The Virtues of Argumentation from an Amoral Analyst's Perspective

MARIANNE DOURY

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
Laboratoire Communication et Politique
Paris
France
marianne.doury@cnrs.fr

Abstract: Many French-speaking approaches to argumentation are deeply rooted in a linguistic background. Hence, they "naturally" tend to adopt a descriptive stance on argumentation. This is why the issue of "the virtues of argumentation"— and, specifically, the question of what makes an argument virtuous— is not central to them. The argumentative norms issue nevertheless cannot be discarded, as it obviously is crucial to arguers themselves: the latter often behave as if they were invested with some kind of argumentative policing duty when involved in dissensual exchanges. We describe several researches developing a descriptive approach to such ordinary argumentative policing: we claim that the virtues of argumentation may be an issue even for an amoral analyst. We will connect this issue with linguistic remarks on the lexicon of refutation in English and in French.

Résumé: De nombreuses approches de langue française à l'argumentation sont profondément enracinées dans une formation linguistique. Par conséquent, ils ont «naturellement» tendance à adopter une attitude descriptive sur l'argumentation. C'est pourquoi la question des «vertus de l'argumentation» et, en particulier, la question de ce qui fait un argument vertueux, n'est pas primordiale pour eux. La question des normes argumentatives néanmoins ne peut pas être écartée, car il est évidemment crucial aux raisonneurs eux-mêmes: ceux-ci se comportent souvent comme s'ils étaient investis d'une sorte de devoir de maintenir l'ordre argumentatif lorsqu'ils sont impliqués dans des échanges divergents. Nous décrivons plusieurs recherches qui développent une approche qui décrit un tel maintien d'ordre ordinaire dans l'argumentation: nous prétendons que les vertus de l'argumentation peuvent être un problème, même pour un analyste amoral. Nous allons relier ce problème à des remarques linguistiques sur le lexique de réfutation en anglais et en français.

Keywords: norms, descriptive approach, meta-discourse, argumentative practice

1. Normative *versus* descriptive perspective

In some way, the research orientation presented is this paper is quite representative of a trend in French-speaking argumentation

studies—even if the phrase "a trend in French-speaking argu-mentation studies" sounds a little bit too ambitious for the reali-ty it refers to.[1]

The approaches I am referring to are descriptive; they aim at analyzing the discursive and interactional mechanisms in-volved in argumentative discussions, but they are little—if at all—committed in assessing the argumentative devices thus identified.

This preference for a descriptive stance on argumentation is characteristic of scholars in argumentation studies originating from the field of linguistics, rhetoric, or from that of French dis-course analysis (Amossy 2009, 2012). Such scholars by and large adhere to Plantin's claim according to whom there is noth-ing like a linguistic marker of the truth or soundness of a dis-course, any more than there are markers of proper or beautiful discourse: "*Il n'y a pas plus de marqueur linguistique du dis-cours vrai que de marqueurs linguistiques du bon ou du beau discours*," writes Plantin (2002: 237).

Beyond contrasting disciplinary anchorages, there also may be deeper cultural reasons for this theoretical divide of ar-gumentation studies into normative *versus* descriptive approach-es.

This cultural hypothesis may be supported by an observa-tion I made when beginning to work on my paper for the 2013 OSSA conference on "The virtues of Argumentation".

2. "Virtuous argument" ~ "*argument vertueux*"

As any conscientious participant to the 10th OSSA conference, my first concern when preparing my talk was to fit its theme, "Virtues of argumentation." It did not seem obvious to me how the phrase "Virtues of argumentation" should be understood. As a result of linguistic scruples due to my non-native speaker sta-tus, I took the title "Virtues of argumentation" not in the general sense of "the benefits that one can expect from the practice of argumentation", but in the restricted sense of "what makes an argument virtuous." Even understood that way, I still had to face a hesitation that was due partly to a conceptual uncertainty, and partly to a feeling of linguistic insecurity: does the phrase 'the virtues of argumentation' mean the same thing as the French '*les*

---

[1] I prefer "French-speaking approaches" to "French approaches" insofar as the researches I am referring to are developed in France, but also in Belgium, in Switzerland, or in Israel; the number of French-speaking scholars whose research is essentially focused on argumentation may be estimated at about 20 people.

vertus de l'argumentation?' The way I proceeded to handle this question was to turn to a Google search to have a look at the uses of the phrases 'virtuous argument' and '*argument vertueux*' in context. What came out was a spectacular divergence between the uses of the French phrase '*argument vertueux*' and that of the English corresponding phrase 'virtuous argument.'

As a result of this Google search, the phrase 'virtuous argument' seems to appear in casual contexts as well as in scientific settings. It is used by ordinary speakers (if anything such as an ordinary speaker ever exists) as well as by experts, or semi-experts, in rhetoric or argumentation studies. The following semantic considerations are drawn from the instances found on the Internet.[2]

The meaning which is associated to the phrase 'virtuous argument' is by and large stable. It refers to an argument that is acceptable[3], from a moral point of view, but also in a much broader sense. A "virtuous argument" is ethical in the sense that it is grounded in virtues such as sincerity, honesty, and accountability (through the support-giving requirement attached to it). It is respectful of the opponent and of the audience and shows open-mindedness, tolerance and generosity, for it requires the arguer to consider alternative points of view.[4] A "virtuous argument" also complies with the rules that warrant the validity of an argument. It favors the respect of principles rather than the achievement of persuasive objectives. A "virtuous argument" is "faithful to the ideals" of the speakers[5], at the risk of unrealism[6]; it is based on the speaker's humanity, or on "righteous reasons."[7] It may be inspired by religion[8], as well as by mundane principles.

---

[2] The footnote references to specific texts found on the Internet are meant to illustrate the meaning attached to 'virtuous argument' identified owing to a much broader research.

