Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type: A pragma-dialectical analysis of online forms of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically

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Chapter 2

Walton and Krabbe’s dialogue types as conversational contexts of argument

2.1 The study of context in contemporary theories of argumentation

A qualitative, empirical study of the conditions for argumentation in the context of online political discussion forums requires a sound theoretical background; that is, an approach to the study of argumentation in context which offers a consistent and systematic set of concepts and methods that enable detailed analyses of online argumentation. The goal of this chapter, as well as the two following chapters, is to provide such a background. The main question to be addressed in Chapters 2-4 is thus theoretical: which approach to studying argumentation in context can best serve as a framework for analysis and evaluation of everyday argumentation taking place in the context of online political forum discussions? In order to provide a well-justified answer to this question, an account of the issue of contextual conditioning of argumentative practice offered by three contemporary theories of argumentation is critically reviewed below. First, I will discuss Walton and Krabbe’s concept of dialogue types (Chapter 2), then Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’ idea of argumentation designs (Chapter 3), and finally the pragma-dialectical conception of argumentative activity types (Chapter 4). In this endeavour, I will give full attention to the theoretical underpinnings and methodological solutions of these three theories, in respect of their treatment of the contextuality of argumentation.

Like any other theory, a theory of argumentative contexts has to meet some vital criteria if it is to provide a solid theoretical and methodological basis for empirical investigations. Such criteria can be specified here along the lines proposed by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993: 88-89), who distinguished between three ‘adequacy conditions’ for a well-justified dialectical reconstruction of argumentative discourse: (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony. These three criteria can be seen as certain abstract criteria applicable to any
sound and useful theory. In the following, I will use them to assess the general value of three distinct approaches to studying contexts of discourse in argumentation theory and, further, their value in the specific task of analysing and evaluating argumentative exchanges in online forum discussions.

Firstly, a theory of argumentation focused on the issue of contextual conditions for argumentative discourse is efficacious if it makes clear what the function of the concept of argumentation contexts is in the theory at large and, consequently, what the theoretical status of the notion of ‘context’ is.1 On the one hand, contexts can be analysed by argumentation theorists primarily for normative purposes, that is, they can be approached as sources of certain norms for evaluating argumentation. In this case they have the status of normative models of how argumentation should proceed in various circumstances. On the other hand, contexts can be conceptualised from a decidedly descriptive perspective, in which case their examination allows for a more precise analysis of argumentation. In such an account, the conditions that certain typical, recognisable contexts of discourse create for actual practice of argumentation are grasped in terms of descriptive models. Secondly, an approach to contexts of argumentation is empirically well-grounded if systematic studies of actual contexts are carried out and the results of such studies are accountably based on empirical data. To this end, the theory has to develop analytic tools sophisticated enough to grasp the pertinent details of typical situated argumentative practices. For this reason, thirdly, one can speak of a parsimonious theory when the concepts proposed and the methodological tools developed are indeed indispensable and applicable in the study of contextualised argumentation. This is to say that every element of the theory should be conducive to achieving the goals the theory sets to achieve by analysing various types of argumentative contexts.

What is of special importance for this research, is the adequacy of the concepts developed in argumentation theory to a methodical investigation of the specificities of online political forum discussions. The relevant question is what new light can the theory shed on the conditions for argumentation prevalent in online political discussions. As it will be shown in the following three chapters, each of the three approaches analysed below is suitable to serve as a framework for studying online argumentation to a varying degree. From an empirical perspective, in the study of online political argumentation, three levels

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1 As discussed below, the notion of ‘context’ can be understood in various ways. What is common to the three approaches to argumentation analysed here, is their understanding of context in terms of a broad, typically recognised surrounding of argumentation, characterised by a particular format, or genre, for discussion. Van Eemeren (2010: Ch. 1) uses the term ‘macro-context’ to refer to this level of context.
of the interdependence of the conceptual tools and empirical results can be distinguished: 
(1) The theoretical concepts can be developed as a result of some empirical research regarding online discourse; in this way the theory is, so to speak, tailored to account for empirical phenomena of online argumentation. (2) The theory can be developed with the view towards carrying out empirical research which is still to be done; that means that the theory is geared to investigating the details of various real-life contexts of argumentation, including online discussions, but this particular context has not been methodically examined yet. (3) Finally, the theory can be developed in a certain detachment from the argumentative reality, whether this detachment is deliberate (as may be the case with normative theorising) or results from a confusing lack of clarity regarding the status of the relation between the theoretical and the empirical.

