Commentary on Krabbe

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Erik Krabbe’s The Problem of Retraction in Critical Discussion (1999) represents a further development of the discussion in (Walton and Krabbe, 1995) of retraction and the tension between the need to retract (as an ultimate aim of the critical discussion, indeed), and the need for an interlocutor to stick to what her or she has said (in a spirit of reasonableness). The paper clearly motivates the need for an account, sets out desiderata of what an account should accomplish, and presents a taxonomy of statements, which specific rules of retraction can be based. Although Krabbe claims that the model is "sketchy and of a preliminary character", it nevertheless presents a comprehensive view of the key issues.

This commentary discusses two potential problems with Krabbe’s analysis, one concerned with the ISA, and one on the issue of ‘agendas’ – lists of dialogic tasks that interlocutors may be maintaining.

Relevance and the ISA

The Internal Stability Adjustment (ISA) is proposed as a definition of the effects on an interlocutor’s commitment set of the retraction of an assertion. The idea is that retracting an assertion requires the concomitant retraction of all those premises which support that assertion, premises which support those premises, and so on. Krabbe offers his example 7 (hereafter K7) to demonstrate the idea:

(K7)

Peter: The fine skating weather is holding.
Olga: Why?
Peter: According to John, the almanac says so.
Olga: What good is the almanac?
Peter: Well, perhaps not much, but look at these weather reports.
Olga: And John, is he to be trusted?

[where the propositions are abbreviated thus: $p$ – "The fine skating weather is holding"; $q$ – "John says that the almanac says that the fine skating weather is holding"; $r$ – "What John says is right"; $s$ – "What the almanac says is right"]

The strangeness and, importantly, irrelevance of the question at K7-line6 is explained as being a result of Peter’s retraction of $r$ which occurred at K7-line5 following the action of the ISA with his move No commitment(s).
K7, however, seems to suffer from several problems, which confuse the issue to the extent, perhaps, that the conclusion is unwarranted.

The first problem is Peter’s statement at K7-line3. Is Peter claiming that he believes that "the almanac says so"? Presumably, he is, but if that is the case, then the profile offered in K8 needs amending to include the new proposition, a.

Relatedly, the use of hearsay itself is problematic, particularly for diagrammation. If an analysis follows Freeman’s (1991) account, it is necessary that the implicit premises in K7 are replying to either the ground adequacy or relevance questions ("Can you give me another reason for believing the claim", and "Why is that premise relevant to the claim", respectively). Seeing "What John says is right" as answering the relevance question of the link between "John says the almanac says so" and "The almanac says so", is clearly the preferred option, but it is not particularly intuitive.

To illuminate the discussion below, Peter’s argument in K7 might be diagrammed as in Figure 1 – Figure 1a shows the argument with the inclusion of the premise a; Figure 1b suggests its form if a is conflated into the support arc from q to p. The diagramming style follows (Reed, 1999), but is similar to more conventional approaches, if arrows pointing to arrows are viewed as equivalent to connected arrows of linked support.

When Peter claims No commitment(s), the retraction of s (before the ISA steps in) in some way destroys the link from a to p (in Figure 1a) or from q to p (in Figure 1b). To emphasise: No commitment(s) both retracts s, and does something else. Krabbe proposes that the ‘something else’, coordinated by the ISA, is the immediate retraction of a, q, and r.

Given the complications introduced by hearsay, (1) below is offered as an
isomorphic, but less complicated, example of the structure diagrammed above in Figure 1a (although the discussion assumes that the inclusion of the premise \( a \) is reasonable, it does not rely upon the assumption). In addition to eliminating hearsay, (1) also attempts to make all of the premises diagrammed above explicit.

(1) Peter: The fine skating weather is holding [this May].

Olga: Why?
Peter: Well, it was good last May because I remember getting a suntan at OSSA – OSSA is always in May, you see. I find that the Canadian weather is always predictable from one year to the next.
Olga: Are you sure that the weather’s that predictable?
Peter: Well, perhaps not much, but look at these weather reports.
Olga: Are you sure OSSA’s in May every year?

[where the propositions are abbreviated \( p \) – "The fine skating weather is holding"; \( a \) – "It was good last May"; \( q \) – "I remember getting a suntan at OSSA"; \( r \) – "OSSA is always in May"; \( s \) – "The Canadian weather is predictable from one year to the next"]

Given the isomorphism between (1) and K7, the No commitment(s) leads, under the ISA, to the concomitant retraction of \( a \), \( q \), and \( r \) – the various happy memories of an OSSA conference. Intuitively however, the retraction of commitment seems a little strong: simply acceding that Canadian weather may be unpredictable does not necessarily alter my adherence to beliefs about last year’s OSSA conference.

