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# Persuasiveness from a Pragma-Dialectical Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Persuasiveness is generally equated with the speaker's ability to change the recipient's attitude. In this paper, I want to show that by using van Eemeren and Houtlosser's (2002) theory of strategic manoeuvring a view of persuasiveness can be found that complements the above conception. Starting from the pragma-dialectical definition of conclusiveness, I argue that persuasiveness depends on the ability of the arguer to confer on his argumentation the appearance of conclusiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Accepting, conclusiveness, convincingness, persuadedness, persuasiveness, reasonableness, strategic manoeuvring.

## INTRODUCTION

For the last ten years, a central issue that has occupied argumentation scholars is how insights from dialectics and rhetoric may be integrated so that a more systematic understanding can be achieved of what goes on in ordinary argumentation (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002, Jacobs 2002, Kauffeld 2002, among others). One central question at the heart of this issue has been the question of persuasiveness: how arguments come to be persuasive (Jackson 1995; Kauffeld 1995, 2002). Although this question may at some point have been of more relevance to rhetoricians than to pragma-dialecticians, the question seems now to have become of equal importance to both. Initially pragma-dialecticians were not necessarily concerned with what speakers should do to be persuasive. Their awareness of the importance of persuasiveness in ordinary argumentation has led these scholars to integrate rhetorical insights into their dialectical framework. This endeavour has enabled their views on argumentation to accommodate the notion of persuasiveness and to provide a potential for scholarly work within a dialectical framework to address the question of how argumentation comes to be persuasive.

In this paper I attempt to make a contribution to that enterprise. Starting from the integrated pragma-dialectical approach developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) and extended by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002), I will try to argue that with a systematic integration of rhetorical insights, the pragma-dialectical theory can contribute to understanding persuasiveness. I will show that a pragma-dialectical conception of persuasiveness clarifies how the norms of argumentation relate to its persuasiveness, and is, at least potentially, in line with the notion of persuasiveness that persuasion researchers with an empirical orientation employ in their research.

PRAGMA-DIALECTICS: CONVINCINGNESS OR PERSUASIVENESS?

From the outset, the pragma-dialectical theory has been concerned with convincingness rather than persuasiveness. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) initially set the distinction between persuading and convincing straight and made it clear that their project would be about convincing. For them, persuading is not categorically different from convincing, but since persuading is more concerned with influencing actions not thoughts and, therefore, can be characterised by the employment of both rational and irrational means to obtain acceptance, it would be safer to take convincingness as the ultimate aim that language users should aspire to attain through argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 49).<sup>1</sup> The option for convincingness is articulated in the pragma-dialectical definition of argumentation:

As a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 1)

Regardless of whether it is persuasiveness or convincingness that ordinary arguers are after, it is clear from the pragma-dialectical definition of argumentation that the acceptability of the standpoint is ideally conditioned by the ability of the arguer to make a *reasonable critic* accept it.

In pragma-dialectics, convincing is conceptualized as the perlocutionary effect of argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984). By putting forward the constellation of propositions to justify the acceptability of his standpoint, the arguer does not simply want the other party to realize that he is aiming to make this party recognize that the argumentation is acceptable, nor is he only trying to show that his arguments justify the standpoint, which is the illocutionary act of arguing; the arguer seeks more than that: he is aiming to make the other party accept that standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 47).

A successful attempt to convince takes place when the listener accepts the standpoint as well as the constellations of arguments brought forward by the arguer to justify the acceptability of that standpoint. The listener is regarded to have accepted the standpoint when he, recognising that the arguer has made an attempt to convince him of the acceptability of the standpoint, comes to believe that the standpoint is acceptable and that the arguments brought forward to support it are acceptable and are an acceptable justification of that standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 73).