Each of the three approaches discussed in Chapters 2-4 is assessed against the criteria of (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony. In each case, I first briefly present the theoretical basics of the approach. Then, I discuss its empirical applicability in the study of actual contexts and the analytic tools it employs. Finally, I give an overall appraisal of the approach from the perspective of the task set in this dissertation, i.e., a detailed analysis of the conditions for argumentation in online political forum discussions.

Before discussing the details of each of the three approaches, a short historical background of the research into the contextualised conditions of argumentation is given, in order to provide a better understanding of the problems analysed here.

In the tradition stemming from Aristotle’s distinctions between five types of argument and three genres of rhetoric, the study of various contexts of argument have been undertaken from two diverse perspectives: the normative and the descriptive. The basic task of the normative approaches is to establish standards of good argumentation in distinct, theoretically conceived types of context. The idea behind such conceptual work is that one universal standard of reasonable argumentation, such as the system of norms of validity in classical logic, cannot adequately cover all the cases of what seems to be reasonable argumentation – hence the need for developing other normative standards, in (abstract) contexts other than monologual proof-making. By contrast, the descriptive

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2 In *Sophistical Refutations* (165a-165b) Aristotle distinguishes between didactic, dialectical, examination, contentious and demonstrative arguments (see also Walton, 1998: 11-14, 237-244). In *Rhetoric* (1358a-1358b), Aristotle divides rhetoric into the deliberative, forensic, and display (epideictic) genre.
approaches take the path of a meticulous examination of the means of argumentation routinely used by ordinary language users in different actual contexts of discourse. Empirical researchers postulate that a proper analysis and, in effect, also evaluation of argumentative discourse is impossible without a methodical insight into the conditions prevalent in some typical contexts of argumentation.

In contemporary research, both these traditions have been inspired by Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language games.’ In the normative tradition, mostly philosophical and logical research into the contextual conditions of reasoned discourse has been carried out. In particular, various theories of ‘dialogue games’ have been proposed. Their goal generally is to construct different models of logical validity using concepts of formal dialectics and game theory (e.g., Barth & Krabbe, 1982; Hamblin, 1970; Walton, 1984). Such normative theorising is posited on the assumption that since the rules of various (constructed) games of dialogue differ, different types of arguments are acceptable, and thus valid, in different games. In short, the validity of different types of arguments depends on the context of dialectical rules that govern a given dialogue game. On the other hand, in the descriptive tradition, detailed studies of contexts of discourse have been undertaken in the fields of linguistic pragmatics and rhetoric. Inspired by Malinowski’s (1923) early ethnographic attempts at a pragmatic description of language use in a ‘context of situation,’ this line of research has been developed in Hymes’ (1962, 1972 [1967]) ethnography of communication with its central notion of a ‘speech event,’ and in pragmatics by researchers such as Levinson (1992 [1979]) who saw important analytical advantages in conceptualising various ‘activity types’ in which language users are involved. The aim of these socio- and pragma-linguistic studies was to describe some typical, actually occurring ‘language games’ in agreement with the way in which they are perceived by language users, in order to obtain a clearer picture of how speech exchanges function in conventional circumstances. Moreover, contemporary rhetoricians, such as Bitzer (1968), pursued the idea of ‘the rhetorical situation’ as the broad ‘context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse.’ What these scholars meant, however, were unique, historically contingent situations surrounding performance of a given rhetorical discourse, rather than regularly recurring and broadly recognisable types of situations.

