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Relevance, Argumentation and Presentational Devices

Cristian Santibanez Yanez
Diego Portales University

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CRISTIAN SANTIBÁÑEZ YÁÑEZ

Centre for the Study of Argumentation and Reasoning
Diego Portales University
Vergara 275
Santiago
Chile
cristian.santibanez@udp.cl

ABSTRACT: This paper presents the concept of relevance in argumentation theory analyzed from a pragma-rhetorical angle. Special attention will be given to examples in which relevance is determined by the extended social context of the use of presentational devices in controversies. The analysis of examples will include the rhetorical concept of *decorum*, maintaining that a different emphasis should be given to the role of the speaker in the determination of relevance.

KEYWORDS: arguer, decorum, hearer, presentational devices, principle of charity, relevance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Probative, topical or dialectical relevance (Walton 2004); global, local, subject matter and probative relevance (Walton 2008); premise, topical or audience-contextual relevance (Tindale 1999); causal and epistemic relevance (Hitchcock 1992); relevance and its domain, object and aspects in a normative frame (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 2004); all these distinctions, among many others, not only show the central importance of the concept 'relevance' and the serious intent of scholars in the field to define the notion, but also the great range of areas which these intents come from, namely: informal logic, pragmatics, and rhetoric. There is no doubt that relevance is a key notion in contemporary argumentation theory.

Running the risk of a hasty generalization, it could be said, that all these attempts follow and combine as much the normative sense and uses of relevance in natural language to evaluate arguments; Aristotle-Hamblin's back and forth criticisms to measure relevance from logical and pragmatic views; Grice's proposal of a maxim of relevance for a rational communicative exchange, as Sperber and Wilson's notion of relevance, the human cognition and communication being, for these scholars, a relevance-oriented phenomenon.

Even though the rhetorical angle has been explicitly taken by some scholars (e.g. Wenzel 1989; Tindale 1999, 2004), especially to understand how the relevance of a set of premises and conclusion should be evaluated in a broader sense, in fact, they have demonstrated already that the logical and pragmatic dimensions of relevance depend on a

rhetorical account, the role of the speaker and the hearer or audience are not totally explained in these approaches. The advice has been too vague to get a clear concept of relevance from a rhetorical point of view. For example, Wenzel sees it

> as a pragmatic relationship between the materials of argument and the situation, that is, to the complex of persons, events, objects, relations, exigencies, and constraints that an arguer seeks to encompass (1989, p. 89).

In what follows, an effort will be made to explain how the concept of decorum, in a Ciceronian way, could help in modeling a revised concept of relevance for argumentation theory. My hypothesis is that we could adopt the term "Second order relevance" to evaluate arguments in contexts of controversies in which we know that the speakers have a great access to and the skill to manoeuvre information and a clear position in a specific field, namely: political, academic, artistic, and scientific. Note that within each field different other fields can be distinguished: for example, in the political field, parliamentarian debate, political parties discourse, governmental communications, and so on. In each field what at first sight could appear as irrelevant, in a second movement in the dialogue could show the relevance of a comment or claim.

I will adopt the ideas contained in the notion of decorum and use the phrase "second order relevance" in the following situation: when the hearer asks the speaker for clarification because the hearer assumes that the other party is trying to say something else, or when the hearer cannot assume that the speaker is irrelevant due to his history. An example will be given to illustrate my point, especially those that are reflected by the uses of presentational devices, namely: metaphors, figurative language, analogies, etc.

2. DECORUM

2.1. Decorum and Grice's account of relevance

Aptum, prosekon, acommodatum, decens, propium were the words used to refer to "decorum," this is, the appropriated, adequate, and pertinent participation of a speaker according to contexts, participants, and expectations. The idea of decorum could be defined as the quality *maximenecessaria* for the speaker to suit her speech as well as her capacities to the expectation of the audience and the circumstances.[1] Defined in this way, decorum is a very similar concept to relevance in Grice's sense.

With *Be relevant*, the third maxim under the cooperative principle,[2] Grice emphasized that the speaker should contribute appropriately to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction (Grice 1989, p. 28). Although according to Huang (2007, p. 27), Grice had in mind that the cooperative principle and its associated maxims are normally adhered to by both the speaker and the addressee in a conversational interaction,

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[1] In Cicero the most clear indications of the concept are found in *Orator* (II 17, III 201-211); in Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoria* (11, 1, 1; 11, 1, 16-28)—see version LOEB Classical Library *The Orator's Education. Books 11-12*.
[2] Grice (1989, p. 26) points out about this principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged," which is already a way to define "relevance" in natural language.

it is not very clear if Grice meant the hearer. It is more evident that the advice was *Be relevant speaker*! than *Be relevant hearer!*

What I think is incorrect in this view is that by making the relevance the responsibility of the speaker the problem of relevance, as a property in argumentation, is not described properly. It is also a matter of the hearer to act and contribute in an appropriate way to maintain the relevance of a speech act in a collective activity as, by definition, argumentation is.[3] Here, I think, the idea of decorum could contribute.