In pragma-dialectics, the state of mind that the listener has when he accepts the standpoint is not important; what is important is what he externalises verbally (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 69). That is, being convinced is in the pragma-dialectical sense restricted to nothing more and nothing less than agreeing with the standpoint defended by the arguer. This agreement takes place when the listener declares that he accepts that standpoint. Of course, in various situations, the listener may not feel the need to state that explicitly, but every situation provides specific opportunities to

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the differences between convincing and persuading, see van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, chapter 3).

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externalise one's acceptance. Sometimes, acceptance may be externalised through action, sometimes through silence (provided the listener has the freedom of externalising his rejection if that were the case). What is important from the pragma-dialectical viewpoint is that the listener should be in a position to perform the act of accepting.

Accepting is considered as a commissive act because by declaring that he accepts the standpoint defended by the arguer, the listener binds himself to the commitments that result from that. These commitments are such that the arguer will be in a position to reproach the listener in case the latter has acted in a way that contradicts the commitments to which he has bound himself by accepting the standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 71).

### REASONABLENESS AND THE CONCLUSIVENESS OF ARGUMENTATION

The speech act account adopted in the pragma-dialectical theory gives an idea of what it means to convince someone and what it means to be convinced in the sense of expressing acceptance of the standpoint at issue by a reasonable critic. An equally important question in this theory of argumentation is what kind of argumentation has the force to elicit such acceptance. In line with a critical rationalist way of thinking, in which human thought should be subjected to maximum critical testing, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 1992, 2004) conceive of argumentation in terms of a critical discussion whereby two parties aim at resolving a dispute about the acceptability of a standpoint. They define a critical discussion in the following way:

By a critical discussion we mean a discussion between a protagonist and antagonist of a particular standpoint in respect of an expressed opinion, the purpose of the discussion being to establish whether the protagonist's standpoint is defensible against the critical reactions of the antagonist. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, p. 17)

For the protagonist to get his standpoint accepted by the other party, he should defend it conclusively against whatever critical reaction the party may come up with. Conclusiveness is defined in rule 9a for critical discussion:

The protagonist has conclusively defended an initial standpoint or substandpoint by means of a complex act of argumentation if he has successfully defended both the propositional content called into question by the antagonist and its force of justification or refutation called into question by the antagonist. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 151)

Rule 14b obligates the antagonist to retract his doubt when the protagonist has defended his standpoint conclusively:

The antagonist is obliged to retract the calling into question of the initial standpoint if the protagonist has conclusively defended it (in the manner prescribed in rule 9) in the argumentation stage (and has also observed the other rules). (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 154)

To assure that this critical testing procedure will proceed along reasonable lines, 10 rules of conduct are stipulated that if observed the resolution of the discussion would be

reasonable (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992).<sup>2</sup> This resolution is marked by one of the parties winning the discussion and the other losing it. The protagonist, who defends the standpoint, wins the discussion when he manages to get the antagonist, who doubts it, to retract his doubt, and the antagonist wins the discussion when the protagonist can no longer maintain his standpoint against the antagonist's doubt.

I am here particularly interested in the first case, i.e. when the protagonist manages to get the antagonist to accept the standpoint and to give up his doubt. From the perspective of critical discussion, the arguer convinces a critic of the acceptability of the standpoint only when the argumentation he has brought in support of it has been conclusive. Conclusiveness of argumentation is then necessary for convincingness in the sense of rational acceptance.

A crucial question is, nevertheless, how this view of convincingness squares with what happens in real life argumentative discourse. The answer to this question depends naturally on whether ordinary arguers have to be reasonable, in the sense of defending their standpoints conclusively, in order to be convincing. Everyday argumentation seems to pose a challenge to this view of convincingness because one soon realises that what actually convinces people is in fact not always reasonable. Fallacious (unreasonable) argumentation can lead to acceptance in just the same way as reasonable argumentation ideally does (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2003, p. 289). The question is then whether the convincingness advocated in pragma-dialectics has anything to contribute to explaining convincingness, or rather persuasiveness, of (unreasonable) argumentation or whether convincingness should be confined to ideal arguers in ideal situations.

#### STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING: TOWARDS A NOTION OF PERSUASIVENESS

Although the answers to these questions have not been explicitly addressed by advocates of the pragma-dialectical theory, the recognition that argumentation in real life is a field of strategic manoeuvring allows this theory to account for what persuasiveness amounts to. The idea underlying the concept of strategic manoeuvring stems from the recognition that in everyday life arguers are interested not only in resolving disputes reasonably but also in winning the discussion conducted over these disputes (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002). By arguing, people strive to maintain a balance between the two aims. This is done through strategic manoeuvring. At any stage of the discussion, the arguer aims to make the best out of the opportunities available in order to win the discussion while maintaining the appearance of reasonableness. Any failure to maintain this balance results in the derailment of strategic manoeuvring, which usually takes the form of a fallacy (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2003).

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003) maintain that under normal circumstances ordinary arguers can be presumed to maintain the norms of reasonableness and at the same time to be aiming at the most persuasive effect. What can be deduced from van Eemeren and Houtlosser's notion of strategic manoeuvring is that every instance of argumentation contains an assumption of reasonableness. This assumption of reasonableness is what may lead an inattentive critic to accept an argumentation at face value, rather than based on rational considerations. Another thing that can be deduced is

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<sup>2</sup> Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) warn that observing these rules does not guarantee that the discussion will be resolved (p. 151).

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that if a reasonable arguer has failed to get his critics to grant acceptance to his standpoint, it may be because he has failed to appear reasonable. This – following the strategic manoeuvring view – must be the price of not manifesting this reasonableness in such a way that accepting the standpoint becomes an obligation on the critic. This very assumption of reasonableness is what enables a great many fallacious arguments to have persuasive power on receivers. Jackson (1995) has argued for a similar view of the persuasiveness of fallacious argumentation, as arguments that conceal their own weakness (1995, p. 257).

Analyses inspired by the notion of strategic manoeuvring have shown that certain forms of fallacious argumentation which have proven to be empirically persuasive manifest strategies aimed specifically at masking their unreasonableness. In his study of the so-called ‘Nigeria SPAM letters’ Kienpointner (2006) has demonstrated that in these letters strategic manoeuvring is basically aimed at anticipating the readers’ objection to the fallacious arguing occurring in the letters. In some of the letters analysed the sender even states that his argumentation may come across as fallacious but proceeds to save his attempt by justifying this fallaciousness through referring to the circumstances that have prevented him from providing more reasonable arguments. The reader in this case may feel obliged to accept the standpoint, because the sender has provided a conclusive defence for his standpoint, at least presumptively, by presenting himself to have done his utmost to use all available means of defence.

### PERSUASIVENESS AND ‘PERSUADEDNESS’

Viewing argumentation in terms of strategic manoeuvring seems to shed light on how argumentative discourse comes to be persuasive as it clarifies why fallacies can sometimes help the arguer get his standpoint accepted. Yet, the notion of strategic manoeuvring has more to offer than simply stating that an arguer gets his standpoint accepted by appearing reasonable. In view of the dialectical nature of argumentation presupposed in strategic manoeuvring, it is also necessary to consider what makes a critic accept the standpoint.

In pragma-dialectics, argumentative discourse, whether dialogical or monological, always involves two parties who have different roles, commitments and interests: the arguer as the protagonist of the standpoint and the listener as the antagonist of that standpoint. In order to account for what a persuasive argument amounts to we need not concern ourselves exclusively with what the arguer has done to get his standpoint accepted, but also with what the listener has done to accept it. This means that we need to be prepared to say something both about the ‘persuasiveness’ of the arguer and about the ‘*persuadedness*’ of the listener. The former refers to the quality of being persuasive (without necessarily being convincing, i.e. reasonable) and the latter refers to the state of being persuaded without being convinced. While the former definition seems to be unproblematic, the latter presents some theoretical problems. For, assuming that one has been given total freedom to decide whether to accept or reject a standpoint and no coercion of any kind has been employed, one would not be persuaded to accept a standpoint and act upon it unless one sees that the argumentation brought forward in support of it has been reasonable in the sense of being conclusive (so that no objections can be raised about it). That is, although it is possible to differentiate between cases in

which the arguer has been persuasive because his argumentation is convincing and cases in which he has been persuasive simply because his argumentation has appeared convincing, it is not easy to make a parallel differentiation when it comes to the listener. Being persuaded seems then to boil down to being convinced.