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3 For a recent overview of various discourse-analytic approaches to context, see Blum-Kulka, 2005.
4 The concept of the rhetorical situation has been recently used by Jacobs (2002, 2009) to emphasise the contextuality of critical fallacy judgments. According to him, good (or reasonable) arguments are those that 'make the best of the situation,' either because they are well-adjusted to the particular rhetorical situation or because they introduce adjustments of the particular rhetorical situation.
All these approaches, in their varied ways and to a different extent, have influenced the theories discussed below. Yet, apart from providing a general theoretical background to the following discussion, they are not directly useful in systematic argumentative analyses of ordinary types of context, such as online discussion forums. That is mainly because the approaches mentioned above were either focused on developing theoretical models with no empirical ambitions or they pursued empirical goals which were not directly related to the problems of strictly argumentative discourse, but rather to general problems of discourse, such as meaning of utterances or organisation of talk in various contexts.

2.2 General types of dialogue, mixed dialogues and dialectical shifts

Walton’s approach to the contextuality of argumentation (developed in collaboration with Krabbe) centers on the concept of ‘dialogue types’ and the related concepts of ‘mixed dialogues’ and ‘dialectical shifts.’ The theoretical point of departure for Walton’s ‘new dialectic,’ in which these concepts play a crucial role, is Hamblin’s notion of a ‘dialectical system’ that, according to Walton, implies the definition of dialectic as ‘the study of contexts of use in which arguments are put forward by one party in a rule-governed, orderly verbal exchange with another party’ (Walton, 1998: 6; see Hamblin, 1970: Ch. 8). Indeed, the roots of Walton’s concept of dialogue types as ‘conversational contexts of argument’ can be traced back to the ‘systems of dialogue rules’ developed by formal dialecticians, which pertain to game-like and self-contained dialogues defined by the goal of the game and regulated by strict logical rules determining how this goal can be reached in an acceptable way (Walton, 1984; Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 1-12). Such theoretical provenance of Walton’s ideas means that his starting points for considering contexts of argumentation are decidedly normative.

At the same time, in his ‘new dialectic’ Walton elaborates the concept of the types of dialogue in a way that aims to enrich the formal and normative core with the peculiarities of actual contexts of ordinary argumentation:

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5 Since Walton published on the concept of ‘dialogue types’ more extensively alone than in collaboration with Krabbe, in what follows I primarily refer to him as the author of the ideas discussed, unless it is clear that they are co-authored by Krabbe.

6 A succinct overview of the conceptions of dialogue logic and formal dialectics can be found in: van Eemeren et al., 1996: Ch. 9 and Krabbe, 2006.
The key here is that the concept of dialogue has to be seen as a context or enveloping framework into which arguments are fitted so they can be judged as appropriate or not in that context. So the concept of dialogue needs to be normative: it needs to prescribe how an argument ought to be used in order to fit in as appropriate, and to be used rightly or correctly (as well as incorrectly, in some cases). But the concept of dialogue also needs to fit the typical conversational settings in which such arguments are conventionally used to make a point in everyday argumentative verbal exchanges.

The concept of a dialogue [...] is that of a conventionalized, purposive joint activity between two parties (in the simplest case), where the parties act as speech partners. It is meant by this that the two parties exchange verbal messages or so-called speech acts that take the form of moves in a game-like sequence of exchanges (Walton, 1998: 29).

Such a definition, which attributes both ‘normative’ and ‘conventionalized’ qualities to dialogue types, can be understood as giving this theoretical concept a double function: not only should dialogue types prescribe which argumentative behaviour is correct, or reasonable, within the bounds of a well-delineated language game, but they also have to mirror in their structure ‘the typical conversational settings’ or—as they are called by many—‘speech events’ that are characteristic of a given speech community (Hymes, 1962, 1972 [1967]).