When Cicero and Quintilian talk about decorum, they do not only consider the things that the orator and/or the educator should do or have in order to please their audiences, but also the role that the audience and/or the hearer should have and the things that they should do in order to behave decorously, namely: remember the history of the speaker and keep the evaluation of the arguments used by the speaker in balance with his history.[4] Following Cicero's idea, that the "convenient" depends as much on the speaker as on the audience, the ethical dimension necessarily has to be part of the explanation.

What is interesting here is that this ethical dimension in Cicero is related to a mental aspect as well. This could be seen as, apart from the obvious and many differences, especially the genetic and semiotic dimensions, a peculiar coincidence with Sperber and Wilson's account of the principle of relevance –or even as a step ahead of Cicero's intuition in this area. Cicero claimed that a genuine decorous conduct is that which is expressed in a virtuous manner, this is, a manner which is already a component of thought of the speaker or hearer. This virtuous manner, therefore, should be manifested always as a healthy reciprocity between the participants in a dialogue –specially, we could add, in the controversial ones. In *De Officiis* (I, pp. 93-95), Cicero points out explicitly that respecting the others is the best way to be relevant, decorous; the speaker by means of doing the thing that has to be done and not being guided only by the searching of effectiveness, and the audience by paying careful attention to the reasoning of the other party. Later an example will clarify this point.

2.2. *Decorum, Sperber and Wilson's perspective, and argumentation theory*

Apart from a vague effort by Tindale (1999, pp. 101-109) to broach some ideas contained in the account of Sperber and Wilson of the principle of relevance, especially the concept of "cognitive environment," to explain his particular notion of audience-contextual relevance –to say finally that if a premise or argument has contextual effects, then it is relevance-, it seems that explicitly the cognitive, semiotic and communicative points of view of Sperber and Wilson on relevance have not been assumed in argumentation theory. In fact, Woods (1992), points out that this theory fails in explaining relevance because basically its approach is a propositional one, and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 2004) are uncomfortable with this approach, not only because it reduces Grice's four maxims to one, namely, relevance, but especially because it does not give a proper

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[3] I am aware of the similarity of this idea with the notion of principle of charity (Davidson, 2001) which says that the hearer should act on and interpret a message trying to make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others.

[4] It should be added that Aristotle talked about a "decorous performance" in *Ethics Nicomachean* (1098a), in *Poetics* (1454a), and in *Rhetoric* (1404-1405a), when he advises the poets how to keep the appearance in the comedy and tragic art.

account to evaluate arguments in a normative way; Walton (2004, pp. 131-132) explicitly points out that the concept of relevance in Sperber and Wilson "fits somewhere into a context of dialogue where information-seeking of some kind is the goal" (2004, p. 132), given that, in Walton's reading of it, they define relevance in terms of the collection of information.[5]

But in Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008), there is an interesting case in which Walton's (2004) claim seems to be challenged. Talking about the premises that are left implicit in certain argument schemes, they recognize that in the *argument from position to know* there is a "natural" use of the assumption of relevance. They point out (2008, p. 17):

> In many cases there is a range of assumptions, all of which can be seen as acting as implicit linked premises. For example, recall the scheme capturing argument from position to know introduced earlier:
>
> (P1) *a* is in a position to know whether A is true (false)
> (P2) *a* asserts that A is true (false)
> (C) Therefore, A is true (false)
> (CQ1) Is *a* in a position to know whether A is true (false)?
> (CQ2) Is *a* an honest (trustworthy, reliable) source?
> (CQ3) Did *a* assert that A is true (false)?
>
> In a canonical use of this scheme, the second premise, P2, is asserted explicitly, as is the conclusion. Premise P1 is left implicit (and, as Walton points out, is probably assumed by the hearer by Grice's Principle of Charity, by which an assumption of honesty and relevance is made). The argument thus has its conclusion C, supported by the two linked premises P1 and P2 (if either premise fails, then the argument falls down, just as with the minor and major premises of a *modus ponens*).

