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# Comment on Beth Innocenti's "Paying a Cost of Metadialogue: Reasonable Observations and Another Example on Handling Unwarranted Retreats to Metadialogue"

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**Abstract:** Beth Innocenti has offered an insightful explanation on halting retreats to metadialogues by utilizing Krabbe's (2003) concept of paying a cost of metadialogue. Her analysis uses Krabbe's concept to interpret various strategies that social actors take as reasonable during disagreement. Her analysis provides insight when applied to a different case.

**Keywords:** Metadialogue, Normative pragmatics, Obama 2008 primary campaign

## 1. Introduction

In her insightful essay, "Halting retreats to metadialogues" Beth Innocenti considers the way people engage in public discussion about systemic sexism in the US. Experience with sexism, she observes, remains widespread for many women. Yet activists and writers have observed that many discussions about sexism become derailed when a discussant qualifies key claims in the discussion by cautioning that "not all men" act in sexist or harmful ways. Innocenti examines when this phrase derails the discussion, and the practical strategies social actors use to halt the "retreat to metadialogue," when actors become excessively focused on dialogue about the phrase instead of the ground level discussion.

The aim of these comments are to summarize Beth Innocenti's analysis, describe its benefits, and apply it briefly to a different case, the discourse between Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Barak Obama during the 2008 US Presidential campaign. In all, Innocenti's analysis shows the usefulness of studying how the balance between addressing legitimate moves and stopping retreats to nit-picking dialogues is managed in argumentative interaction.

## 2. Innocenti's Analysis

Beth Innocenti observes that there are limited avenues within a strategic maneuvering approach to analyze metadialogues in argumentation. The use of directives, for instance, in banishing others' use of "not all men" would be rejected in a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 64), but is nevertheless often used by social actors (Innocenti and Kathol, 2018). To solve the problem of regulating retreats into metadialogue, Innocenti proposes using Krabbe's observation that social actors "strike a balance" between contesting a ground level move, and having a "means of defense" against retreats into metadialogue by paying a cost of the metadialogue (Krabbe, 2003, p. 83). It should be noted that Krabbe is particularly interested in solving the problem when "one is confronted with nit-picking or completely unwarranted charges" (Krabbe, 2003, p. 83).

To illustrate the merits of her claim, Innocenti analyzed an online post essay by Brenda Wambui, titled “The problem with ‘not all men’ and why you should stop saying this” (2014). Innocenti notes that Wambui is a writer whose post illustrates the types of online objections about the “not all men” phrase and who expresses, with considerable outrage, her case as to why using the phrase is a problem and why people should stop using the phrase. Innocenti’s analysis employs a design perspective to see if the strategies social actors use and the reasons they employ fit with Krabbe’s concept of paying a cost. Her analysis describes the responsibilities and obligations to using particular strategies in the context, and identifies three moves.

First, building off her previous scholarship on demanding (Innocenti & Kathol 2018), Innocenti observes that Wambui expresses a demand (2014). The demand is comprised of strategies designed for addressees to understand that Wambui occupies the substantive and procedural high ground to expect that her addressees should halt their use of the phrase.

Second, Wambui uses two strategies to prevent addressees from dismissing her demand that they stop using the phrase. One strategy involves describing women’s extensive experience with harassment, which serves as a rebuttal to undermine the phrase. Wambui also makes three observations about women and the topics of violence, education and pay. For each topic, she argues that a single counter-instance does not deny the existence of systemic sexism. Innocenti points out that for each strategy Wambui creates a context to show that interactants pay a cost of public resentment if they continue using the phrase “not all men.”

Finally, Innocenti observes that Wambui also creates a context that shows that she herself is risking paying a cost as a credible podcaster by seeming to behave inappropriately. Indeed, Wambui repeatedly and vividly expresses outrage, contempt and sarcasm toward her addressees using ALL CAPS, accusatory questions and explicit criticism. Innocenti reasons that addressees may determine that it may be too risky to continue saying “not all men,” for Wambui displays confidence that the public will approve her case.