One way of attacking the problem might be to view retraction as simply the breaking of a link an argument – in the example above, it is the "a supports p" link which becomes broken. Such link breaking is probably feasible in many theories (in (Reed, 1999), for example, it would be represented by the addition to the speaker’s set of beliefs of \(~(a \circ p)\)). Importantly, such breaking of a link would leave sections of an argument intact, but ‘orphaned’. The irrelevance of the final question in K7 and example (1), might then be definable on the grounds that it questions orphaned argument components.

A key reason for adopting this approach is re-use: let us assume that (1) represents a fragment in the middle of a larger dialogue, and that at some later stage, Peter needs to argue for the fact that the weather last year was good:

(2)

Peter: The weather last year was good – it was good in May, for example. Remember what I said about OSSA?
Olga: Oh yes, OK.

Thus the \( a, r, j \) complex is being re-used in support of another argument, and it is reasonable to assume that Peter has his commitments to those premises
left intact from their earlier utterance. The formerly orphaned components have been ‘adopted’.

**Agendas and implicit concession**

All of the examples presented in (Krabbe, 1999) present argumentation which is either serial or linked in structure. Presumably in the interest of clarity and brevity, none involve convergent argumentation, where several reasons independently support a conclusion. Although only hinted at in (Krabbe, 1999) it is quite clear from (Walton and Krabbe, 1995) that the various concerns of the ISA and its counterpart the External Stability Adjustment are built on the assumption that convergent sibling arguments are exempt from consideration. Thus in example (3), the final question does not seem irrelevant, and the ISA would not have pruned it from Peter’s tree of commitments at his no commitment on the penultimate line.

(3)

Peter: The fine skating weather is holding
Olga: Why?
Peter: The blackbirds are singing, the weather reports are good, and I've got two hundred exam scripts to mark – and the weather's always good when I've got marking to do.
Olga: Those aren't blackbirds I hear!
Peter: Well, OK.
Olga: Are you sure about those weather reports?

A point that needs clarifying from the theory in (Krabbe, 1999), however, is why it is that Olga does not concede any of Peters other points by questioning a single one of them. Clearly she is not making any concessions, but the structure seems somewhat analogous to that in K15, where, by asking "So what?", Olga is conceding that "the almanac says so". Thus it may be worthwhile to make the linked-convergent distinction explicit and include it in the development of rules of retraction, to enable an interlocutor to address single issues at a turn, but to have an agenda of other issues that he or she wants to address at subsequent turns.

A related concern is that it is not made clear when a question involves implicit concession, and when it does not. To illustrate, fragments of K15, K16, K19 and K20 are shown below:

(K15)


(K16)

\(P: q \ [\& r: \text{therefore } p]\)
P: q \[&r: therefore p\]
O: Concession(q). Why(r)? O: Why(q)?

The question here is obvious: why does "So what?" involve concession of the other component of the linked argument structure, and "How come?" not? This question seems further complicated by the subtle effect that phrasing might have. Clearly, somewhere between "So what?", "Even if it does, so what?", and "Even if it does – which I do not concede – so what?", the implicit concession is eliminated.

Then again, order seems to play an important role. Consider the full example K15, and then a modified version, example (4):

(K15)

Peter: The fine skating weather is holding.
Olga: Why?
Peter: The almanac says so.
Olga: So what?
Peter: John says the almanac can’t be wrong about this.
Olga: Perhaps it isn’t in the almanac.

Krabbe’s comment is that O’s behaviour "may raise some eyebrows", and goes on to suggest that it may be appropriate in permissive dialogue, but not in rigorous. The problem is that Olga concedes q implicitly with her "So what?", and then goes on to question it on the last line. If the order is changed, however, it becomes less clear that there is a problem:

(4)

Peter: The fine skating weather is holding.
Olga: Why?
Peter: The almanac says so.
Olga: Perhaps it isn’t in the almanac.
Peter: John says it definitely is.
Olga: But just because the almanac says so, so what?

Thus, even in linked argumentation, the problem recurs that an interlocutor may be maintaining an agenda of items which he or she wants to tackle, and that dealing with only one at a given turn does not necessarily imply concession of the others.

Concluding remarks

The work presented in (Krabbe, 1999) discusses a crucially important problem, and offers an approach to a solution. It then goes on to outline one such solution. The comments here reflect potential problems and avenues for
future work with the solution: the general approach Krabbe proposes by which the problem can be tackled seems at once powerful and refined, and I look forward to the development of a complete, rigorous solution to the problem of retraction in critical discussion reached by the route Krabbe has so clearly indicated.

References

(Freeman, 1991) Freeman, J.B., *Dialectics and the Macrostructure of Arguments*, Foris