This more or less intuitive remark about the difference between persuasiveness and persuadedness may be explained by considering how arguers are expected to manoeuvre strategically at the concluding stage of the discussion. In this stage, each party manoeuvres to secure for himself the most favourable resolution of the dispute (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2003). One can observe that the aim of the arguer, reconstructed as the protagonist, consists in *presenting* his argumentation *as convincingly as possible to the antagonist*, while the objective of the critic would consist in showing the protagonist's argumentation *as unconvincing as possible*, so that no acceptance is to be granted.

When analysing a case in which the arguer has managed to get the critic to accept the standpoint, the situation becomes slightly more complicated. Since strategic manoeuvring is omnipresent in argumentation, the act of accepting should also contain the opportunity for the listener to manoeuvre strategically, which includes attaining rhetorical gains, but what is there left for the listener to manoeuvre strategically? One meaningful way of manoeuvring that the listener has when declaring his acceptance of the standpoint is presenting this acceptance in such a way that he downplays his commitment to it; the listener can for instance do this by being ironic or by conveying that for some opportune reason he sees no opportunity but to accept that standpoint.

As it happens, the arguer may have, intentionally or unintentionally, used fallacious argumentation to get the listener to accept that standpoint and act upon it. We could then say that the arguer has succeeded in persuading the listener while, about the listener, we would say that he has been convinced to act in the way recommended by the arguer. Given the sincerity condition involved in the illocutionary act of accepting, i.e. that the listener believes that the standpoint he has now accepted is indeed acceptable and that the arguments brought forward in support of it are acceptable and are an acceptable justification of it, we may infer that there exists no such thing as persuadedness that falls short of 'being convinced': language users are persuaded when they believe that they have been convinced.

#### A PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL CONCEPTION OF PERSUASIVENESS AND EMPIRICAL PERSUASIVENESS

Calling an argumentative text persuasive is an empirical statement that requires the ability to make explicit those qualities that not only *can* but also *do* lead to the persuasive effect, such that another argumentative text containing those qualities should also turn out to be persuasive. Kauffeld (1995) makes a distinction between a prima-facie case of persuasive argument, i.e. an argument that exhibits the qualities required of a persuasive argument, and an actual case of persuasive argument, i.e. an argument that actually persuades and brings about a change in attitude. Kauffeld wonders, however, whether the notion of a prima-facie case has any use at all, as such a case may simply boil down to the case of a normatively good argument, and this does not always persuade (1995, p. 82). Whatever normative claims are made about what actually is persuasive are likely to

be disproved because arguments do not persuade because they are normatively good but because they manifest themselves as normatively good. From a pragma-dialectical point of view, an instance of (sound or fallacious) strategic manoeuvring is empirically persuasive because it has been presented as reasonable.

Zarefsky (2006) has proposed that the pragma-dialectical rules be used as rules for sound persuasion, i.e. persuasion that is identical to convincing in the context of critical discussion. The notion of strategic manoeuvring suggests that reasonableness, in the sense of observing the rules of critical discussion, is not what is in actual practice (*as opposed to the ideal context of critical discussion*) required of arguers to be persuasive; what is required is actually maintaining the appearance of reasonableness. So what Zarefsky has proposed may be understood to boil down to what van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002) conceive of as strategic manoeuvring: maintaining the appearance of observing the rules of critical discussion while trying to win over an audience. One might roughly claim that, if there is anything that language users should observe in order for them to be persuasive, it is that they should be able to uphold the appearance that they have respected these rules. The question that imposes itself, however, is whether there are any rules regulating how this appearance can be maintained.

