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Commentary on: Dima Mohammed's "Rationality of argumentation aimed at multiple goals"

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1. A PENETRATING ACCOUNT OF THE GOAL ISSUE IN ARGUMENTATION STUDIES

First of all, I would like to thank Dima Mohammed for offering us an insightful paper which sets out the distinctions crucial to the elaboration of a framework suitable for the analysis and evaluation of public political arguments.

Dima provides us with a highlighting account of how the question of goals is handled in argumentation studies. The goal issue is crucial, in that an argument, as any piece of communication, can be understood, in the full sense of the word, only with regard to the goals it pursues.

The French sentence "les carottes sont cuites" literally means that "carrots are cooked"; but once you've understood that, you've understood nothing. « Les carottes sont cuites », « carrots are cooked » may be uttered by a mother calling her children to come and eat; it may mean, in French, that an endeavour is devoted to failure and that any hope of success should be abandoned. Moreover, during the Second World War, this very phrase was used as a coded message by London clandestine radio broadcast in France in order to launch actions in the territories that were occupied by Germany. In all three cases, the sentence «carrots are cooked» is not uttered because it is true; the reason for uttering it is intimately linked to actions the launching or the abandonment of which may be considered as its goal.

I also agree with Dima Mohammed when she claims that "political discourse is multi-purposive", as a "result of the multi-dimensional nature of the responsibility of a politician and other times [as] the result of the multi-purposive nature of political institutions or even simply because public political discourse is open to individuals and groups that have different interests and needs as well different commitments and positions." One might add that, most of the times, political public discourse, inasmuch as it is public, addresses heterogeneous mass audiences, and its goals have to be understood according to the sub-audience that is being targeted by each argumentative move.

Besides, I would like to add that, even if it is even more true as for political discourse, most of argumentative discourses, when submitted to an accurate analysis that takes contextual issues into account, may reveal multi-purposive; hence the issue addressed by Dima Mohammed is all the more relevant for argumentation studies.

Furthermore, I appreciated the way Dima clearly exposes and discusses the existing theoretical frames proposed by various scholars in the field of argumentation studies on the issue of goals in argumentation. I found her discussion systematic, open-minded and clear, in that the preferences she expresses are driven by what she considers to be the specific requirements of her object, that is, public political argument. Nevertheless, after having read her paper and thought for a while about it, I realized that I could not directly make use of the model she sketches within my perspective on argumentation. I could certainly use some important pieces of her reflection to feed my own research, but I could not adhere to the whole theoretical construction, for at least two reasons.

2. "THE ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF ARGUMENTATION"

The first reason is that, as I understand it, Dima's focus on the issue of goals in argumentation is connected to her concern with evaluation.

As she puts it in the introduction, her aim is to propose "a framework that is suitable for the analysis and evaluation of public political arguments". On many occasions in her paper, she seems to equate "assessing an argumentation" and "assessing the rationality of an argumentation"; and she claims that such an assessment of the rationality of an argument should necessarily take the goals pursued by argumentation or by the arguers into account. Such a concern with evaluation leads her to discard whole sets of goals (for instance, individual arguers' goals) from her framework as being irrelevant for the assessment of argumentation, and, specifically, for the assessment of public political argument: hence her commitment to the evaluation of argumentation has consequences for the way she conceives of goals. As far as I am concerned, my perspective on argumentation is bluntly descriptive. I don't take evaluation to be incumbent upon me as an analyst of argumentation; hence, some of the constraints imposed on the conception of goals by an evaluative concern may disappear in a descriptive approach to argumentation.

Furthermore, as Dima states in her conclusion, her focus on the evaluation is connected with her aim of improving argumentative practice. She thus proposes that "public political arguments be examined from a perspective in which the internal goals of argumentation are in principle instrumental for the achievement of the political uses of argumentation", and she justifies this proposal as follows: "This, I believe is necessary for an argumentative evaluation of argumentation to benefit the practice of political arguments" – I repeat: "to benefit the practice of political arguments".

My question then is: What does "improving the practice of political argument" mean? How can the analyst, through the analysis and evaluation of argumentation s/he proposes, help the arguers to improve their practice of political argument? Why would these arguers be eager to improve their practice of political argument – if it does not mean to gain in efficiency? (and I presume that, by "improving the practice of political arguments", Dima has both rationality concerns and efficiency concerns in mind).

3. A TOP-DOWN APPROACH

Second, and maybe as a consequence of this normative stance, Dima Mohammed's paper may be characterized as obeying a top-down logic, whereas my approach to argumentation is fundamentally bottom-up.

Of course, the distinction is not that clear-cut: Dima is not data blind – and some of her previous papers show an empirical concern (see for instance Mohammed, 2008). And as far as I'm concerned, I am not theoretically naïve: any relevant analysis rests on a theoretical frame and departs from expectations to be tested. Nevertheless I always feel uncomfortable with pre-established categories of dialogues, of activities, of goals. As François puts it in a somewhat provocative style, "it would be naïve to suppose that one can start by first determining the goal one wishes to achieve in order to study afterwards the means employed to achieve this goal [my translation]" (1980, p.83). The underlying idea of this quote is that, on the contrary, one should identify first the discursive choices, and, in particular the argumentative choices, that one makes in an interaction, and then try to determine the effect these choices have on the interaction. Only then, and after considering these choices in relation to the properties of the context in which they have been applied, can one attempt to make a hypothesis on the goals that the participants have been seeking to realize through their argumentative behaviour.

Even if I can acknowledge the consistency and sophistication of the models Dima appeals to in order to elaborate her own framework for the analysis and evaluation of public political discourse, I am very quickly put off by the difficulties posed by the application of such theoretical constructions to authentic data. For instance, it is almost never clear to me which dialogue type (Walton, 1992), or activity type (van Eemeren, 2010) a piece of interaction belongs to – and the possibility of resorting to a hybrid type does not provide me with any satisfactory solution. I am sincerely indebted to the scientists who identified the various criteria relevant for establishing such reasoned sets of dialogues, or activities, or goals – and the use of these criteria in order to characterize the data I am confronted with is very fruitful; but trying to force the data into a category established a priori with regard to these criteria is contrary to what I consider the priority of a descriptive approach to argumentation: that is, accounting for the crude reality of argumentative discourse, not seeking to interpret it with reference to what it should look like, or to an ideal prototype.

In the same spirit, when examining authentic data, one may find quite convincing pieces of evidence that an arguer is oriented towards the achievement of one or another goal. But in many cases it is not easy – and here I am quite euphemistic – to decide whether a discursive or argumentative choice contributes to, or, on the contrary, endangers the achievement of a given goal – for instance, whether a specific argumentative move contributes to reaching an agreement between the parties.

4. MANY CONTEXTUAL, NON-SPECIFIC GOALS, ONE INTERNAL “MECHANIC” EFFECT

My conception of goals in argumentation departs from the hypothesis that if language users argue, they do so because this activity serves a purpose, but this purpose cannot be determined a priori and without reference to the context in which this activity takes place, considering its institutional features, the genre it belongs to, the individual characteristics of the participants, the material specificities of the setting, etc. (Doury, 2012).

Such goals are not specific to argumentation: they may be achieved by other discursive or even non verbal means. It is the specific relationship between a discourse and a counter-discourse that I take to be typical of argumentation, when argumentation is studied from a perspective inspired by linguistics and conversation analysis. I consider argumentation as a way of taking a stance and of elaborating on a position in such a way as to improve its resistance against contention. Improving the ability of a discourse to resist against contention may be considered as what argumentation achieves best – that is, as its specific goal, and its only context-independent goal.

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