[3] http://kentuckyblog.blogspot.fr/2005/01/ignorancemeet-power.html

[4]   http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/03/16/essay-value-first-year-writing-courses

[5] Steven, *Nothing but the Truth. Why trial lawyers don't, can't, and shouldn't have to tell the whole truth*. http://books.google.fr

[6]

http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/bulletin/mtdailybulletin/article/1100512/pope-wants-robin-hood-tax-prayer/

[7]   David MacGarty, David Nott (eds), *Disaster Medicine. A case-based approach*. http://books.google.fr

[8] *The morality of Shakespeare's Drama illustrated by Mrs Griffith*. http://books.google.fr ; Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in Antebellum American Abolitionism, 1830-1870*. http://books.google.fr

"Virtuous argument" is opposed to "vicious argument," that is, an argument that is deemed purely instrumental, for which the end justifies the means; a vicious argument is "interest driven."[9] Non-virtuous arguments may be "vile," "misogynistic" and "repulsive"; they pertain to *toxic rhetoric*.[10]

These are the main semantic elements resulting from a survey of the results of a Google search with the phrase 'virtuous argument' as a keyword.

By contrast, the French expression '*argument vertueux*' turns out to be almost always used in a distanced and even antiphrastic, ironic way. Example 1 is typical of such a use of '*argument vertueux*.' It is drawn from the website of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, and it announces that in England 3D technology is being used to broadcast operas such as Carmen or Lucrezia Borgia in selected cinemas or on TV channels. The comment by the author of the paper on the communication surrounding this innovation runs as follows:

Example 1

> [*Pour camoufler le caractère lucratif de la démarche (qui n'a rien de choquant, au contraire), on nous ressert le même argument vertueux : encourager ceux qui, terrorisés, n'ont jamais mis les pieds dans une salle d'opéra, à franchir le pas*.][11]

> In order to conceal the lucrative dimension of the project (which is in no way shocking, on the contrary), we are served up again the same virtuous argument: it is a way of encouraging those who, terrified, have never set foot in an opera hall, to make the leap.

In this example, the expression 'virtuous argument' paradoxically refers to an argument which is subject to a negative assessment—it is paradoxical, since 'virtuous' is linguistically endowed with a positive assessment. The way the "virtuous argument" is introduced in this example ("we are served up again the same virtuous argument") views it as a well-worn, poorly conclusive argument. Besides, the so-called "virtuous argument"

---

[9] David MacGarty,David Nott (eds), *Disaster Medicine. A case-based approach*. http://books.google.fr

[10] http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/03/16/essay-value-first-year-writing-courses

[11] http://www.forumopera.com

is deceptive in that it is intended to conceal the real motives of the speaker, which have to do with financial issues. Thus, despite the clearly negative assessment attached to the phrasing of the argument, the adjective 'virtuous' is used, which clearly has a positive orientation. This antiphrastic use of 'virtuous' serves the denunciation of an ethotic strategy led by the speaker: the argument put forward to support the 3D broadcast of operas is used for its consensus-generating potential and its ethotic dimension. It makes the arguer appear anxious to provide culturally deprived people with an access to high-valued cultural goods. In that, it promotes a well-wishing, solidarity-oriented attitude that can meet nothing but agreement—one can hardly oppose the use of 3D broadcast of operas claiming that opera is, and should remain, restricted to an elite sophisticated enough to appreciate it at its real value. The so-called virtuous argument is thus discarded as purely strategic and insincere.

I will confine myself to this example to illustrate the use of the French expression '*argument vertueux*' that seems to prevail, but it is far from being an isolated, atypical example.

To sum up the certainly too hasty impressions conveyed by this cursory investigation of the 'virtuous argument' / '*argument vertueux*' phrases, it seems that in an Anglo-American context, people have no problem with qualifying an argument as virtuous, based on a set of backing principles or values which can be made more or less explicit. In contrast, in a French-speaking context, an argument can hardly be thought of as genuinely virtuous, without seeing in the displayed virtue a mere strategy aiming at prompting consensus on the thesis under discussion, and at attracting sympathy onto the arguer: a virtuous argument is a façade argument used to make the arguer himself appear virtuous.

3. Aristotle's *Logics* / Aristotle's *Rhetorics*

This contrasting approach to "virtuous argument" may be connected with contrasting traditions in argumentation studies. Most of the scholars whose research is rooted in Aristotle's *Dialectics* and *Logics* are English-speaking (whether they are native speakers or not, their research is mainly conducted in English). They develop an approach that handles arguments as sets of propositions structured along identifiable logical patterns. The evaluation of arguments requires that, beyond the identification of the logical pattern they show, further parameters be taken into account; these additional parameters allow handling characteristics of the context (Blair 2004) or interactional specifications.

   In contrast, most of French-speaking approaches to argumentation—and in particular, the approach I myself develop—come under two traditions. First, as mentioned before, some of them adopt a linguistic perspective. They may consider argumentative discourse as characterized by a specific regime of transphrastic coherence and come under a textual linguistics approach (here I thing mainly of Jean-Michel Adam's work on argumentation; see Adam, 2004[12]); some others, mainly inspired by Oswald Ducrot's research, claim that argumentative meaning is constrained by the linguistic system (Ducrot 1995, Anscombre & Ducrot 1983, Carel 2010). Typically, such a linguistic perspective on argumentation focuses on the way the use of argumentative connectors or the choice of lexical items prepares an utterance to support some conclusions over others by selecting specific semantic *topoï*. Such a view of argumentation cannot make sense of the notion of virtuous argumentation insofar as a linguistic approach is not designed to handle evaluative issues.

   Other approaches that inspired me, and which may highlight the preference for a strategic and somewhat cynical interpretation of French '*argument vertueux*,' are tied up with the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition (see for instance Amossy 2009, 2012; Declercq 1992). They consider argumentation as a social activity that can be investigated only in connection to a specific context characterized by specific stakes, animated by actors pursuing goals and using various means, among them verbal means, to achieve these goals. In such a perspective, the issue of the virtues of argumentation is seen through strategic glasses: an argument which displays respect for some principles or values is seen less as reflecting the arguers' sincere concern with producing a virtuous argument than as a means to enhance the persuasive potential of one's discourse through producing an ethos of *bona fide* that is favorable to the speaker.

