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Commentary on: Lilian Bermejo-Luque’s “Assessing presumptions in argumentation: Being a sound presumption vs. being presumably the case”

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1. INTRODUCTION

I want to thank program planners for the opportunity to respond Dr. Bermejo-Luque’s paper and also to thank Lilian for a very interesting and instructive essay. Regardless of some areas disagreement, I think Lilian would agree that presumption comprises a topic great importance to students of argumentation and, also, that it has received far too little careful attention. In what follows I will first offer an overview Lilian’s account; I will note a serious reservation, before turning what to what I take to be the major area in which we may disagree.

2. BERMEJO-LUQUE’S ANALYSIS OF PRESCRIPTION

According to Lilian’s account presumptions are a kind of speech act on the order of constantives like assertions and promises. “Like assertions,” she writes presumptions may be correct or incorrect as speech acts, and it is their correctness condition as speech act what determines the semantic assessment of those pieces of argument that involve them.” In the interest of ultimately providing normative models for argumentation, Lilian gives priority to the questions, “. . . what is a presumption, and what makes a presumption correct? In this connection she distinguishes presumptions from presumptive inferences and offer correctness conditions for both.

In response to the first question Lilian proposes that “a presumption is the speech act of putting forward a proposition as a reasonable assumption.” In this view a presumption will be correct, if the proposition put forward is a reasonable assumption. An assumption may be reasonable on both epistemic and pragmatic grounds. In turn, a presumptive inference, concluding in presumably that p, has a presumption as its warrant. Presumptive inferences, according to Lilian’s account, are valid (correct) “if the presumptions that constitute their warrants are correct presumptions. . . . And they will be good arguments if their reasons and warrants are both correct” (Bermejo-Luque, 2013).

Lilian’s paper fits this analysis into her larger picture of arguments as second order speech acts. With that overall view in mind, she addresses several questions
regarding presumptions for which theorists have offered different answers.

3. A PRELIMINARY RESERVATION

Professor Bermejo-Luque and I share overlapping interests and common concerns, but we approach study of presumptions from rather different perspectives. Both of us, it seems, suppose that students of argumentation ought to attend closely to the speech acts by means of which agents engage in arguments. Moreover, both of us are concerned with equipping argumentation studies with a sturdy armament for analysing and assessing arguments. But we approach these interests and concerns from somewhat different perspectives. Lillian works, we might say, from the top down. She has an apparently well-developed linguistic normative model for argumentation, LNMA, and her interest in presumption is explicitly directed to accounting for that practice, within her normative model for argumentation. I, on the other hand, approach study of presumptions more or less from the bottom-up. I start from the presumption, which animated the “discovery” of speech acts by Austin, Strawson, Grice, and others, that ordinary-day-to-day discursive practices rest on time-tested practical strategies which may need revision but which merit at least the supposition that they are coherent and productive (Austin, 1961; Grice, 1989; Strawson, 1964). Accordingly, I do not start from an abstract theoretical orientation to the study of presuming and presumption. My primary questions have been what are we doing when we presume things and what is that we take when we garner presumptions from this activity? Over the decades of working with pragmadiescipients, I have learned to respect and gain enlightenment from work animated by more abstract models, and I would not presume here on short notice to critique what seems to be a very interesting linguistic normative model for argumentation. Instead, I will express some reservations regard her account.

My first reservation focuses on the classification of presumptions as speech acts. Lillian is not alone in advancing this idea, and it has the theoretically motivated advantage of linking her work to various broader theories regarding speech acts. My immediate doubt focuses on whether presuming is properly and/or productively classified as a speech act. In J. L. Austin’s initial formulation of this term of art, and it will be recalled that Austin “discovered” this family, speech acts are performed in and by saying something or doing something which is the virtual equivalent of saying something (Austin, 1962). In promising, for example the speaker must (both conceptually and practically) say that she will do that which she promises to do (or produce a semantically equivalent utterance). Now, is possible to presume something in an utterance-act which explicitly involves a speaker’s saying that which she presume, e.g., “Dr. Livingston, I presume.” And we have forms of speech in which a supposition conforming to Lilian’s analysis can be presented in appropriate utterance, e.g., ‘It is reasonable to assume that p’. Still, I seriously doubt whether throughout our pervasive practice of presuming things, anything more than a very small proportion of such acts involve saying anything. You, for example, invite me to a reception; I enter the appropriate room, presuming that I will be welcome. There may be a conversational exchange affirming this presumption, but such exchange is not conceptually, and often would not be practically, necessary. Again, as a standing
presumption, we presume good will and proper regard from our fellows (Strawson, 1968). These presumptions, integral to the texture of our day-to-day lives are apt to be articulated only when they are breached.