Apart from the confusion of attributing the Principle of Charity to Grice, what is shown in this case is: that usually relevance acts in the mental space of both speaker and hearer as an implicit process; that relevance is a structural part of the activity of argumentation, manifested in arguments schemes, among other mechanisms; that relevance, as Sperber and Wilson claimed, comes with a presumption of relevance in terms content and form; that premise-content-relevance works as a sort of warrant (Freeman 1992); and that relevance has a *rhetorical force* in terms of effect in the argument and in the hearer, which becomes clear when the hearer does not ask any critical questions.[6]

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[5] It should be noted that between the argumentation theory scholars the first edition of *Relevance* is quoted, and not the second edition (1995), in which Sperber and Wilson added, apart from new footnotes, a postface in which many critical remarks were directly addressed by the authors, such as those related to the different concept of relevance that could be found in the first edition, and the idea of presumption of relevance, among others.

[6] This quote also shows that relevance has a dialectical dimension. Walton (1997, 2004) calls it the "dialectical nature of relevance," because "Relevance of an argument is determined at the local level by the sequence of questions and replies (the profile of dialogue), in relation to how the sequence matches the proper normative profile determined by the argumentation scheme and the appropriate critical questions. But relevance is determined at the global level by the type of dialogue the argument is supposed to be part of, and its contribution, at a given stage of this dialogue (1997, p. 169).

The last characteristic emphasized, the rhetorical force of relevance, is in fact the step by which Sperber and Wilson discuss the reliability of the presumption of relevance, the "rhetorical disposition" of the speaker to achieve relevance, and the working of ostensive-inferential communication. These aspects are all crucial, to me, to relate the idea of decorum with argumentation.

Sperber and Wilson say:

> How reliable is the presumption of relevance? As we all know, the world is full of bores. The principle of relevance does not say that communicators necessarily produce optimally relevant stimuli; it says that *they necessarily intendthe addressee* to believe that they do. Even bores *manifestly intend their audience to believe* that they are worth listening to. The presumption of relevance communicated by an utterance *does not have to be accepted as true*. The communicator *might fail to achieve relevance*; the addressee might doubt the *communicator's ability* to succeed in being relevant. However, from the presumption of relevance there follows a more reliable presumption that *relevance has been attempted*, if not achieved. A communicator who fails to make it manifest to her audience that she is being optimally relevant *may nevertheless succeed in making it manifest that she is trying to be optimally relevant*. (1995, p. 159; emphases added)

If this style of writing in a rhetorical fashion (emphasized by my cursives) goes fast and well, and Sperber and Wilson consider it true, to describe the communicative behavior of the communicator or speaker in noncontroversial contexts, as all the examples of Sperber and Wilson are, why should it not be true in more complex scenarios, like the argumentative ones, where intent, effects, audience, and a long etcetera, are more necessary. In other words, because relevance is also a matter of maneuvering and degree, we should try to expand the theory around the speaker to the hearer, to formulate something like the *Listening act theory*, this is, to fix the rational parameters, or the rules of the game or profile, of the "correct" hearer's relevant behavior. And, as I believe, with the idea of decorum we have accomplished part of the job.

With Sperber and Wilson (1995), we know that we always, by nature, maximize relevance, selecting and creating the most adequate context to interpret an act of communication, in order to understand, by means of reasoning protocols, what is implied by others. Thus, to have more knowledge of the agent of the speaker and the context means to have more criteria in selecting and creating the proper reasoning protocol. When a hearer does not know the speaker, or does not have the right information on the context to understand a speech act, she should ask for clarification as a move to search for second order relevance.

Because in natural language relevance is always a matter of evaluation, a normative act, the uses of second order relevance (asking for clarification, recognizing non-attention, misinterpretation, and so on) could help to accept, to a certain degree, the lack of local relevance, knowing that, for example, the speaker has a public history of "delayed" relevance. If we know that the speaker and the hearer can strategically maneuver relevance, the former hiding it, the latter not recognizing it, it could be of help to design the condition of preparation and satisfaction of the hearer, just to keep the protagonistin balance, at least theoretically.