   This opposition between essentially normative English-speaking approaches to argumentation, and essentially descriptive French-speaking ones, is not as clear-cut as the previous presentation suggests. Some French scholars adopt a normative stance on argumentation (see for instance Dufour 2008, Breton 1996); conversely, a growing number of English-speaking scholars pay a sustained attention to the discursive and interactional dimension of argumentation; I think of course of Jacobs and Jackson's seminal work on face-to-face argumentation (Jackson & Jacobs 1980, Jacobs 1987), but also of the Pragma-dialectic model, some of the recent developments of which fo-

---

[12] See also Micheli (2012a, b), who gives a crucial importance to the notion of *justification*.

cus on the practice of argumentation (see for instance van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005). Nevertheless, these approaches to argumentation, while showing an important descriptive and analytical concern, simultaneously advocate a normative and prescriptive stance that is largely absent from the French-speaking trend I am referring to.[13]

4. A descriptive approach to argumentative norms

In brief, maybe as a consequence of this double linguistic and rhetorical background, normative approaches to argumentation, that is, approaches aiming at proposing criteria for the assessment of argumentation, do not prevail in the francophone research on argumentation, which may be characterized, as I suggested before, as mainly descriptive (Amossy 2009, p. 254). However, adopting a descriptive perspective on argumentation clearly does not entail that one has no concern for argumentative norms. As Sally Jackson puts it, "A descriptive model pictures argumentation *as it occurs*, not necessarily as it *ought* to occur. But it is important to realize that a major part of any description will be a reconstruction of people's *own* normative ideas. That is, in order to adequately describe argumentative practice, we must realize that people already have ideas about whether and how they are obliged to defend their statements" (1989, p. 113).

The point made by Sally Jackson, and also advocated by Robert Craig (1996), Goodwin (1992) or Goldman (1994), meets some concerns expressed in France by Christian Plantin.[14] Since his early writings, Christian Plantin has been emphasizing the need to explore the spontaneous theories ordinary arguers rely on when taking part in argumentative exchanges (Plantin 1996, p. 16). A quick look at argumentative practice makes it obvious that such spontaneous theories have a normative component, which helps the arguers to elaborate their case and to evaluate their opponent's argument according to some stand-

---

[13] It is well known for the Pragma-dialectic model; it is also true for Jacobs and Jackson, who advocate a normative pragmatics (see Jacobs and Jackson, 2000). It still holds for Gilbert's theory of "coalescent argumentation"; after emphasizing the need for a solid descriptive component of any argumentation theory, Gilbert adds: "the elimination of violence as a response to disagreement is, and must be, the final aim of all Argumentation Theory" (1997: 145).

[14] Note that Jackson as well as Craig, Goodwin or Goldman, through this attention paid to argumentative practice and to its normative dimension, aim at contributing to its improvement; it is not centrally the case for Plantin, nor, to my knowledge, for most of French-speaking description-oriented scholars in argumentation.

ards. The standards for a "good" argument are more likely to be made explicit in agonistic contexts. In peaceful interactions, where argumentation fulfills a heuristic, inquiry-like function, the norms on which it rests often remain unstated.

As far as I am concerned, I am particularly interested in the issue of this normative dimension of everyday argumentative competence. Most of my research consists in exploring the critical activity led by speakers engaged in argumentative exchanges. Such a perspective on argumentation defines a research program that should address questions such as:

- When people dismiss the opponent's argument as unacceptable, what norms or principles do they resort to?
- What is the degree of generality of such norms or principles? Do they vary according to the domain of knowledge the issue under discussion falls in? Are they specific to a discursive genre (academic writings, political meetings, conjugal arguments)? Are they typical of a cultural area or of a period in history?
- Is the invocation of argumentative norms always subordinated to local strategic objectives (a norm is invoked because it enables one to dismiss the opponent's argument which supports a conclusion the arguer disagrees with)? Or does it sometimes reflect the ideal arguers should conform to, whatever their momentary rhetorical interest?
- To what extent does taking these argumentative norms into account improve the comprehension of the interactional dynamics of argumentative exchanges? For instance, how do the critical questions associated with a specific argument scheme structure the interactional sequence opened with that kind of argument?
- A last set of issues defined by a descriptive program dealing with argumentative norms has to do with their linguistic expression: how are such norms phrased? How are "good" or "bad" arguments qualified? How are they named? How are they defined?

These questions outline some of the possible orientations of an anthropological approach to argumentative norms that pays attention to the linguistic phrasing of arguments as well as to their interactional dynamics.

So far, I have explored this issue of ordinary argumentative norms in two ways.

5. Argument schemes' phrasing and critics

One way consists in analyzing how a specific argument scheme is used, phrased and criticized in a specific debate. The notion of critical questions as defined for instance by Douglas Walton (Walton and Godden 2005) or by the Pragma-dialectic theory (Garssen 2002) helps the analyst to identify and classify the refuting moves that may arise in relation to the use of a specific argument scheme. In return, the observation of the refuting moves addressing this argument scheme in a specific context may reveal local critical questions conditioning the acceptability of this argument scheme (Doury 1999a, 2005, 2006, 2009a).

   For instance, I have explored the way arguments from testimony run in many TV debates on pseudo-sciences (like astrology, parapsychology, etc.) (Doury 1999b). Apart from the usual critical questions addressed to check the reliability of any testimony (Govier 2001, pp. 145-147), the transcripts of TV debates on the subject show that the fact that the witness looks like a nice guy, as well as the fact that he is a run-of-the-mill person, with a run-of-the-mill life, are stated as arguments inviting people to trust his testimony.

