (Eds.), *Dialectics, Dialogue and Argumentation: An Examination of Douglas Walton's Theories of Reasoning and Argument* (pp. 59-71). London: College Publications.
- Pagliari, F. & Woods, J. (2011). Enthymematic parsimony. *Synthese*, 178, 461-501.
- Saussure, L. de (2005). Pragmatique procédurale et discours. *Revue de sémantique et de pragmatique*, 17, 101-125.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Snoeck Henkemans, A. F. (1992). *Analysing complex argumentation: The reconstruction of multiple and coordinatively compound argumentation in a critical discussion*. Amsterdam: SicSat.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, (2nd ed). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Tindale, C. (1992). Audiences, relevance, and cognitive environments. *Argumentation*, 6(2), 177-188.
- Walton, D. (1993). Commitment, Types of Dialogue, and Fallacies. *Informal Logic*, 14(2&3), 93-103.
- Walton, D. & Krabbe, E. (1995). *Commitment in dialogue. Basic Concepts of Interpersonal Reasoning*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Walton, D., & Reed, C. (2005). Argument Schemes and Enthymemes. *Synthese*, 145, 339-370.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2002). Relevance theory. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 14, 249-287.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2012) *Meaning and relevance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woods, J. (1992). Apocalyptic relevance. *Argumentation*, 6(2), 189-202.