Considering argumentative reality, Walton and Krabbe (1995: 65-67) acknowledge that a great number of dialogue types may be distinguished and ‘grouped according to various differences and resemblances.’ They themselves opt for a ‘provisional’ taxonomy of six ‘general types’ of dialogue: persuasion dialogue, negotiation, inquiry, deliberation, information-seeking dialogue, and eristic dialogue. These types are primarily characterised by their main goal, initial situation, and participants’ aims (not to be confused with the main goal of a dialogue as such). (See table 2.1)

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7 Exact formulations of the main parameters of dialogue types vary across different publications: cf. Walton, 1992, 1998; Walton & Krabbe, 1995; Walton & Macagno, 2007; Macagno, 2008. Illustrative is the case of a precise stipulation of the goal of the persuasion dialogue. In the most frequently used formulation, persuasion dialogue is aimed at a ‘resolution of the initial conflict [of points of view] by verbal means’ (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 68). Walton, however, also declares that: ‘In the new dialectic, the purpose of persuasion dialogue is to increase maieutic insight on an issue’ (1998: 242-243). Importantly, this goal can be realised without the conflict of opinions being resolved by verbal means. Perhaps for this reason Macagno uses an all-embracing formulation in which the goal of the persuasion dialogue is to ‘resolve or clarify issue’ (italics added – ML).
Table 2.1 Six general dialogue types (from: Macagno, 2008: 110; adapted from: Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF DIALOGUE</th>
<th>INITIAL SITUATION</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT’S GOAL</th>
<th>GOAL OF DIALOGUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERSUASION</td>
<td>Conflict of opinions</td>
<td>Persuade the party</td>
<td>Resolve or clarify issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INQUIRY</td>
<td>Need to have proof</td>
<td>Find and verify evidence</td>
<td>Prove (disprove) hypotheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGOTIATION</td>
<td>Conflict of interests</td>
<td>Get what you want most</td>
<td>Reasonable settlement that both can live with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFORMATION-SEEKING</td>
<td>Need of information</td>
<td>Acquire or give information</td>
<td>Exchange of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DELIBERATION</td>
<td>Dilemma or personal choice</td>
<td>Co-ordinate goals and actions</td>
<td>Decide the best available course of action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERISTIC</td>
<td>Personal conflict</td>
<td>Verbally hit out at opponent</td>
<td>Reveal deeper basis of conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite their resemblance to real-life contexts of discourse, dialogue types are in the first place supposed to fulfil a normative function that is central to argumentation theory (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 67, 82). As Walton propounds, the usefulness of the conception of dialogue types lies in its capacity to account systematically for the difficulties related to the identification of fallacies, that is, unreasonable but often effective argumentative moves, in different contexts. Walton and Krabbe’s concern for the normative utility of dialogue types is evident in their declaration that a subtype of persuasion dialogue—critical discussion—‘is the most fundamental context of dialogue needed as a normative structure in which fallacies and other errors of reasoning can be analyzed and evaluated’ (1995: 7). However, the remaining types seem to be equally legitimate models of dialectic rationality. In the simplest formulation, this context-dependent normativety amounts to a claim that ‘a good argument is one that contributes to a goal of the type of dialogue in which that argument was put forward’ (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 2). Conversely, a fallacy ‘is an infraction of some dialogue rule’ (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 25). Walton and Krabbe explain this dependence in a radically pluralistic way: ‘what constitutes a fallacy in one game of dialogue does not need to constitute a fallacy in another (it could be just a blunder, or even be entirely all right)’ (1995: 25). The most striking example of this principle are personal attacks (especially of the abusive *ad hominem* type): they are indignantly fallacious in critical discussion, but entirely fine in (or, at least, ‘typical of, and closely associated with’) eristic dialogues (Walton & Kabbe, 1995: 78).
Walton and Krabbe’s view is, in sum, that each dialogue type constitutes a separate normative model of argumentation, with its own specific rules prescribing what good (and fallacious) argumentation is. Following their reasoning, for such a theoretical framework to be practically useful in the analysis and evaluation of actual argumentation, two interrelated issues need to be dealt with: (1) the relation of the six normative (general) dialogue types to the plethora of types of communicative contexts actually perceived by ordinary language users, and (2) the exact ways in which fallacies occur in different types of dialogue.

