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A Dialogue-Theoretical Approach to Multimodal Arguments

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ABSTRACT: According to a dialogue-theoretical (“hyper-dialectical”) approach to argumentation, a single argument is seen as conveying a dialogical “Why? Because!” sequence. Can we see multimodal arguments as such dialogical sequences? This paper focuses on multimodal arguments with a predominantly visual character and shows that dialogues are helpful for identifying and reconstructing arguments in multimodal communication.

KEYWORDS: challenge, dialogue game, hyper-dialectical concept of argument, multimodal argument, visual explication

1. INTRODUCTION

Multimodal argumentation practices have been studied from a variety of approaches. Dialogue-theoretical, also known as dialectical, approaches are represented by those who use the analytical and evaluative tools of the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (Groarke, 2002; Tseronis, 2018). In this theory, argumentation is seen as a speech act complex that involves reasons that aim at justifying a standpoint towards a critical antagonist (van Eemeren, 2010, pp. 27-29). In this paper, I want to explore the consequences of adopting such a, what Finocchiaro calls, “hyper-dialectical” conception of argument (2006), where even a single argument is seen as providing a response to a form of criticism. Specifically, I will think of a single argument as interpersonal reasoning produced in a dialogical “Why? Because!” sequence, as is common in studies of formal dialectics (Hamblin, 1970, pp. 265-267; cf. Krabbe & Walton, 2011). How can these why- because sequences help us to identify, analyse and evaluate multimodal argumentation? In this paper, I focus on multimodal arguments with a predominantly visual character, and limit myself to identifying and reconstructing a few sample arguments. Questions of evaluation will be left for another occasion. First, in section 2, I outline the dialectical idea of argument as dialogue. Second, in section 3, I discuss the modifications necessary to make this concept of argument applicable to multimodal communication. Third, in section 4, I use my findings for responding to the challenging claim by Champagne and Pietarinen (2020) that images cannot be arguments, unless the images are moving. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. ARGUMENT AS DIALOGUE

Consider John's argument: "You should do this, Mary, because it will help you to realize that goal of yours!", where John and Mary are assumed to know what action and goal are at issue. Any such argument of the form <R, therefore T> can be regarded as reasoning expressed with the presumed aim of convincing an addressee of the acceptability of conclusion <T> by offering them reason <R> (cf. van Eemeren, 2010; cf. Walton, 1990; Krabbe & van Laar, 2007). We can specify this definition with reference to a basic dialogue sequence, that I call a "why-because sequence", so that each instance of expressed reasoning with this presumed goal is understood as a way of presenting such a sequence. Figure 1 gives the general structure, where "i" (et cetera) stands for the ith move in the dialogue, where "Proponent" (et cetera) stands for an agent (often a person) with a particular role in the dialogue, where "R" (et cetera) stands for a proposition (i.e. a content that can be evaluated as acceptable, correct or true, or not), where "Thesis" (et cetera) stands for a particular illocutionary force, and where "<...>" stands for a particular communicative mode for expressing a proposition with an illocutionary force.

- i. Proponent: <Thesis T>
- i+1. Opponent: <Why T? How about S?>
- i+2. Proponent: <Because R>

Fig. 1 The why-because sequence

In any single argument, thus conceived, reasoning is communicated by the proponent to respond to, and to defuse, the opponent's critical challenge to the reasoning's conclusion. Complex argumentation can be understood as conveying more extended dialogue sequences. For example, when at i+3 the opponent challenges <R> and the proponent supports it at i+4 with <Q>, the proponent's global argument at that point has become a two- step subordinate argument <Q, therefore R. R, therefore T> (see Snoeck Henkemans, 2003, for a dialogical analysis of other such argumentative relations).

In an argument, the logical relation between R and T has a specific function, namely to make the addressed opponent understand and accept that R, possibly after having been supplemented with additional reasons, provides sufficient ground for abandoning their initial stance of critical doubt and conceding T.

Following a tradition in formal dialectics, the sequence can be understood as part of a conversational game played by the proponent and the opponent, who reason together towards a resolution of an underlying disagreement about T's acceptability (Krabbe & Walton, 2011). The proponent's goal is to convince the opponent of T by providing reasons that should persuade the opponent, and each argument is presented as instrumental to this end. The opponent's aim is to critically examine T and the reasons given in support of it. The proponent "wins" if the opponent concedes T, while the opponent "wins" if the proponent withdraws their attempts to persuade the opponent rationally. It is through a limited and norm-governed competition that the participants cooperate and manifest all relevant considerations in order to approximate a solution based on the merits of the case (cf. van Eemeren, 2010). As a result, every single argument has the internal tripartite dialogue structure.