In developing his notion of persuasiveness in the case of the speech act of proposing, Kauffeld (1995 & 2002) identifies a potentially persuasive argument as one that prompts the receiver to *grant it consideration and to react to it*. This consideration, according to Kauffeld, is preliminary to attaining acceptance. Kauffeld argues that one should generate the presumption of having discharged the burden of proof that he has incurred by advancing arguments for his proposal in order to give reason for the critic to consider the arguments advanced for the proposal (1995, p. 83). What this view explains is what the arguer should do so that his standpoint will merit the critic's consideration, but not what he should do so that his standpoint will merit the critic's acceptance. Consideration of the arguer's arguments can thus not be conceived of as a sufficient condition for acceptance.

It is even a question if it can be regarded as a necessary condition. Empirical studies of persuasion using the Elaboration Likelihood model, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), have shown that getting the listener to accept the standpoint does not necessarily presuppose critical consideration of the argumentation. A central route to persuasion, whereby receivers are motivated to consider the arguments brought forward by the arguer, is just as likely to lead to acceptance as to rejection. In cases where listeners have the time and capacity to engage in elaboration, fallacious argumentation is more likely to turn out to be unpersuasive, for the simple reason that it is found fallacious. The elaboration likelihood model predicts that in cases where people are for whatever reason not in a position to engage in the elaboration may grant acceptance to the argumentation without considering it on the merits. The arguer may not have provided a conclusively argued case, but something in the argumentation would have led receivers to accept his standpoint.

It seems that the only case in which getting the receiver to consider the argumentation carefully is necessary for attaining any persuasive effect at all is when the receiver is not expected to have any interest in engaging in argument with the arguer (See Kauffeld 1995, 2002). In such cases, the arguer shapes his argumentation in such a way that it deserves attention. One way of doing this is making it clear to the listener that he

may gain interests in engaging in the process (Goodwin 2002, Kauffeld 2002), but in most conversational argument the fact that the listener will attend to the argument may already have been secured.

What I have argued for in this paper is a notion of persuasiveness that is applicable to those argumentative texts which do not necessarily encourage receivers to elaborate on them. I have considered the generation of the presumption of conclusiveness to be necessary for any persuasive effect because it is what receivers should find in the argumentation in order to accept the standpoint. In my view, generating a presumption of conclusiveness is therefore what argumentative texts should do to be persuasive. Jackson (1995) has rightly noticed the sometimes-superficial nature of the heuristics that receivers apply in cases where no elaboration is possible. However, no matter how absurd these heuristics may be, receivers would always want to be convinced that they have made the right choice regarding accepting or rejecting the standpoint: that they have accepted the standpoint because they believe it to have been conclusively defended or that, otherwise, they rejected it because they believe it to have been inconclusively defended.

In case receivers have been motivated to take the central route of persuasion, a text will be persuasive when the argument scrutiny undertaken by the receiver results in the receiver finding the argumentation conclusive in the sense that no objections can be generated; the receiver has then but to accept the standpoint. Along the same route, a text is not persuasive if the receivers have scrutinised the arguments and come to the conclusion that the standpoint is not conclusively defended, for instance, because they have thought of counterarguments to the standpoint which the text did not anticipate and refute. In this case, the text fails to generate a presumption of conclusiveness and the obligation to accept that standpoint is not incurred upon the receiver.