Walton and Krabbe are well aware of the fact that their six basic types of dialogue cannot cover all ordinary speech events (1995: 82). Therefore, to deal with the first issue, they assume that actual speech events are composites of more than one of the six dialogue types. They take it, in other words, that there is a multiplicity of various normative types of dialogue constituting together one particular speech event. This can happen in three different ways:

A) One normative type of dialogue can be dominant throughout the speech event, yet ‘flavours’ or ‘admixtures from other types of dialogue’ can creep in: ‘For example, a persuasion dialogue can have an “eristic flavor” if it partially becomes a heated fight or a contest where one party is trying to attack and defeat the other party with a greater intensity than normal’ (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 70). A certain difficulty with such cases is, as Walton & Krabbe admit, that ‘often it is hard to tell which type of dialogue is dominant’ (1995: 82). This leads them to consider another option, that is:

B) An actual speech event may simultaneously exhibit qualities of a few of the general six dialogue types co-existing on a par, as it were. In this case, Walton speaks of ‘mixed dialogues.’ Political debate, for instance, involves a mixture of no less than five (out of six) types of dialogue (Walton, 1998: 223): it is partly information-seeking dialogue, partly deliberation, partly eristic dialogue, partly negotiation, and partly critical discussion. Still, there is one more possibility:

C) Speech events may be constituted by multiple ‘normative dialogue types’ appearing in sequence, one-by-one, rather than all at once. A special instance of such a

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8 This ‘postmodern and relativistic standard of rationality,’ as Walton calls it (1998: 30), is most clearly reflected in his concept of dialectical relevance (1998: 35): ‘This postmodernistic pluralism yields an approach to dialectical relevance […] that offers six distinctively different ways of explaining the nature of relevance or irrelevance of an argument in a given case, depending on the type of dialogue exchange one was supposed to have been engaged in, relative to the given case.’
sequential move is when during the performance of one type of dialogue, some other type is ‘sandwiched in’ or ‘embedded,’ to fulfil some immediate dialectical need. Walton and Krabbe call such cases ‘subdialogues’ and give the following example (1995: 73): ‘a persuasion dialogue may reach a point where some matter of fact has to be settled before the discussion can proceed. The participants may then agree to conduct an inquiry to settle the matter.’

The last alternative is intimately connected to the second crucial issue, the one concerning the problem of fallacious moves in various dialogues. The conceptual tool proposed to solve this problem is the notion of ‘dialectical shifts.’ Walton’s central observation is that actual discussions that emerge and develop are liable to take turns that—in his theoretical framework—can be perceived as shifts from one type of dialogue to another. Crucial to this concept is the normative distinction between ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’ shifts. Licit shifts are overt and mutually agreed moves away from the dialogue the participants were originally supposed to be engaged in to another type of dialogue that still serves the goals of the original dialogue (Walton, 1992: 138-139). Illicit shifts are, by contrast, covert and unilateral attempts to change the type of dialogue that is going on into one that is wrongly presented as being in line with the exchange taking place in the original dialogue. It is the illicit type of shift that is typically ‘associated,’ as Walton puts it, with the informal fallacies. *Ad hominem* attacks, for example, typically signify an illicit shift from other types of dialogue (most importantly: critical discussion) to a quarrel, while *ad baculum* attacks are connected with illicit shifts from a different type of dialogue to a negotiation dialogue.

2.3 Theoretical complications

In accordance with the criteria set in section 2.1, any theory of argumentative contexts derives its value from its efficiency and functionality in analysing and evaluating real-life argumentation. The fundamental idea behind Walton’s consideration of types of contexts seems indeed to be that this should lead to a significant improvement of the analysis and evaluation of actual arguments. Having a better understanding of how arguers typically behave in a given type of context, and what norms they are expected, or even required, to follow, must allow for a more differentiated appraisal of everyday argumentation than would result from a straightforward application of context-independent normative
standards, such as the norms of logical validity or the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion. Assessing the value of Walton’s theory with the help of the criteria of efficacy, well-foundedness and parsimony, an analyst of actual argumentative discourse may encounter some serious problems pertaining to both theoretical ideas and practical solutions proposed by Walton.