Each of the three moves has three components in turn: an illocutionary force, a propositional content and a form of expression. Note that the speech act of raising critical doubt (Why ...?) may or may not be accompanied by a consideration underlying (that is: motivating or justifying) the challenge (What about ...?). Any move involves a form of expression, using one or a mixture of semiotic meaning-making resources, such as writing, gestures, facial movements, speech, sound and more (see: Bateman, 2018).

Such argumentative mini-games can be played in two ways. In an “exchange,” each person adopts a role and they take turns consisting of a single move, as in Example 1.

John: “You should do this.”

Mary: “Why should I? What’s in it for me?”

John: “Because, it helps you to realize that goal of yours!”

Example 1a

Instead, it can be played in an “address” (such as a speech or an argumentative text) where one person takes primary responsibility for the role of the proponent and anticipates moves from the opponent, as in Example 1b.

John: “Mary, you should do this, because it helps you to realize that goal of yours!”

Example 1

A verbal address with a flavour of verbal exchange is where the author gives voice to opponent, as in Example 1c.

John: “You should do this. Why? Well, because it helps you to realize that goal of yours!”

Example 1c

Any argumentative monologue forms, as it were, a hypertext, in which a competent addressee can activate its elements and access the underlying move in the dialogue sequence.

Since an argumentative exchange revolves around the exchange of propositions, one might wonder whether the dialogue game can be seen as independent of any mode. Popa points to the distinction between a communicative act and a visual device that records or reproduces that communicative act, and contends that it is the communicative act that really matters (Popa, 2016). Similarly, we could specify that the illocutionary force and the propositional content constitute the relevant dialogue move, but that any way of expressing that move, for example by using verbal or visual resources, is not part of the move itself. An argumentative discussion, Popa contends, is “mode-neutral,” and to think otherwise is making the category mistake of confusing content and means of expression.

But according to the current hyper-dialectical framework, argument is conceptualised as the expression of reasoning with a particular function. There is no communicative act of advancing a thesis or a reason if the content and the illocution are not made manifest to the addressee in one way or another. Dialogical moves are not “mode-neutral”, though they can and must be seen as *mode-fluid*.

Seeing argumentative dialogue as mode-fluid rather than as mode-free has the advantage of including asking for, and giving clarifications, as part and parcel of

argumentative dialogue, rather than as necessarily prompting a meta-dialogue. Mary may find John's argument vague, ambiguous, general or otherwise insufficiently clear, and ask for clarification. It is quite natural for her to say: "Please clarify your argument. What do you mean with "my aim"?" rather than saying something more artificial like: "Please clarify the way you have expressed your argument." Including the mode of expression as part of an argument is in agreement with how the concept of argument is understood in ordinary language.¹

The argumentative game is about mutual evaluation. At each stage, the opponent evaluates whether there are sufficient grounds for withdrawing their critical doubt and conceding the proponent's thesis, whereas the proponent keeps evaluating whether the opponent's doubt has been shown to be inconsistent or otherwise untenable given her position and propositional commitments. As a result, any argument by the proponent conveys the message that the argument's premises provide serious and persuasive grounds for the opponent to give way to the proponent's thesis, if not here and now, then after hearing the responses to any further critical challenges. This claim of reasonableness (cf. on the presumption of reasonableness: van Eemeren, 2010, p. 199) can be seen as having two parts: the claim that the premises help to convince the opponent, and the claim that the attempt at persuasion is reasonable by following the rules of the argumentative game. The latter part includes, for example, the claim that the means of persuasion do not trick or pressure the opponent into accepting the thesis, but that they invite the opponent to reflect and decide on the issue themselves.

The (hyper) dialectical account of argument provides an understanding of the role of the relation of illation that is different from the one adopted in the article on visual arguments by Champagne and Pietarinen (2020). According to their viewpoint, the premises in an argument "generate" the conclusion (p. 208) and are meant to preserve the truth of the premises while "moving" to the conclusion (p. 209). The conclusion is, then, said to "follow from" the premises. Whereas their approach seems spirited by the idea that an argument is a form of movement, the hyper-dialectical approach is animated by the idea that an argument is a form of conversation. In section 2 and 3, it will become clear that this leads the authors to impose an unnecessary restriction on visual arguments.

In short, any real communicative act, or the product of such an act, counts as an argument only if: (1) the author communicates it as containing a response to a challenge, either an existing one or one expected of the addressees; (2) the author claims, typically implicitly, that the argument conforms to the normative constraints of the argumentative conversational game, where a dialectical division of labour serves epistemic collaboration.