When receivers are not motivated to scrutinise the arguments, a text will be persuasive when the receiver finds clues indicating that the arguer has already done the scrutinising for him. Knowing, for instance, that his receivers will not have enough time to read the whole text, the arguer could start his argumentation by, for instance, addressing a possible objection that the receivers may think of, thereby making it appear to them as though he has been careful in defending his standpoint. Conclusiveness in this case will be inferred from the clues rather than established through critical testing. Along the peripheral route too, a text will be considered not persuasive when the arguer has not made it *immediately clear* to the receiver that the argumentation is conclusive. Since in this case the receiver is not in a position to elaborate on the argumentation, the arguer loses any chance of obtaining acceptance from the receiver, not necessarily because his argumentation is not conclusively defended but because it has failed to strike the receiver as conclusively defended.

What follows from this line of reasoning is that conclusiveness, in the strict sense of rule 9a, mentioned above, becomes crucial insofar as persuasion is expected to proceed through the central route. When persuasion is expected to proceed through the peripheral route, the arguer may get away with simply maintaining the appearance of conclusiveness. It is, as Jackson (1995) has argued, through this route that fallacious argumentation triumphs.

One way in which the Elaboration Likelihood model can be of help to argumentation theorists concerned with the question of persuasiveness is providing tools for predicting when it is sensible for arguers to activate a central or a peripheral route of

persuasion. Determining which route will be instrumental to an optimal persuasive effect depends very much on factors that are external to the argumentative message itself, such as the time receivers are prepared to devote to the message as well as their ability to comprehend it. However, the insights gained from the Elaboration likelihood model, at least, inform us that arguers can enhance the persuasiveness of their argumentation just by making the right predictions about the way their receivers will approach the message. As explained above, this can be of use to both arguers seeking what Zarefsky (2006) called sound persuasion as well as arguers who are not particularly concerned with sound persuasion. Yet even when the arguer is able to predict how the receiver will approach the message, he still needs to know *how* to confer on his argumentation the appearance of conclusiveness. This question remains largely unanswered.

However, recent meta-analyses of persuasion effects research conducted by O’Keefe (1999, 2002) have given some reassurances that certain message features, which may be seen as features of conclusiveness, enhance the persuasiveness of argumentative messages.<sup>3</sup> These meta-analyses have shown, among other things, a) that messages in which the conclusion is explicitly stated are in the main more persuasive than messages in which the conclusion is left implicit (O’Keefe 2006, p. 237) and b) that messages in which a counterargument is mentioned and then refuted are more persuasive than messages in which the counterargument is left unrefuted (O’Keefe 2006, p. 239). O’Keefe has argued that the two findings are consistent with the normative expectations of the pragma-dialectical theory. In my opinion, they are consistent with normative expectations because they indicate that *at least appearing conclusive* in the way stipulated in the ideal model of critical discussion can lead to persuasiveness. By mentioning the conclusion or refuting an anticipated counterargument the arguer can confer on the argumentation the appearance of conclusiveness. In the case of conclusion explicitness the arguer makes his argumentation appear more conclusive by emphasising the link between his arguments and the conclusion and by giving himself a chance to formulate this conclusion in a favourable way. In the case of mentioning and then refuting a counterargument, the arguer shows that his argumentation is strong enough, not only to justify his standpoint, but also to refute counterarguments. Again, the arguer may do this only to give his argumentation the appearance of conclusiveness, for instance by addressing only weak counterarguments and ignoring stronger ones.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to argue that the pragma-dialectical approach, with its recognition of the importance of the rhetorical dimension of argumentation, is better enabled to capture not only how persuasiveness differs from convincingness (reasonable persuasiveness) but also how persuasiveness is achieved. Starting from the pragma-dialectical concept of conclusiveness as a condition for getting one’s standpoint accepted in a critical discussion, I have argued that ordinary argumentation gains in persuasiveness insofar as it is presented as conclusive. I have tried to show that this view of persuasiveness as conditioned by the *appearance of conclusiveness* is in line with recent empirical findings of persuasion effects research and can be useful in explaining why some forms of fallacious argumentation tend to be more persuasive than others.

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<sup>3</sup> See O’Keefe 2006 for a discussion of the results of his meta-analyses.

[link to commentary](#)

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