Innocenti concludes that Krabbe’s (2003) concept of paying the cost of a metadialogue is worth further study for several reasons. Paying a cost of metadialogue is a means to regulate interaction that fits social actors’ lay theories about strategies. In so doing paying a cost fits normative pragmatics scholarship in argumentation (e.g., Goodwin, 2001; Kauffeld, 1998;). Paying a cost also provides a way to discover the reasonableness of unruly moves. Finally, the concept of paying a cost can incorporate both punitive and worthy strategies as ways to regulate disagreements. Innocenti (2020) concludes that “it is also possible for social actors to regulate by rewarding good moves ...for displaying open-mindedness, kindness, empathy, or other qualities.”

### **3. Benefits**

Merging Krabbe’s concept of paying a cost of a metadialogue with normative pragmatics does open up opportunities for argumentation scholars. The concept of equity itself could be further probed; what does the local achievement of equity and balance look like in critical discussion? Do arguers assess payoffs and tradeoffs similar to Brown and Levinson’s analysis of politeness? Paying a cost also calls for analyzing beneficial regulation moves; for instance what latitude does empathy create for arguers as they exchange reasons? Studying questionable moves may also be conducted; for instance, what kinds of conditions permit the suitable use of name calling or hyperbole?

Further analysis could also be undertaken to study what warranted and unwarranted moves look like within Krabbe's concept of metadialogue. While Krabbe acknowledges that his view is focused on confrontations forwarded by nit-picking or "completely unwarranted charges" (Krabbe 2003, p. 8), would the analysis of metadialogues be the same if the charges were only somewhat unwarranted? Evidence that one actor may deem completely unwarranted another actor new to the discussion may consider to be quite warranted. Repeating the phrase may also be warranted since Wambui does not engage in any explication of systemic racism; no institutions or processes are discussed that could display the phrase's relevance. Thus, in the present case how does one understand the reasonableness of repeated use of the phrase?

There is also another level of analysis that could have been expanded upon by the interactants. That is, Wambui's strategy involved disqualifying the phrase "not all men" because critiquing sexism is not the same as critiquing systemic sexism. One could argue that these two different claims are confounded in the discussion, much as Charles Blow, *New York Times* journalist, maintains about systemic racism: critiquing racists is not the same as critiquing systemic racism.

#### **4. Another example of paying a cost: Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Barack Obama**

To examine the merit of Beth Innocenti's analysis, I applied it, albeit briefly, to a different example, systemic racism in the US. The specific body of discourse I examined was news coverage of the 2008 US Presidential primary campaign, during which inflammatory sermons by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Senator Obama's pastor, threatened to undermine Obama's campaign (Ross & Kline, in press). The lines of argument by Wright and Obama show efforts to advance and halt retreats to metadialogue about Obama's patriotism and anti-white sentiments.

*Summary of events.* During Obama's 2008 primary campaign video excerpts emerged of certain sermons of Obama's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Viewers saw Wright proclaiming in a fiery tone that instead of "singing God Bless America" it should be "God damn America." Viewers also saw Wright declaring that the 9/11 attacks were examples of "chickens coming home to roost" as retribution for US racist history and that US racist policies produced the drug problems experienced by the black community. Revelations of Obama's relationship with a pastor who would express seemingly unpatriotic beliefs posed a problem for Obama's campaign as the first African-American nominee for the Presidency. Political commentators and voters questioned Obama's judgment for being associated with a person who seemed to espouse unpatriotic and anti-white sentiments (Logan, 2011).

Wright's sermon clips were widely viewed on YouTube and used by Republicans in their campaign ads. Obama's campaign staff initially responded with biographical background on Wright, such as his military service and his creation of a church that provides numerous social services for Chicago's south side. Wright had also officiated the Obamas' wedding, baptized their children and inspired Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope*. Obama declared Wright's statements "inflammatory and appalling" but his three percentage point lead over Clinton evaporated (Kinder & Dale-Riddle, 2012, pp. 41-44) and Obama's image as a unifier was questioned.