2. MULTIMODAL ARGUMENT AS DIALOGUE GAME

Let's consider a non-verbal exchange between John and Mary. John points disapprovingly at a restaurant as they pass it. Mary looks back with questioning eyes. John shows his disgust with a facial expression and Mary now returns the look with a puzzled expression.

¹ Such clarification dialogues at the object level (rather than meta level) of dialogue, can be seen as extending a why-because sequence, also when the target of a request for clarification is not (exclusively) verbal, or when the provided clarification is not expressed (exclusively) verbally: i+2. Proponent: <Because R>; i+3. Opponent: <Clarify <R>>; i+4. Proponent: <Because R*>, with <R*> being an attempt at clarifying <R>.

John then mimics a stomach ache. This exchange could well be seen as a why-because sequence, extended by a clarification exchange:

John: <You should not go to that restaurant>.

Mary: <Why shouldn't I? What's wrong with it?>

John: <It's disgusting>.

Mary: <What exactly do you mean by <it's disgusting>? Is it the quality of the food, or something else?>

John: <It's disgusting in the sense that the food is so bad that you risk getting an upset stomach>.

Example 2. Disgusting

The logical relationship is made manifest by the sequence of the moves and by the need to arrive at an interpretation that is charitable by accounting for their coherence (cf. Asher & Lascarides 2003). In example 2, it is a critical doubt expressed in a non-verbal way, that points to the proponent's communication as advancing a premise and a conclusion used in an argumentative way.

Some cases of reasoning resemble the examples, but without producing what I would call an argument. For example, if John wants to persuade Mary of the good quality of the wine by letting Mary taste it, then the activity of tasting or the taste itself does not constitute an argument. The reason is that tasting, or taste, is not an ostensive, communicative act. However, John's pointing to Ismar, who is visibly enjoying a sip of his wine, is a communicative act, and if the quality of the wine is at issue, pointing to Ismar's enjoyment of the wine can function as part of John's argument. If Mary were to taste the wine herself and puts on a face of enjoyment, she can be seen as admitting that the wine tastes good, which commitment can then be used in John's argument: "I said so!" (pace. Groarke, 2015, pp. 136-7).

In addition to multimodal exchanges, there are also multimodal addresses. Suppose someone leaves a message on their boss's answering machine: "I can't help you today because I have a really bad cold." And then they make an auditory argument with the ostensible blowing of their nose. The nose blowing then expresses a proposition such as "I am showing signs of having a cold", which can indeed be plausibly evaluated as acceptable and supportive of having a cold. In this example, no one has made a challenge, but the proponent anticipates the challenge that is salient in the context, if only the boss can be expected to be suspicious (cf. Kišiček, 2020).

I now turn to arguments that are primarily expressed through images. In many cases, the challenge is only apparent in context. When elections are coming up, people want to know why they should vote for this party rather than for that one. This makes it more plausible to reconstruct, for example, election posters as expressing an argument and responding to such critical challenges.

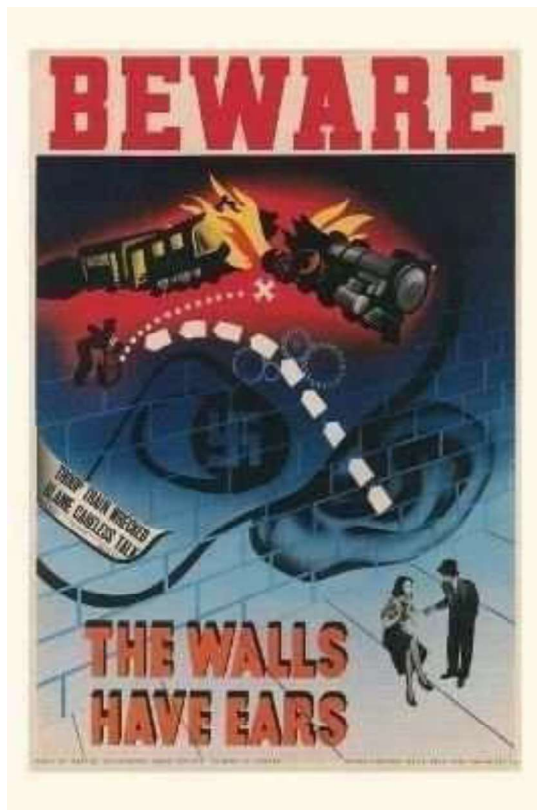
There are also examples where the critical challenge from the opponent is visually depicted. The example in Figure 3 was discussed in an oral presentation by Tseronis and Bateman.