3. RELEVANCE AND PRESENTATIONAL DEVICES

In this section, the ideas until now discussed will be seen in the light of the analysis of several cases. As Krabbe (1992, p. 272) noted, we should be restrict ourselves to those cases which are really argumentative, part of persuasive dialogue. The first example is taken from Krabbe's (1992, pp. 279-280) discussion about relevance criticism in natural language:

(1) Wilma: The Soviet Union is a socialist nation.
(2) Bruce: How come?
(3) Wilma: Well, it calls itself a socialist nation.
(4.3) Bruce: You can't give that as a reason.
(5.3) Wilma: Why not?
(6.1) Bruce: The Soviet Union's calling itself a socialist nation has nothing to do with whether it is one or not.
(7) Wilma: Why wouldn't that be a piece of evidence?
(8) Bruce: The only pattern your reasoning could follow is: X calls itself a Y, therefore is a Y. But this has no force whatsoever.
(9.1) Wilma: My remarks are not of that type at all. Allow me to return to the point at issue.
(4.2) Bruce: O.K. So what is your point?
(5.2) Wilma: I think the Soviet authorities are more or less in a position to stipulate what it means to be a socialist nation. Not that this term was ever very clearly defined…

As a first comment, Krabbe points out that Wilma and Bruce enter a metadialogue (at 4.3) to discuss an argument scheme at stage (8) and (9.1), but they return to the dialogue afterwards. The metadialogue occurred because of Bruce's evaluation of the relevance of Wilma's turn 3. For my purposes here, (4.3) and (9.1) show what I call "second order relevance" by means of a reciprocal effort to clarify what seems irrelevant at first. The effort of clarifying shows, at the same time, an underlying decorous behavior of the participants, because they try to "save the face" of the other by rescuing the relevant intention, content and explanation of the topic at issue.

A different but common case, which comes from a real political context, is the following. In 2005, the two female presidential candidates discussed how to deal with the military budget. Michelle Bachelet, the current Chilean president, said what is recaptured in the following news extract:

Bachelet: Alvear's project is like "selling mister Otto's couch."

While the presidential candidate of the Christian Democrats defended her proposal to eliminate the special copper law, the progressive candidate pointed out that this proposal was like "selling Don Otto's couch." "Believing that the Special Copper law is the problem is like selling Don Otto's couch, do you know that joke?" With these words the presidential candidate Michelle Bachelet answered her opponent's project to eliminate the Special Copper Law that gives a fixed budget to the Armed Forces, and instead to give that money to help the poorest. According to Bachelet "Don't let us fool ourselves because the Armed Forces have international bills to pay for many years to come" specifying that, for example, "the important discussion of 2006, given the relationship we have with our neighbors and the peace that we wish for, is about what we need for our social development and how much we need for our military defense."

Bachelet pointed out that Alvear's proposal was completely irrelevant for the long term social and military politics in Chile. The interesting thing here is that, at the same

time, Bachelet used a very strong rhetorical presentational device: humour. As the speaker says, the expression 'to sell the couch of Mister Otto' originally comes from a joke: "When mister Otto realizes that his wife has been cheating on him with his best friend, Fritz, on the couch in his own house, Otto decides, just because it is such an offence, to sell the couch." Clearly, the joke manifests two categories: the category 'idiocy' (the character as well as the situation is 'stupid'), and the category 'ignorance of the real problem' or 'ignorance of the right solution.' The correlation is: the 'stupid' character doesn't see the real problem and doesn't know the right solution.

In this context, the presentational device, by means of an idiomatic expression, was used in a very specific discussion in the general debate between the two female presidential candidates during their campaign in 2005. The strategic uses of the expression are also related to the meta-discursive comment of the speaker in: *Do you know that joke?*, which is a rhetorical question that doubly emphasizes the meaning of the idiom. This comment of the speaker also emphasizes that the expression satisfies the audience's demands: to explain difficult issues within very clear frames, associations and images. On the contrary, if today's President would have had to explain the expression because of an unexpected negative answer to the question from the journalist (something like: "No, I don't know the joke!!"), then the strategic uses of the expression would have lost strength (the worst thing being to explain a joke), and more importantly, she would have been accused of presenting an irrelevant joke for the topic at hand. Furthermore, by explaining the joke the character of Mister Otto would have gotten more importance, and have been associated more explicitly with Soledad Alvear, and then the uses of the idiomatic expression would have been a personal attack, an *ad hominem* fallacy in its abusive version, this is, doubly irrelevant. Because the speaker in her argument emphasizes the confusion in the solution of the problem by means of a sharp argumentative strategy, the strategic manoeuvring is sound and not fallacious. Because the speaker focuses on the opponent's reasoning and points out the inconsistency between her proposal and the implicit accepted standpoint (that the budget of the army cannot change just like that), Alvear's reasoning is exposed as ridiculous, like the behaviour of don Otto. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2000, p. 206) claim:

> A statement is ridiculous as soon as it conflicts, without justification, with an accepted opinion... An error of fact, says La Bruyère, is enough to make a wise man ridiculous […] Ridiculous works toward the preservation of what is accepted.