Were we to seriously count presumptions as speech acts, we would populate our cognitive/discursive domain with a bewildering array of speech acts. Consider, if I seriously say and apparently mean that p, my utterance act warrants (other things being equal) the presumption that I am sincerely expressing beliefs the rational and empirical adequacy of which I have made a reasonable effort to ascertain. Do we want to say in this case that I have performed the act of seriously saying something and in the course of performing that act I have performed a second speech act of presuming something? The consequent multiplication of (redundant) acts of presuming in our social/cognitive space would simply be enormous.

4. PRINCIPLE RESERVATION

Lillian’s rather elegant conception of a correct presumption as a reasonable assumption has a certain theoretical appeal and, given the complexities of the relationships between assumptions and presumption in our ordinary cognitive scheme and corresponding practice, it has some plausibility as theoretical move. However, regarding her conception from the standpoint of what can be ascertained about our ordinary conceptions and practices of these two important activities, it seems to me that Lillian’s conception of their relationship may well confound the two to the detriment our capacity to critically evaluate relevant argumentation.

As I have argued at some length elsewhere, from an ethno-methodological perspective, assuming and presuming are commonplace ways of taking something on the basis of reasons. They have this in common: both are taken on the basis of reasons which involve social considerations as well considerations related to the substantial basis for the inference. Thus, I presume that A will be home by seven on the grounds that A promised me to be home by that time; whereas, I might assume that A will return at that time because she normally does and no one, myself included has (so far as I can see) reason to suppose otherwise. Accordingly presumptions have strength and force; if A does not return by 7:00, she has some accounting to do. On the other hand, if I have merely assumed on the basis of past regularity that A will be back by seven, the responsibility for this error is mine, not hers. These differences between assuming and presuming ramify in somewhat ascertainable ways.

Interesting differences also emerge when we consider the risks involved in assuming and presuming things. Assumptions may be safe or dangerous. We say ‘That’s a safe assumption; everything argues for it, nothing against it’ or ‘It’s dangerous to assume that; this is a very controversial matter’. The risks involved in

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1 Another similarity is that both assumptions and presumptions characteristically operate where more substantive reasons for accepting a proposition, when available, leave us less than certain. If the facts of the case provide good and sufficient reason to believe that p, there would be little call to assume or presume p.
making an assumption are run by the assumer. One may be justified or warranted in assuming that \( p \), but an assumption is something one takes upon oneself in that typically one bears a singular responsibility for the adequacy of what one assumes. When a person presumes something, he or she characteristically takes it as something to which he or she is entitled. In this connection presumptions are subject to abuse in ways which assumptions are not. Where a person presumes something to which he or she is not entitled, his or her behaviour takes the form of a pretension; we describe it as “presumptuous,” using a disparaging sense of this term. Of such a person we ask, “Who does she think she is?” Assumptions are also subject to abuse, as when we speak of an arrogant assumption, but we do not have a concept of “assumptuous” behavior.

Analysis shows that presumptions come to hand by virtue of reasons that have a rather definite form. The superior presumes that his subordinate will comply rather than risk reprobation for disobedience. Smith might presume upon his friendship with Jones by entering the latter’s home, expecting Jones to acquiesce rather than suffer Smith’s resentment upon being expelled. In each of these examples something is taken to be the case on the grounds that someone has or will have made that the case rather than risk resentment, criticism, reprobation, loss of esteem, or even punishment for failing to do so. Here we find the defining mark of presumption. We commonly use the expression ‘He/she would not dare (do anything so outrageous as) . . . ’ to frame presumptive inferences.

Assumptions, on the other hand, are inferred on something like this basis: in the present circumstance \( p \) may (safely) be taken as being true because no relevant party is likely to raise compelling objections or doubts regarding \( p \). Accordingly, we describe assumptions as suppositions which are taken for granted. To take something as being true is not to suppose that it is true; rather, it is to treat that proposition as true for purposes of the discussion, inquiry, decision, etc., even though it may not be known to be true and might even be known to be false (Kauffeld, 1995).

My primary concern with Lilian’s account is that it blurs the difference between these related, but essentially distinction cognitive and discursive activities in ways which, where we to adopt her model and account as a primary matrix for argument evaluation, would blunt rather than sharpen our capacity for normative evaluation of arguments.

REFERENCES