Example 3. "Don't Drive Drunk" (adsoftheworld no date)

From my perspective, it can be seen as expressing three considerations, which are separated thematically and partly also by the use of different semiotic means. First, in the lower right-hand corner is the text "don't drive drunk foundation". Secondly, there is an image of a car that appears to be a bullet leaving the person's head. These two elements work together to highlight the dark side of drinking. The third element, however, is a person visibly enjoying a glass of champagne, highlighting the light side of drinking. What is this contrasting element doing here? If argument is a why-because sequence, and if we take into account that a public campaign by a foundation of this kind can be expected to be persuasive, then our preference for finding a coherent interpretation of the whole communicative act triggers a reading in which the pleasure of drinking functions as a critical challenge to the thesis that one should not drink and drive: "Why not? Drinking is such a pleasure!" The bullet car part provides the reasoned answer to this challenge: "Because it is far too dangerous". Thus, the poster is quite plausibly an example of a multimodal address in which the opponent's challenge has been depicted in a quite explicit way.

Figure 4 shows a similar example. The poster warns against passing on information that could be used by the enemy. Again, one wonders what this elegant woman and gentleman are doing in this picture. Clearly, they are sharing information that could prove sensitive. But why is their conversation depicted in such an attractive way? Because, we might say, it presents a challenge: "Why shouldn't we share information? It is so pleasant to chat with this charming person!" The answer provides the reason, and is something like: "Because it might help the enemy to crash our troop trains".



Example 4. "The walls have ears" (Zeman, 1978, p. 56)

So far I have taken for granted that images can express propositional content in a fairly explicit way, and that the concept of arguments as a why-because sequence is sufficient to reconstruct the argument from the images under consideration. The fact that an image has such "visual explicatures" (Forceville, 2020, pp. 89-90) means that only minimal inferential work needs to be done by a competent interpreter in order to arrive at the communicated content, but also that it is comparatively implausible for the author of the message to withdraw their commitment to the acceptability of the propositions in question. Unlike linguistically packaged messages, the directness and relative conclusiveness of these visual explicatures cannot be accounted for by reference to grammatical and lexical code. Forceville (2020, p. 78) suggests that we should acknowledge the importance of the kinds of codes provided by cultural and social conventions: we use these to identify the message manifested in an image in a relatively direct and unambiguous way. Can this suggestion be reconciled with the common observation that visually expressed messages are typically less clear in meaning than those expressed verbally?

Indeed, the interpretation of multimodal arguments presents additional challenges. The absence of linguistic codes often seems to be only partially compensated by the presence of non-linguistic, possibly less stable codes. This shakiness is also present in our examples, such as Example 3. Exactly what reason is expressed in the drink-and-drive argument? There are several possibilities. In my reconstruction, I point to the reason that drinking and driving is far too dangerous. But there are other options, such as that drinking and driving is as deadly as guns, or that drinking and driving is tantamount to suicide. However, the "depth of intended meaning" (Naess, 1966, p. 38) may not have been very

deep, and it may be that the author is simply trying to express some general idea that is best covered by a disjunction of these and similar such options, leaving it up to the viewer how to elaborate on this message. The statement at such a low level of precision may be sufficient for the argument to give the addressee a good reason, especially if there is not much critical scrutiny to be expected from the addressee as regards the various ways to specify the reason.

The distinction between multimodal explicatures and implicatures will be difficult to make, and in many cases it will be useful to regard it as a matter of degree, depending on the ease and plausibility with which the author can cancel, dismiss or deny a message attributed to him by the addressee (cf. de Oliveira Fernandes & Oswald, 2022). Some examples of visual implicatures are likely to be unproblematic from an argumentative point of view. In example 4, it is taken for granted, and thus implicitly conveyed, that the enemy will be able to sabotage trains if they obtain the appropriate information. This proposition is likely to be uncontroversial in the context of use, and thus argumentatively unproblematic.

In addition to innocuous visual implicatures, there are risky or deceptive ones, because the proposition at hand may be controversial and by leaving it implicit, the addressee can be manipulated and deceived (see: Forceville, 2020, Chapter 10). Medina (2018, p. 56) examines the grim case of racist propaganda through photographs of lynchings in the early twentieth century. Starting from the idea that "communicative mechanisms (...) operate in both linguistic and visual communication in analogous but distinctive ways", Medina (2018, pp. 61-63) applies the linguistic distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content to the photographs. For example, by showing smiling white families in white clothes in the background of a photograph of a man who has been lynched, the message is presupposed that lynching black people is a respectable practice. Medina also discusses how this visual propaganda has been resisted, thereby suggesting ways to deal with this kind of propaganda within argumentative dialogue. In a similar vein, we can consider how we can profit from existing insights into the language-dependent fallacies, as developed in the history of logic and argumentation, when dealing with the deceptive and fallacious exploitation of implicit meaning in multimodal argumentation.