   The "nice face" criterion may be used by the host of a TV show, as in the following example after two guests have recounted the out-of-body experience they underwent:

Example 2

> [*Patrick Poivre D'Arvor : alors, vous y croyez, vous y croyez pas, ça dépend, **c'est vrai qu'ils ont une bonne tête***][15]
>
> Patrick Poivre D'Arvor: believe them or not, at any rate they have nice faces

   Whatever its assessment with regard to rationality standards, I hold "at any rate they have nice faces" to be an argument oriented to the "believe them" branch of the conjunction ("believe them or not"); such an analysis permits us to account for the textual coherence of the sequence. Besides, whereas such an argument would probably be deemed bluntly fallacious by most of the normative analysts, it is not deprived of all psychological relevance: there is no serious doubt that the physical appearance of someone always influences to some extent the way the message he delivers will be perceived. It is all the more the case for

---

[15] *Ex Libris du 8 mars 1990, "avons-nous un sixième sens ?",* TF1.

arguments from testimony, which make the perception of the witness central to the acceptance of the claim. This criterion gains even more weight in the context of a TV broadcast, known to give a crucial importance to image issues.

The "run-of-them-mill" argument is more specifically linked with what is being testified to: testimonies about extraordinary events or facts seem to be deemed all the more credible when they are reported by banal, ordinary witnesses. It may explain why the host of the TV broadcast, when introducing the couple who underwent an out-of-body experience, insists on the fact that until then, they had ordinary people's life:

Example 3

> [*Patrick Poivre D'Arvor: Alors il est évident que quand on fait ce genre d'émission on essaye d'éviter les farfelus alors on a fait une petite enquête de voisinage pour savoir si les gens qu'on recevait étaient quand même convenables bon ceux-là ils le sont c'est ce qu'on nous dit chez vous et effectivement quand on vous lit on s'aperçoit que vous avez l'existence de monsieur tout le monde et de madame tout le monde jusqu'au jour où vous étudiant à Lille dans votre chambre vous pratiquez pour la première fois sans savoir de quoi il s'agissait un dédoublement astral*][16]

> Patrick Poivre D'Arvor: Well obviously when one prepares this kind of program one tries to avoid eccentrics, so we conducted a little inquiry in their neighborhood in order to make sure that the people we invited were at least respectable, well, these two are, that's what we've been told by your neighbours and in fact when one reads your book, one realizes that you have a run-of-the-mill way of life until the day when, while you were a student in Lille, in your room, you experience for the first time, without having ever heard of that, an astral split.

The ordinariness of witnesses is a recurring motive of arguments from testimony concerning UFO apparitions, communication with the dead experiences and other improbable matters of that kind; this motive is meant to increase the acceptability of the testimonies under discussion.

This quick evocation of the way argument from testimony works in the context of the debate on pseudo-sciences is meant to illustrate the fact that close attention paid to argumentation in

---

[16] *Ex Libris du 8 mars 1990, "avons-nous un sixième sens ?"*

various communication contexts, and specifically, attention paid to the way objections elicited by a specific argumentative scheme may be anticipated or answered, enables the analyst to identify which critical questions are intrinsically attached to this argument scheme "in the abstract," and which are context-dependent.

6. The lexicon of the ordinary critics of argumentation

The second main research orientation I have been exploring concerning ordinary argumentative critical practice is more lin-guistic-oriented. It focuses on the very words used by ordinary speakers to name and qualify argumentative phenomena. In this sense, it parallels the research conducted for instance by Robert Craig (1999) on what he calls "practical metadiscourse," and more specifically the exploration by Robert Craig (2011), Karen Tracy (Craig and Tracy, 2005), or Jean Goodwin (2007) of the "ordinary" use of words such as 'argument,' 'argue' or 'issue.'

Such a focus on the ordinary meta-language of argumenta-tion connects with the question of argumentative norms in that it appears that most of the meta-argumentative terms used by ordi-nary speakers have a normative dimension. It seems that speak-ers engaged in an argumentative discussion rarely talk about argumentation in general, or about specific argumentative pro-cesses, in a neutral way. Thus, argumentative daily practice sug-gests that categorizing an argument as displaying a specific ar-gument scheme is usually nothing but a preamble to its assess-ment—or even concomitant with it.

The exploration of argumentation meta-language is inter-esting in that it provides an access to ordinary, spontaneous, practical, proto-, or whatever one calls them, theories of argu-mentation.

My point is not to claim that spontaneous theories for ar-gumentation would be "better," more "true," more "accurate" than academic theories of argumentation. It is rather that, be-yond its anthropological interest, a good knowledge of ordinary views of argumentation (including ordinary argumentative standards), combined with a rigorous and systematic model of argumentation, might help one to gain in accuracy when analyz-ing arguments.

Besides, the idea that there would be something like *an ordinary theory of argumentation*, notably showing through ordinary meta-language of argumentation, is a fiction, for at least two reasons.

First, as suggested by Craig (1996: 465), it would be wiser to speak of sketches of theories, partial theories or even only of theoretical fragments: there is no reason why arguers should elaborate a systematic, complete, explicit theory of argumentation. Much more probably they resort to the theoretical modules that serve their local argumentative purposes.

Second, there is no reason why this ordinary theoretical substratum should be unified: as an element of the argumentative competence, it is plausibly heterogeneous, and varies from one cultural sphere to another, from one communication context or discursive genre to another, and even from one person to another.

To illustrate this point, consider the following dialogue, which is too beautiful to be true; I borrowed it from the Simpson's cartoon. The episode is entitled "Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment." In the episode, Homer gets an illegal cable hook-up. His daughter Lisa radically disapproves of that: for her, it amounts to stealing, and it is contrary to the 8th Commandment. Homer puts forward an argumentation in order to convince Lisa that if she considers using an illicit cable is stealing, then she herself can be said to steal things on many occasions. The argument runs as follows:

Example 4

> Lisa: Dad, why is the world such a cesspool of corruption?
> Homer: [sotto voce] Oh, great... [speaking up] All right, what makes you say that?
> Lisa: Well, in Sunday School, we learned that stealing is a sin.
> Homer: Well, DUH.
> Lisa: But everybody does it. I mean, we're stealing cable as we speak.
> Homer: Oh. Look at it this way, when you had breakfast this morning, did you pay for it?
> Lisa: No.
> Homer: And did you pay for those clothes you're wearing?
> Lisa: No, I didn't.
> Homer: Well, run for the hills, Ma Barker! Before I call the Feds!
> Lisa: **Dad, I think that's pretty spurious**.
> Homer [looking flattered]: **Well, thank you, honey**.

