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Argumentation Illuminated

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How Counter-argumentation Works

Gustavo Quiroz, Denis Apothéloz and Pierre-Yves Brandt

1. PREVIOUS DEFINITIONS¹

The great majority of the studies of argumentation center exclusively on justificatory aspects of persuasive discourse, and seldom give more than marginal attention to negative argumentation. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1983) have sought to account for this by referring to certain philosophical and epistemological a priori theses, an attitude which they have called "justificationism". The exclusion of negative aspects is probably also a result of the preference generally given to a monological rather than dialogical approach to argumentation. In any case, it must be recognized that argumentative behavior is always motivated to a certain extent by the anticipation of a disagreement or an objection, and that consequently, whether it be monological or dialogical, it is intrinsically polemical.

In polemical dialogues, regardless of whether the interlocutors maintain their positions or one or the other attempts to minimize the differences, what they say will inevitably involve positive and negative elements of argumentation, i.e. attempts at justification on one side and attempts at rejection on the other. We call the first form *positive argumentation*, since it is oriented in favor of its conclusion, and the second form of argumentation, the one that refutes, *negative argumentation*, since it is oriented against the conclusion of a previous argumentation.

With Grize (1971:3), we define argumentation as "the whole set of discursive strategies of a speaker A who addresses a hearer B in order to alter, in a certain way, the judgment of B about a situation S". This functional definition suggests that a discourse will be said to be argumentative only on the condition that it includes certain statements (reasons) which will be used to argue in support of other statements (conclusions) in order to get them accepted. A discursive sequence made up of a conclusion and of one or several reasons presented in favor of this conclusion will be called an *argument*. The movement that goes from the reason to the conclusion may be described as the transfer of an epistemic modality of the reason onto the conclusion (Quiroz 1989).

The person giving an argument attributes a certain *argumentative orientation* (Anscombe and Ducrot 1983) to his reasons; these are oriented toward the conclusion. When an argumentative discourse is produced against

an argument, we shall call it *anti-oriented* relative to the conclusion of the latter. This negative argumentation makes use of an operation that we have called *argumentative negation*. See Brandt, Quiroz and Apothéloz (1991) for a formalization of this operation.

Another important fact having to do with the dynamic of discussion is that positive argumentation aims at accepting the conclusion, i.e. at concluding, whereas negative argumentation aims at rejecting the conclusion, i.e. at preventing the debate from closing. Thus, positive argumentation tends to close the debate, whereas negative argumentation revives it and stimulates openness.

2. NEGATIVE ARGUMENTATION AND COUNTER-ARGUMENTATION

Every discursive interaction can bring out disagreements, i.e. can create the conditions in which an argumentation can be developed in order to counter a previous argumentation. However, the term 'counter-argumentation' cannot be applied to just any polemical intervention: not every such intervention is argumentative. We shall call *counter-argumentation* this kind of negative argumentation that attacks the reasons that can be or have been formulated in favor of a conclusion, and whose result is the construction of a new argument (a *counter-argument*), anti-oriented to the preceding one.

Remark 1

In reply to an argumentation that defends a given point of view, another argumentation may be produced that defends an alternative point of view. This reply will be a negative argumentation only if it has the intention of altering the addressee's point of view. Consider the dialogue (1)-(1a).

- (1) I love "banana splits", because of the bananas!
 (1a) I don't like "banana splits" because bananas make me sick.

The negation in (1a) is not a refutation. It is not produced to influence the point of view of the speaker that pronounces (1). For this reason it doesn't have any argumentative effect.

Remark 2

An argumentation can be negative even if it doesn't present any negative morpheme, because the reversal of the argumentative orientation doesn't depend on the presence of such a morpheme.

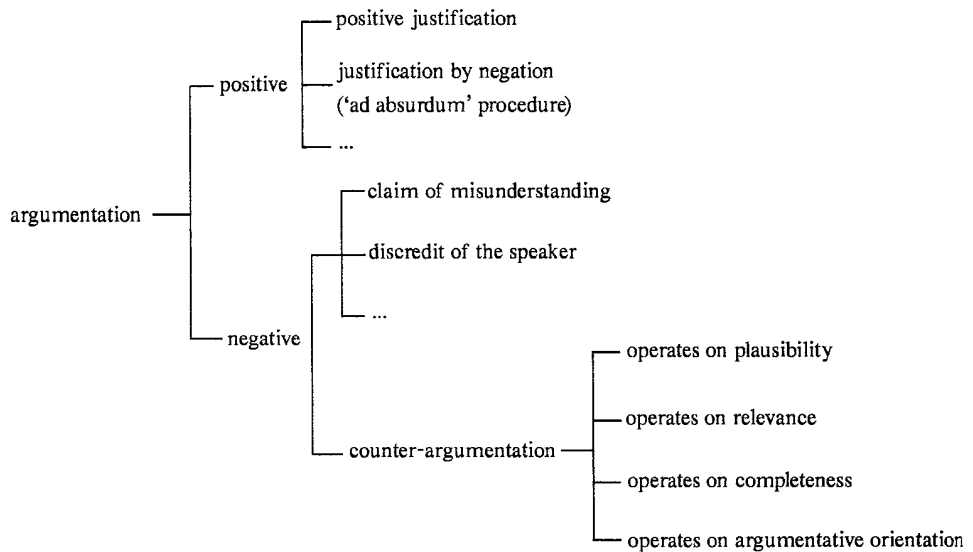
Remark 3

Among the modes of negative argumentation that do not constitute counter-argumentation, we should mention criticism of the author of the argumentation

(*discrediting the speaker*), as in (2a), and the *claim of misunderstanding*, as in (2b)². (Example (2) is taken from van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1983:5)).