What I think is shown in this case is that relevance is not only a matter of context (Tindale 1999), but also a matter of the regular ways of problem-resolving in politics, what the audience expects in terms of relevant political behaviour: sharpness, intelligence and strategies.

A different case, but also very common in political contexts, is the following:

> The Communist Party happily received the invitation from the Renovación Nacional to discuss the binominal electoral system
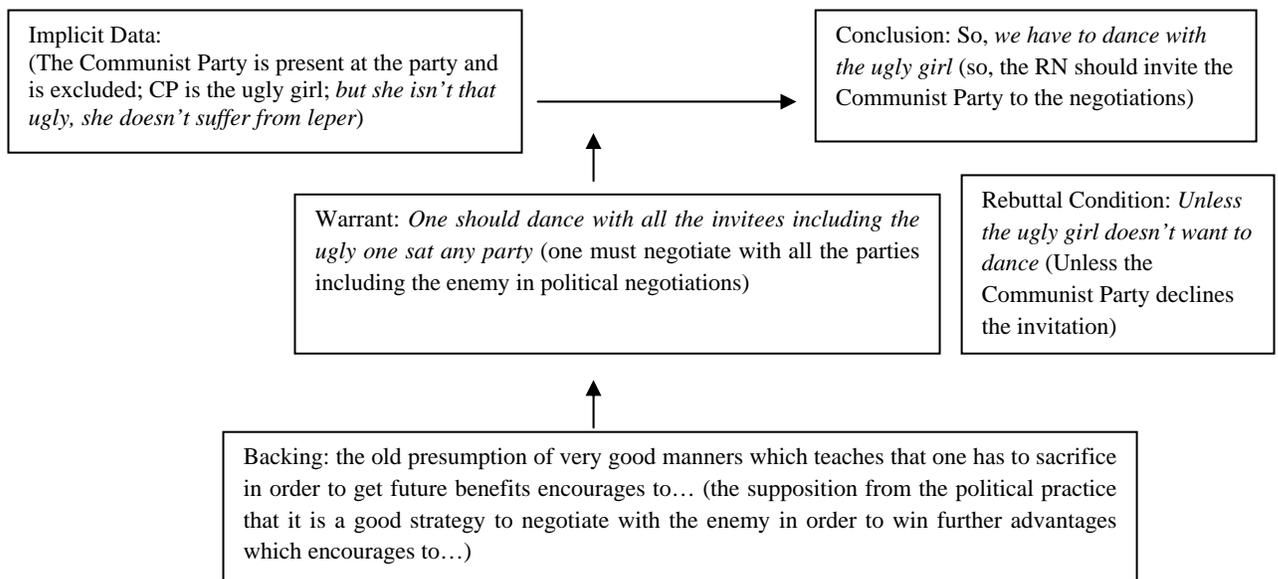
> Without assuring that he would be part of the meeting, the president of the Communist Party, Guillermo Teillier, said that he would not be an obstacle in trying to reach an agreement, after Carlos Larraín had said "one must also dance with the ugly girl." "We are not going to be an obstacle at all: we are going to take a seat and make proposals of course, and we also want to listen

to the proposals of the Renovación Nacional," he indicated. The leader of the Communist Party said: "if the government has no problems, then we will have even fewer problems," and added that they were going to make a proposal very soon. The invitation was explained in very curious terms by the president of the RN, Carlos Larraín, who said that "we can invite whoever we want." According to Larraín "I try to be a gentleman and remember what my mother taught me: we must also dance with the ugly girl; it was not only a matter of dancing with the prettiest of the team." "For that reason, we think that we have to talk with the Communist Party, who don't have lepra either."

The use of the idiomatic expression, as a presentational device, is fallacious in this context. In fact, it is doubly fallacious: on the one hand, because the expression "one must also dance with the ugly girl" falls into the category of 'voluntary sacrifice' or 'action against basic desires' based on a sort of moral backing, and the invitation to the CP is not made through reasons or arguments, but by references to the 'good' properties or qualities of the speaker (RN). The fallacy here is known as *Argumentum ad verecundiam* in its ethical version. On the other hand, the projection or understanding of the CP as the 'ugly person' is a qualification that gives a negative feature, the ugliness, without any justification: *Ad hominem* fallacy. Nevertheless, because the expression works in a negotiation and, moreover, because it is supported by explanations like "I try to be a gentleman and remember what my mother taught me" and "we think that we have to talk with the Communist Party, who don't have leper either," the fallacious movement is hidden behind a strategy of "good manners."