The comical effect of this sequence is due to a double discrepancy between Homer's and Lisa's communicative competences.

The first one has to do with an unequal distribution of lexical competence. Clearly, 'spurious' does not enter Homer's vocabulary, which may be deemed somewhat rudimentary, whereas his daughter Lisa is an educated and very smart person. Specifically, Homer's "thank you, honey" signals the fact that he takes 'spurious' to be a positive assessing word. Note that the interpretation of Homer's "thank you" as being ironic is reasonably excluded by non-verbal indications: Homer's tone of voice is cheerful, and his face shows a high degree of self-satisfaction.

Although probably hearing the word *spurious* for the first time, he is interpreting it as positively oriented in this specific context, and this has to do with a second type of discrepancy, which concerns argumentative standards. Homer seems to be very satisfied with the argument he has just put forward in order to discourage Lisa's virtuous tendencies, and he expects his daughter to echo his self-satisfaction: hence he tends to interpret the word 'spurious,' which he does not know, as laudatory. In contrast, the critical inquiry to which Lisa has submitted her father's argument concludes to a negative assessment of it ("Dad, I thing that's pretty spurious").

This example is quite typical of ordinary critics of argumentation, in that the criterion according to which Homer's argument has been negatively assessed remains unstated. Maybe Lisa has categorized her father's strategy as a *tu quoque ad hominem* argument. Homer charges her with having committed the same crime as the one she accuses him of; and she considers that the fact of charging her back with theft is irrelevant to the question under discussion (should they renounce using the illegal cable?). Maybe Lisa's reluctance to accept her father's line of argument is due to the definition of 'stealing' it relies on: for Homer, 'stealing' equates with "using something you have not paid for", whereas Lisa might well consider that such a definition is incorrect, for it would lead to qualify faultless behaviors as "thefts": nothing, in the dialogue, tells us which line of assessment corresponds to Lisa's reasoning.

Second, the critical activity displayed by Lisa is typical of daily arguments in that it cannot be isolated from strategic concerns. Lisa does not assess her father's argument from an exterior, neutral, disinterested perspective. She assesses it from her locally involved perspective, in connection with her rhetorical objective, namely, resisting her father's attempt at benumbing her guilt feelings, and even convincing him not to use the illicit cable. In this example, as is the case most of the time, argumen-

tative criticism occurs because it serves refuting objectives. This remark does not reflect a cynical perception of the use of argumentative norms in ordinary discourse: Lisa might well be sincere and readily adhere to the standards she invokes—and she even surely does (Lisa is a deeply virtuous person). My point is only that in "real-life" examples, the critical assessment of argumentation must be considered in the light of the participant's rhetorical local objectives.

7. Qualifying arguments

The research direction suggested by the Simpson example is certainly worth pursuing. Identifying and analyzing the various evaluative adjectives, like 'spurious' in the dialogue, that may be attached to the words 'argument' or 'argumentation' is a way of accessing ordinary argumentative norms.[17]

A quick survey in Googlegroups discussion forums suggests that an argument may be assessed in quite general terms. Typically, it may be deemed "good" or "bad." The principles of assessment underlying some of the evaluative adjectives associated with 'argument' may echo standard evaluation criteria of argument. Hence an argument may be deemed relevant or irrelevant, rational or irrational, reasonable or unreasonable (and sometimes, "reasonably rational"), logical or illogical, coherent or incoherent. After noting this superficial lexical convergence, one should of course check to what extent these oppositions, which go through daily argumentative discourse, conform to the way they are conceived of by argumentation scholars.

Another way of assessing arguments in ordinary discourse focuses on the effect it may have on the audience. When an argument is deemed "persuasive" or "convincing," "strong," "acceptable," "seductive," the evaluation standard seems to be the argument's efficiency, its ability for making the audience adhere to the thesis that it supports. When the argument is said to be "civil," "fair," "honest," or "virtuous," the evaluation rather rests on something like an ethics of communication.

Some qualifications of 'argument' are much more unexpected. It is the case for instance for "boring": "your argument is boring," writes "God incorporated" in alt.atheism. 'Boring' clearly carries a negative viewpoint on the argument. It may

---

[17] Goodwin's 2007 paper ("What, in practice, is an argument?") develops a quantitative approach to the discursive context in which the word 'argument' appears, and specifically, to the adjectives that may be associated to it, in the 1991 U.S. Congressional debate over initiating hostilities in the first Gulf War.

reflect a hedonist perspective on communication in general, and on argumentation in particular: an argument should be phrased in such a way as to elicit the audience's interest and to provide it with pleasure. 'Boring' may also refer to the lack of novelty of the argument: an argument is boring when it is neither interesting nor exciting because it is already known or heard or read. In both interpretations, a boring argument violates the efficiency criterion: in order to be persuasive, one must prevent the argument he uses from being boring.

A last example of how the evaluative adjectives associated with 'argument' suggest that ordinary critics of argumentation do not always follow the lines of normative academic theories of argumentation, is the rich paradigm that opposes "clever, smart, subtle" arguments to "dumb, silly, stupid" ones. No doubt that this assessment paradigm is quite common; no doubt either that it illustrates an original way of evaluating arguments with regard to usual academic normative perspectives on argumentation. It also is certain that making this criterion systematic and rigorous enough to make judgments such as "this argument is a smart one" or "this argument is fricking retarded"[18] intersubjectively decidable is a failure-destined endeavor.