- (2) Women have a logic of their own.
- (2a) You don't know anything about that.
- (2b) I certainly don't define logic the same way as you.

Figure 1 summarizes the various forms of negative argumentation.



3. THE FOUR CATEGORIES OF COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

Several authors have proposed a classification of counter-arguments in the sense in which we understand this term here (see for example Fogelin 1982, Moeschler 1982, Oléron 1983, Blair and Johnson 1987). Blair and Johnson distinguish three kinds of objections: (1) a reason may be attacked as unacceptable; the reason-conclusion connection may be attacked (2) either on grounds that one or more of the reasons is irrelevant, or (3) on grounds that the reasons fail to supply sufficient support for the conclusion.

The study of counter-argumentative procedures in polemical dialogues has lead us to single out four main ways of refuting an argument (Apothéloz, Brandt and Quiroz, in press):

- 1) By disputing the *plausibility* of the reason or of one of the reasons used.
- 2) By bringing up a reason that has not yet been used, that is anti-oriented to the conclusion of the rejected argument, and that is presented as being more

decisive than the reason(s) of this argument. This procedure amounts to disputing the *completeness* of the reason(s).

3) By disputing the *relevance* of the reason(s) with respect to the conclusion that is supported.

4) By disputing the *argumentative orientation* that the speaker has attributed to a given reason, and by affirming that this reason is actually oriented toward the opposite conclusion.

Let us consider four paradigmatic examples of these categories of counter-arguments:

Counter-argument concerning the plausibility of the reason

(3) Mary was in a very bad mood.
She didn't smile all evening.

(3a) Mary? She didn't stop laughing.

Counter-argument concerning the completeness of the reason

(4) You should buy the same car as Peter.
It is extremely comfortable.

(4a) It is much too expensive for me.

Counter-argument concerning the relevance of the reason

(5) I am not going to take this exam.
I didn't prepare for all the questions.

(5a) Just because you didn't prepare for all the questions is no reason not to take the exam.

Counter-argument concerning the argumentative orientation of the reason

(6) "A World Apart" is not a very good film.
It doesn't teach us anything new about apartheid.

(6a) That's precisely what makes it good.

Reply (3a) is an objection to the plausibility of the reason "Mary didn't smile all evening". This reply does not dispute the completeness of the reason: it concerns only what has already been said. Nor does it dispute the relevance of the reason: it does not deny that from the absence of Mary's laughter we

may conclude that she is in a bad mood. Nor does it dispute the argumentative orientation attributed by the speaker to the absence of laughter.

Reply (4a) proceeds by introducing new information that is presented as being a more decisive reason than that of the disputed argument. It may be paraphrased as follows. It is true that Peter's car is comfortable (no objection to the plausibility of the reason) and that comfort may be a reason to buy a car (no objection to the relevance and to the argumentative orientation of the reason), but this reason is not sufficient to make one decide on buying: let me point out a fact that is more important to me than comfort, and that you have forgotten to consider, namely the high price of the car (objection to completeness). Since the reason in favor of the disputed conclusion is not rejected, this type of counter-argumentation raises the complex problem of the type of relation that can occur between two reasons that are true and at the same time of opposite argumentative orientation (Brandt 1990), i.e., in this case, comfort and price. The acceptance or refusal of the counter-argument by the speaker of (4) will depend primarily on the weight he attaches to each of these reasons.

Reply (5a) could have been formulated differently, for example: "It doesn't matter that you didn't prepare for all the questions", or "OK, you didn't prepare for all the questions. So what?". These different ways of saying the same thing show that what is at stake here is the relevance of a certain fact (that not all the examination questions were prepared for) relative to a universe of discourse (should the examination be taken or not?). This counter-argument does not dispute the plausibility or the completeness of the reason. Nor does it reverse the argumentative orientation. All that it does is to refuse to grant the status of reason to a certain fact, in which, consequently, no particular orientation is recognized.

Reply (6a), on the other hand, is directly concerned with the argumentative orientation of the reason, and reverses it; it uses the same reason in order to reject the same conclusion. The procedure thus consists in reinterpreting the information contained in the reason, which is why in most cases the latter must in turn be argued. The relevance of the reason is not disputed here; in fact, it is explicitly re-used. The plausibility and completeness of the reason are not disputed here either.

Let us notice that a counter-argument can carry out more than one procedure at a time, e.g. dispute the completeness and the relevance of the reason(s), as in example (7)-(7a), taken from Moeschler (1982:134).

- (7) Anthony is at home.
There is light at his window.
- (7a) You know that Anthony is absent-minded. He may have forgotten to turn off the light before leaving.

This typology proved to be a very efficient instrument in the analysis of actual polemical dialogues and argumentative strategies (cf. Brandt 1990).

NOTES

1. Research for this article was supported by grant no. 1.804-0.88 from the Swiss National Science Foundation.
2. We have argued elsewhere that some kinds of discrediting consist in calling into question a condition of satisfaction of the illocutionary act accomplished by the conclusion, and that an argument the conclusion of which accomplishes a non-assertive illocutionary act can be refuted only by calling into question a condition of satisfaction of this act (Apothéloz, Brandt and Quiroz 1992).

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