Obama then announced he would give a speech on race to place Wright and his sermons in their "proper context" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 78). In "A More Perfect Union" Obama described Wright's accomplishments, preaching, and black church traditions. While not disowning Wright, Obama argued that Wright's static view of race prevented the country from moving toward a

more perfect union, the American dream (Frank, 2009). The speech drew widespread praise and Obama regained his lead over Clinton (Berry & Gottheimer, 2010).

It was not until late April that Wright defended himself in three media appearances. In them Wright explained black church traditions which he said were not understood by white Americans who followed European Christian traditions. At the Press Club, however, Wright also reiterated his controversial sermon claims in an intense question-and-answer session and interpreted Obama's race speech as politically posturing, actions that prompted Obama break off his relationship from Wright. Then on May 25<sup>th</sup> Rev. Michael Pfleger, a local priest and activist, preached at Trinity church during which he mocked a Clinton campaign appearance, "I'm Bill's wife. I'm white..." (Madigan, 2009). Obama quickly condemned Pfleger's comments and resigned from Trinity church.

*Analysis.* Innocenti's analysis supplies a fresh perspective to view the communication strategies and argumentation that occurred between Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barak Obama, the print media and cable/internet viewers. Wright's sermon excerpts implicitly advanced the claim that Wright and his views were unpatriotic and anti-white. News articles and Obama's campaign could not dislodge this view, despite factual refutations, and the growing accusation was that Obama was unpatriotic and anti-white, too. While a specific argumentation analysis is not produced here, one can glimpse Krabbe's concept of paying a cost at work in Obama's campaign challenge.

How did Obama halt this retreat to a metadialogue on Obama's patriotism? Obama quickly decided to pay a cost by engaging in the risky move of giving a speech on race. His strategy was to directly respond to the media's accusations about Wright and himself by engaging in many explanations, including explanations of Wright's accomplishments, Black church aims and rhetoric, 1960's era discrimination and protest style, racial progress, and his views about race and economic progress. Obama's lofty style and explanations were sufficient to respond to the accusations and quell voter discontent. While news commentators had also called on Obama to disown Wright he refused: "I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother ... a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world" (Obama, 2008). Obama's response was widely cited and expressed his resoluteness that public approval would follow, which it did.

However, Wright's subsequent media appearances, particularly his appearance at the National Press Club, displayed the same bombast and inflammatory views from his sermons he had given years earlier, which expressed a range of unpatriotic and anti-white views that would again be associated with Obama. One might ask if Wright paid a serious cost of public resentment with his answers to the moderator's questions at his Press Club appearance. Wright, however, maintained that he was above political maneuvering; rather Wright's authority and job was to preach the Scriptures, which dispelled any risk of public disapproval or perceived inappropriateness.

So, if Rev. Wright is immune to paying a cost with his argument moves, how is Obama supposed to halt this retreat to metadialogue about his patriotism? Soon after viewing the Press Club appearance, Obama announced he was severing his ties with Wright: "His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate... They certainly don't portray accurately my values and beliefs." Severing his extensive and close relationship with Wright set up a definite halt to questions about Obama's patriotism and anti-white sentiment.

Yet Obama's actions were not enough to quell questions about his patriotism and anti-white sentiment. Soon after Rev. Pfleger and mocked Hillary Clinton at a Trinity church service, saying "I'm Bill's wife. I'm white... I'm entitled." Upon press accounts of this performance, Obama halted the retreat to metadialogue by denouncing Pfleger, "I am deeply disappointed in Father Pfleger's divisive, backward-looking rhetoric," and then resigned from Trinity church. Thereafter, Rev. Wright was not mentioned in a substantive way in media coverage of Obama's campaign.

## 5. Conclusion

Beth Innocenti argues that Krabbe's (2003) concept of paying a cost likely involves a variety of strategies interactants use to manage their disagreements. Her essay displays the usefulness of Krabbe's concept. Future research could aim to discover more regulative strategies that help achieve senses of equity in argumentative interaction.

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