8. Categorizing arguments

The research that I've been conducting on ordinary argumentative norms, when centered on lexical indicators, has been centered on nouns rather than on adjectives. It is based on the fact that, when interpreting the arguments they are confronted with, ordinary speakers do not stick to their literal, local meaning, but relate them to more general categories on the basis of the underlying abstract pattern they have identified. Such general categories connect more or less directly with classically identified argument schemes. Garssen's 2002 paper entitled "Understanding argument schemes" presents the results of experimental studies that have proved the cognitive reality of such an ordinary argumentative categorizing competence; he also shows that the distinction between the three main families of argument—comparative, symptomatic, causal arguments—echo by and large arguers' categorizing and qualifying competence.

Garssen considers that an arguer has correctly identified the scheme an argument belongs to when the strategies he uses to object to it fit the critical questions associated with this scheme by a theoretical model—here, Pragma-dialectics. An-

---

[18] http://www.tigerdroppings.com/rant/display.aspx?p=5708830

other complementary way of exploring the connection between spontaneous categorizations of arguments and academic or scholarly ones, requires once more that one pay attention to argumentation meta-language. What are the terms that ordinary arguers use to name the arguments they employ, or the arguments they are confronted with? Do these terms also belong to scholarly terminology of argumentation studies? Are they defined the same way? Is their assessment the same?

The terms used to categorize an argument may, or may not, have an evaluative dimension. For instance, an "example" or an "analogy" may be deemed "good" or "poor"; therefore the use of the terms 'example' or 'analogy' to designate an argument may be deemed neutral when not qualified. By contrast, certain terms always convey a negative perspective on the argument they refer to: it is the case for French word '*amalgame*,' which refers to an argument based on a parallel between two situations, persons or entities, on the basis of a connection which may be a causal relationship, or a resemblance, or an inductive move from the particular to the general. Whatever relationship it establishes, an "*amalgame*" is always deemed "fallacious": the phrase "a good *amalgame*" is self-contradictory (Doury 2005). Other words are much more ambiguous as regards the evaluative perspective they call for: this is the case for the word 'pretext.'

8.1 'Pretext'

'Pretext' is clearly a term belonging to the ordinary meta-language of argumentation. A pretext is a justification one advances as a reason motivating an action. A pretext may be put forward before the action has taken place; it then aims at influencing the decision. It may also be put forward *a posteriori*; it then aims at making the past decision appear legitimate. The arguer who is said to be using a pretext for an action is portrayed as carrying a means-end argumentation—an argumentation that obeys the following pattern:

> Measure M is designed to achieve end E.
> End E is desirable
> So,
> Measure M must be adopted.

But the story does not end here: beyond this neutral semantic core, 'pretext' also often carries a judgment about the reason it designates. This judgment does not concern the truth of the propositional content of the "pretext": the categorization of an argument as a pretext does not mean that Premise 1 or 2 are be-

ing challenged, nor does it mean that they do not support the conclusion. Categorizing an argument as a "pretext" has to do with the sincerity issue: the problem lies within the fact that, in the eyes of the speaker who calls an argument a "pretext," the arguer using the so-called "pretext" does not pursue the achievement of end E, but rather that of another end he wants to keep secret. Categorizing an argument as a pretext amounts to viewing the situation as implying an internal reasoning determined by a hidden agenda, and an externalized argumentation obeying a different end-means scheme, as illustrated in Figure 1:

Externalized argumentation:	Internal reasoning:
1. Measure M is a means to achieve end E.	1. Measure M is a means to achieve end E'.
2. End E is desirable	2. End E' is desirable
So, 3. Measure M must be adopted.	So, 3. Measure M must be adopted.

Figure 1

The meaning of 'pretext' does not imply that the arguer's real intentions are shameful. Consider that I used the fact that my computer was out of order and that I needed someone to fix it, in order to draw John into my apartment while his friends were preparing a surprise birthday party in his own apartment. My displayed intention is to have my computer fixed; my hidden agenda is to have John out of his home; the beneficiary of the deception is John himself. In this specific case, it is highly plausible that no negative judgment will be attached to the use of the word 'pretext,' even if I was insincere when evoking my broken computer as my motive. Only a rigid moralist would deem such a pretext reprehensible, because of the dissimulation that any pretext, by definition, entails.

However, in most of the cases, naming the reason given by an arguer "a pretext" conveys a negative judgment, and appears in denunciatory discourses. This negative judgment is shown by the semantic value of the phrase "a false pretext," which can be met in the following examples:

Example 5

> Nuclear bombs are a **false pretext** for setting up the American public to support a future war with Iran.[19]

Example 6

> The two girls know very well that this is a **false pretext** to lure them into a "male trap."[20]

Example 7

> Moscow uses **false pretext** to wreck Georgia[21]

Whereas a false friend is not a friend—and is even probably closer to an enemy—a false pretext is not a good reason, but is a hyperbolic pretext. The adjunction of 'false' to 'pretext' emphasizes the dissimulation proper to it, and therefore clearly orients to a negative assessment of the device.

The negative judgment attached to the use of "pretexts" seems to be elicited by the contrast between the displayed reason, and the end which is really aimed at. The displayed reason is meant to appeal to consensus. This is why it often plays on the addressee's dearest values or feelings: when you portray a rapist as having claimed a consuming thirst as a pretext in order to invoke his victim's pity to let him in, you suggest he took advantage of his victim's kindheartedness.

When you suggest that the United States government used the 11th of September as a pretext to restrain individual civil liberties and to increase its power over American people,[22] you accuse it of having deliberately exploited a traumatic event associated with pain and fear in order to gain consensus on a liberticidal measure.

In these examples, which I deem typical, the invocation of arguments as externalized reasons for justifying an action is all the more open to the criticism that they exploit the audience's feelings and values in order to serve someone's immoral ends. What seems interesting to me is that, even if one considers that the externalized argumentation is conclusive, the suspicion that

---

[19] http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=waMBt6EnsT8
[20] http://sleimans.wordpress.com/page/3/
[21]

http://www.proudtobecanadian.ca/russias_rapacity_moscow_uses_false_pretext_to_wreck_georgia/
[22]   http://mail.paa-tx.org/pipermail/discuss_paa-tx.org/2010-January/027543.html

the arguer has a hidden agenda clearly downgrades the accepta-bility of the conclusion, whereas the existence of a hidden agen-da does not make the public means-end argument less accepta-ble from a logical point of view. In such a case, ethical require-ments clearly overrule other assessment standards.