I would like to apply the Toulminian model to represent the way in which the president of the RN uses the relevant implicit warrant (Freeman 1992) to link the premises and conclusion (note that the analogy contained in "one must also dance with the ugly girl," that replaces 'the Communist Party must also be invited to the discussion,' is put in italics, and between brackets the literal information that the expression represents):

Fig. 1. Argumentative Scheme (By analogy)

Implicit Data:
(The Communist Party is present at the party and is excluded; CP is the ugly girl; *but she isn't that ugly, she doesn't suffer from leper*)

Conclusion: So, *we have to dance with the ugly girl* (so, the RN should invite the Communist Party to the negotiations)

Warrant: *One should dance with all the invitees including the ugly one sat any party* (one must negotiate with all the parties including the enemy in political negotiations)

Rebuttal Condition: *Unless the ugly girl doesn't want to dance* (Unless the Communist Party declines the invitation)

Backing: the old presumption of very good manners which teaches that one has to sacrifice in order to get future benefits encourages to… (the supposition from the political practice that it is a good strategy to negotiate with the enemy in order to win further advantages which encourages to…)

The rebuttal condition, which is not explicit in the discourse, has been inserted because it gives important interpretative elements. The rebuttal condition is part of the analogical consistency line and part of the basic scene: any invitation could be refused, even by the ugly girls. Nevertheless, because this possibility is very improbable (otherwise the expression itself would not exist), the warrant and the backing get a special argumentative strength. This special strength is related to this type of argumentative scheme: comparison argumentative scheme; and in particular by analogy: something that in literal terms is controversial (to invite the Communist Party to negotiate with the right-wing party), is explained by a non-controversial comparison (to invite the ugly girl to dance). In this context, the principle of justice, which is the base of the comparison scheme, was applied fallaciously. The principle of justice says that people or situations that are in similar conditions have to be treated alike. Thus, just as one has to ask the ugly girls to dance at a party so that they don't feel excluded or abandoned, one must also invite the Communist Party so that they don't feel excluded or abandoned. The rebuttal condition does not appear in the discourse because of the strong popular belief that there is a gentlemanly necessity to dance with every girl, and for this reason, it is very improbable that an ugly woman at a party will refuse the invitation to dance. So, the supposed sacrifice is made with a certain social-moral security.

The central point to our analysis here is that the Communist Party assumes its role of the ugly girl. They did not care about the fallacies (as the leader said that "he would not be an obstacle in trying to reach an agreement"). The complete analogy was accepted, with its presumptions and assumptions, by the Communist Party: given that they accepted being the ugly girl at the party (literal information: given that they are running the risk of being excluded from the political system), then she has to accept the invitation to dance (to participate politically they have to negotiate). The first order and local dialogue irrelevant way of reasoning of the right-wing party was ignored by the Communist Party because, knowing the political situation in Chile, they privilege the deepest problematic political issue. I will call this "historical content relevance," which also could be seen as a second order relevance movement.

In terms of decorum, the CP accepted the fallacious reasoning because for them what was the focus was to go back to a formal and normal political system: to dismiss the chance of doing so could be seen as a huge mistake and, in that way, an indecorous political action of the leaders against the historical expectations of the communist people.

4. CONCLUSION

Relevance, then, is not only a matter of the dialogue's structure, topical and audience-oriented coordination, but also a matter of historical expectative.

What has been shown by the examples analyzed is that second order relevance works in one to one decorous dialogical behaviour in which the participants ask for a clarification when the relevance of a premise is not immediately given (case 1); second order relevance also works when there is a standard or ritualized way of decorous action in certain argumentative spaces (case 2); and finally, second order relevance works when one chooses historical relevance over a fallacious move performed by one of the participants.

Perhaps it is counterintuitive to say that we need a *Listening Act theory* in order to design a model of relevance in argumentation theory, but it is not that far from what the reality is showing in terms of evaluative argumentative behaviour. On the other hand, advices of "relevant performances" to the speakers are so old as the history of philosophy. According to Erasmus of Rotterdam, it was Thales of Miletus who said "Talk little and well," which not only means that the wise man should talk only when it is necessary, with an exact amount of words related to the context and the situation, but also considering the other party and evaluating the long term benefits.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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