3. CHAMPAGNE AND PIETARINEN ON VISUAL ARGUMENT

Champagne and Pietarinen have claimed that images cannot be arguments, unless the images are moving ones. I will discuss their position and justification, and use the approach developed in the previous section to make a critical comment. This is how I reconstruct and reformulate their position:

1. When an image is an argument, the conclusion of the argument is either depicted or implied.
2. If the conclusion is depicted, it must be separated from the visual premises in a principled way. Otherwise, it's question-begging.
3. If the conclusion is implied, it must follow from the visual premises in a demonstrable and predictable way. Otherwise, our argumentative reading is a mere interpretation.

4. These requirements of (my terms:) *Separation* and *Following* can only be met by moving images.

5. Therefore, only moving images can be arguments.

I have called the requirement that the conclusion of a visual argument must be separable from the premises "Separation", and the requirement that the conclusion must follow in a demonstrable and predictable way "Following". Also when the conclusion is depicted, the logical relation must be manifest, and so it would only be natural if Following also applies in that case. Similarly, when the conclusion is implied, there must be a separation between premises and conclusion.

It is not so easy to understand what they mean by "moving image". My reading of the term is that it refers to a spatial sequence of images or parts of an image that indicate one or more steps in a line of reasoning. As they understand reasoning in terms of moving through space, it is plausible to qualify such images as moving ones. They give two kinds of examples of such moving images. The first is an example of Peircean diagrammatic reasoning, which can be thought of as a visual proof: from visually expressed premises one derives a conclusion by step-by-step application of a predetermined set of rules for manipulating the images. A visual assertion and what is derived from it are *separated* by a blank line. Because the derivation takes place within a system defined by the rules for image manipulation, the logical relationship between premises and conclusion is manifest to the critical eye *following* the steps. The example shows that moving images in this sense satisfy Separation and Following. Also from a hyper-dialectical approach, the example can be seen as an argument, although it requires a setting in which someone uses the visually expressed premises and the rules of derivation to step-wise show an initially critical addressee that their acceptance of these premises is not consistent with their critical attitude towards the visually expressed conclusion.

The other examples are of a different kind. Take the example of Wegener's map, which shows how neatly two continental plates fit together. Wegener used this map to support his theory of continental drift. This image can indeed be seen as a depiction of movement. But it is not the kind of logical movement when going from the premises to the conclusion of an argument, but a movement in geological time between continental plates. If you look at the map, you can, as it were, see the continental plates drifting apart, which corresponds to Wegener's conclusion. Wegener's reason for this is not the movement of the continents in time (that would be a circular argument), but the fact that the continents fit together so neatly, and the assumption that this can only be explained by the theory that they were once one. In my dialectical reading, the image satisfies Separation because of the thematic difference between moving plates and the fit between coastlines and geological features. It plausibly also satisfies Following, because at the end of the 1920's, Wegener's theory was highly controversial,² so that the challenge to his theory was salient in context.

But that moving images can be arguments does not show that *only* moving images can be arguments. As we have seen in Sections 2 and 3, the dialectical tradition locates argumentative reasoning in a dialogical context, and this allows us to identify multimodal

² It was also controversial amongst his colleagues, also due to Wegener's false idea that the continents could drift by being composed of less-dense granitic rock, drifting on a 'sea' of more-dense basaltic rock.

arguments, not on the basis of a form of movement, but on the basis of the representation of conversational moves.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown how a dialogue-theoretical account of argument can be helpful in delineating the concept of multimodal argumentation and in identifying and analysing multimodal arguments. To do justice to these ambitions, dialogue theory needs to shed its language-oriented terminology and become more explicitly mode-fluid.

Similar to the approach proposed by Champagne and Pietarinen, a hyper-dialectical approach places the concept of reasoning at the centre. The requirement of Separation, which requires a justified distinction between the premises and the conclusion in any multimodal argument, is thereby important and can be adopted without further ado. The requirement of Following points to the function that reasoning should fulfil in order for multimodal communication to qualify as expressing an argument. A hyper-dialectical account can accept this requirement in a modified form, requiring instead that the premises respond to a critical challenge or objection to the conclusion. We can therefore call this the requirement of *Responsiveness*.

A next step will be to examine whether and how the norms of argumentative dialogue are helpful in evaluating multimodal arguments, especially when it comes to distinguishing between licit and fallacious ways of implicitly conveying argumentative content.

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