The use of the word 'pretext' in argumentative ordinary meta-discourse should be further investigated. In particular, the use of the phrase 'a good pretext' should be scrutinized; to what extent is a "good pretext" still a pretext at all? Is it an efficient pretext, that is, a pretext that is plausible enough to deceive the addressee? Or is it, on the contrary, a poorly deceptive pretext—that is, almost a reason? Besides, the "pretext/excuse" pair should be examined. In this respect, a contrastive approach would probably prove interesting: both words 'pretext' and 'ex-cuse' exist in French ('*prétexte*' and '*excuse*'); but, at first sight, they don't seem to have the same distribution.

8.2 Linguistic resources

The last point of this paper concerns the interest of a focus on the linguistic resources that a particular language offers to the speakers in order to label and evaluate the arguments they use as well as the arguments they are confronted with.

When I initiated this part of my research, I investigated two French words very common in argumentative discussions, and used by francophone speakers to disqualify the opponent's argument, as being fallacious. The first one, which I have al-ready mentioned, is the term '*amalgame*.' The second one is the term '*procès d'intention*' (Doury 2009b). My research was orig-inally conducted in French, and on French data; and I was very surprised when it became clear that, in both cases, the transla-tion into English was problematic indeed. Of course, it is possi-ble to *explain* what the argumentative moves designated by these terms consist of. As I suggested before, an "*amalgame*" may be described as a faulty parallel between two situations, persons or entities, on the basis of a connection of some kind. A "*procès d'intention*" may be described as the illegitimate rejec-tion of the claim supported by someone on the basis of the shameful motives that, supposedly, led the arguer to advance it. Nevertheless, I consider as non trivial the fact that a given lan-guage provides its practitioners with terms referring to some specific argumentative moves—but not to others, and that it re-flects a specific attitude towards those moves. Intuitively—but no doubts this requires a more serious reflection—I would say that it both reflects and encourages an increased sensitivity to

specific argumentative patterns, which may not fit exactly the expert classical divisions into argument schemes.

Nevertheless, the perception, by the arguers, of a claim as belonging to a recognizable argumentative scheme does not seem to depend on the existence, in the arguers' language, of an expression to name it—and I will close my paper with the evocation of what arguers sometimes do when their own language does not provide them with satisfactory terms to label the arguments they are confronted with.

As it has been claimed by van Eemeren & Meuffels (2002), the arguments that are rejected as unacceptable by the arguers in everyday polemical interactions are often of the *ad hominem* type. In France, the expression '*ad hominem* argument' is almost never used to label such an argumentative device in daily discussions.[23] Speakers rather often resort to extended paraphrases such as "you should discuss the facts, and not criticize the persons." They may also create original terminologies in order to categorize argumentative schemes (Doury 2006), as in Example 8. In a highly polemical internet newsgroup, a participant accuses "Apokrif" of pretending to be modest although he had previously charged others of displaying such false modesty. Apokrif answers as follows:

Example 8

> [*Vous avez acheté un stock de céçuikidikiyé au prix de gros?*]
>
> Did you buy a stock of "céçuikidikiyé" ["you are what you say I am"/ "I know you are, but what am I?"] at wholesale price?

Apokrif accuses his opponent of constantly using an argument scheme that he labels a "*céçuikidikiyé*"; "*céçuikidikiyé*" is a neologism issued from the oral form of the juvenile expression "I know you are, but who am I?" (literally, "you are what you say I am" [*c'est celui qui dit qui est*]"). It refers to a move that consists in reversing the abusive designation with which one is addressed against the one who used it.[24] Such a designation disqualifies the opponent's argumentation as childish; in that, it

---

[23] The situation seems to be somewhat different in a North-American context, probably because young American or Canadian people are much more familiarized with terms issued from critical thinking throughout their educational training at school or at university.

[24] It equates functionally the English « I'm rubber you're glue ».

conveys an additional criticism that the standard *tu quoque* designation would have missed.

Later on in the same newsgroup, another participant charges Apokrif with himself committing this faulty move. The accusation runs as follows:

Example 9

> [*hum… si le CTQDCTQÉ (ou le CPMCT, au choix) était une voiture, vous seriez une Ferrari*.]

> Hmm… if the YATOWSYATOWI (or the ITSNMITSY, as you prefer) were a car, you would be a Ferrari

After intense reflection, and given what I knew of former exchanges, I hypothesized that those acronyms should be understood as referring to French "*C'est Toi Qui Dis C'est Toi Qui Es*" or English "You Are The One Who Says You Are The One Who Is" for the first one, and "*C'est Pas Moi, C'est Toi*", or "IT'S Not Me, IT'S You" in the second case.

9. Conclusion

These beautiful examples of ordinary arguers' creativity applied to practical evaluation of argumentation suggest that the argumentative norms that underlie ordinary arguments deserve sustained attention from scholars in argumentation. One should pay attention to the content of such norms, to the way they are phrased as well as to the way they are used in order to achieve local interactional and communicative objectives. Last, a contrastive approach to argumentative norms, aiming at exploring the linguistic specificities of the meta-argumentative lexicon in various languages, seems to be a promising research orientation for a descriptive approach to argumentative norms—or for an amoral analyst interested in the virtues of argumentation.

References

Adam, J.-M. (2004). Une approche textuelle de l'argumentation. In: M. Doury and S. Moirand (Eds.), *L'argumentation aujourd'hui. Positions théoriques en confrontation* (pp. 77-102), Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Amossy, R. (2009). Argumentation in Discourse: A Socio-discursive Approach to Arguments". *Informal Logic* 29-3, 252-267.

Amossy, R. (2012). Faut-il intégrer l'argumentation dans l'analyse du discours ? Problématiques et enjeux. *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours* [on line] 9. URL: http://aad.revues.org/1346

Anscombre, J.-C. and O. Ducrot (1983). *L'argumentation dans la langue.* Paris: Mardaga.

Blair, J.A. (2007). Argument and its uses. *Informal Logic* 24-2, 137-151.

Breton, P. (1996). *L'argumentation dans la communication.* Paris: La Découverte.

Carel, M. (2010). La particule *mais* est-elle une conjonction? *Verbum* XXXII-1, 13-29.

Craig, R.T. (1996). Practical-Theoretical Argumentation. *Argumentation* 10: 461-474.

Craig, R.T. (1999). Metadiscourse, Theory, and Practice. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 32, 1&2, 21-29.

Craig, R.T. (2011). The uses of "argument" in practical meta-discourse. In R. C. Rowland (Ed.), *Reasoned argument and social change* (pp. 78-86), Washington, DC: National Communication Association.

Craig, R.T. and K. Tracy (2005). "The issue" in argumentation practice and theory. In F.H. van Eemeren and P. Houtlosser (Eds), *Argumentation in Practice* (pp.11-28), Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Declercq, G. (1992). *L'art d'argumenter. Structures rhétoriques et littéraires*, Paris: Editions universitaires.

Doury, M. (1999a). El argumento de autoridad en situacion: el caso del debate mediatico sobre astrologia. *Escritos* 17/18, 89-112.

Doury, M. (1999b). Les procédés de crédibilisation des témoignages comme indices des normes argumentatives des locuteurs. In E. Rigotti (Ed.), *Rhetoric and Argumentation. Proceedings of the International Conference, Lugano, April 22-23, 1997* (pp. 167-180), Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Doury, M. (2005). The accusation of *amalgame* as a meta-argumentative refutation. In F.H. van Eemeren and P. Houtlosser (Eds), *Argumentation in Practice* (pp. 145-161), Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Doury, M. (2006). Evaluating Analogy: Toward a Descriptive Approach to Argumentative Norms. In: P. Houtlosser and A. van Rees (Eds), *Considering Pragma-Dialectics. A Festschrift for Frans H. van Eemeren on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (pp.35-49), Mahwah (NJ) / London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Doury, M. (2009a). Argument Schemes Typologies in Practice: the Case of Comparative Arguments. In F. H. van Eemeren and B. Garssen (Eds), *Pondering on Problems of Argumentation: Twenty Essays on Theoretical Issues* (pp. 141-155), Dordrecht: Springer.

Doury, M. (2009b). Acte et personne dans l'argumentation: le cas du procès d'intention (pp. 165-179). In H. Jales Ribeiro (Ed.), *Rhetoric and argumentation in the beginning of the XXIst Century,* Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.

Ducrot, O. (1995). Les modificateurs déréalisants. *Journal of Pragmatics* 24, 145-165.

Dufour, M. (2008). *Argumenter. Cours de logique informelle*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Eemeren, F.H. van and P. Houtlosser (Eds) (2005). *Argumentation in Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Eemeren, F. H. Van and B. Meuffels (2002). Ordinary arguers' judgments on *ad hominem* fallacies. In F.H. van Eemeren (Ed.), *Advances in Pragma-Dialectics* (pp.45-64), Amsterdam: SicSat, Newport News, Virginia: Vale Press.

Garssen, B. (2002). Understanding argument schemes. In F.H. van Eemeren (Ed.), *Advances in Pragma-Dialectics* (pp.93-104), Amsterdam: SicSat, Newport News, Virginia: Vale Press.

Gilbert, M.A. (1997). *Coalescent Argumentation*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Goldman, A. (1994). Argumentation and Social Epistemology. *The Journal of Philosophy* 91-1, 27-49.

Goodwin, J. (2002). One Question, Two Answers. In H.V. Hansen, C. W. Tindale, J.A. Blair and R.H. Johnson (Eds.), *Argumentation and its Applications,* CD-ROM (pp. 1-17), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Goodwin, J. (2007). What, in practice, is an argument? In H.V. Hansen, C. W. Tindale, J.A. Blair and R.H. Johnson (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-44), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Govier, T. (2001). *A practical study of argument* (5th edition). Belmont: Wadsworth.

Jackson, S. (1989). What can argumentative practice tell us about argumentation norms? In: R. Maier (Ed.), *Norms in argumentation. Proceedings of the Conference on Norms 1988* (pp.113-122). Dordrecht (Holland) / Providence (USA): Foris publications.

Jackson, S. and S. Jacobs (1980). Structure of conversational argument: pragmatic bases for the enthymeme. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, 251-265.

Jacobs, S. (1987). The Management of Disagreement in Conversation. In F.H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair and C.A. Willard (Eds), *Argumentation: Across the Lines of Discipline* (pp. 229-239), Dordrecht-Holland / Providence-USA: Foris Publications.

Jacobs, S. and S. Jackson (2000). Rhetoric and Dialectic from the Standpoint of Normative Pragmatics. *Argumentation*14, 261-286.

Micheli, R. (2012a). Les visées de l'argumentation et leurs corrélats langagiers: une approche discursive. *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours* 9. URL: http://aad.revues.org/1406

Micheli R. (2012b). Arguing Without Trying to Persuade? Elements for a Non-Persuasive Definition of Argumentation. *Argumentation* 26, 115-126.

Plantin, C. (2002). Analyse et critique du discours argumentative. In R. Koren and R. Amossy (Eds), *Après Perelman: quelles politiques pour les nouvelles rhétoriques ?* (pp. 229-263)*,* Paris: L'Harmattan.

Plantin, C. (1996). *L'argumentation*. Paris: Seuil (coll. Mémo).

Walton, D. and Godden, D.M. (2005). The Nature and Status of Critical Questions in Argumentation Schemes. In D. Hitchcock (Ed.), *The Uses of Argument: Proceedings of a Conference at McMaster University, 18-21 May 2005* (pp. 476-484), Hamilton, ON: OSSA.