To start with the first criterion specified above – theoretical efficacy: it is not precisely clear what the theoretical status of the concept of a dialogue type is. The notion of a dialogue type lays claim to both the normative and descriptive: dialogue types are at the same time defined as ‘normative ideal models’ and as ‘conventionalized activities.’ Here arises a problem. On the one hand, normative concerns are given priority, which is made explicit when Walton and Krabbe emphasise that dialogue types as ‘normative models that represent ideals of how one ought to participate in a certain type of conversation if one is being reasonable and cooperative’ should not be confused with ‘an account of how participants in argumentation really behave in instances of real dialogue that take place […] in a speech event’ (1995: 67). On the other hand, however, the concept of dialogue types that Walton and Krabbe propagate has unmistakably an empirical flavour, as is particularly evident in Walton’s characterisation of the various types of dialogue (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007). When he makes his case for the context-dependent fallaciousness of appeals to threat (ad baculum arguments), for instance, Walton supports his position by observing that ‘during a negotiation type of dialogue, threats and appeals to force or sanctions are quite typical and characteristic’ (1992: 141). In this case, and in many more cases adduced by Walton, it is the observation of an empirical regularity—describable in quantitative terms such as ‘often,’ or quantifiable terms such as ‘typically’ and ‘characteristically’—that creates the normative basis for giving a fallacy judgment.

By contrast, undisputedly normative models in argumentation theory (such as the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion described below) are developed on the basis of analytic considerations concerning the ideal goals the argumentative discourse is supposed to serve (defined by a theorist adopting a particular philosophical concept of rationality) and the procedures it has to comply with to achieve these goals (see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007). The stipulation of a certain set of norms for achieving a certain critical goal by an argumentation theorist leads to the construction of an ideal model, which is by no means an empirical model meant to reflect the regularities of actual contexts of argumentation. Instead, ideal models of argumentative dialogues are developed
to point out what optimally efficacious, reasonable argumentative behaviour in perfect conditions amounts to and to characterise argumentative behaviour that falls short of this ideal as fallacious.

It is indeed rather difficult to assign Walton’s dialogue types to the category of either empirical or normative models (van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming). Analytically, these two categories can be very clearly distinguished using as a criterion the status of the norms the models are built up from: are they ‘internal’ norms recognisable and oriented to by ordinary discussants in a given context, or are they ‘external’ norms stipulated by a theoretician? In the former case, one would speak of an empirical model whose norms are supposed to reflect the ‘native’ constraints of recognisable contexts (that is, they are primarily ‘conventionally valid’), whereas in the latter case one would speak of an ideal model whose norms are stipulated in order to render a given ideal of how argumentation should optimally proceed (that is, they are primarily ‘problem valid’). Walton and Krabbe’s attempts to integrate these two methods of modelling argumentation are largely unconvincing (see: Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 82, 175): one cannot but emphatically agree with them that optimal, problem-valid models should have a chance of gaining conventional acceptance and that conventional ways of arguing should be, at least sometimes, problem valid, but the distinctions themselves should certainly not be kept vague: it is only one of the kinds of validity that can be the primary source for coming to a judgment concerning the reasonableness of argumentation (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming).

Related to the problem of the normative status of Walton’s dialogue types, and thus of the rules of particular types of dialogue, is another issue that concerns the goals of the various types. The question is: are they based on empirical analyses or stipulated on the basis of theoretical considerations? In other words, are these goals familiar to, or at least reflectively recognisable by, the discussants concerned or are they formulated by some theorist, in this case Walton himself?

In any case, the enormous diversity of the goals Walton assigns to the various dialogue types raises the question of which of these dialogue types are really argumentative. Can, for example, ‘reaching a (provisional) accommodation in a relationship’ be seen as an argumentative goal? If such goals—and, consequently, the types of dialogue concerned—are not inherently argumentative but may simply have an...
argumentative component, many more types of dialogue can be distinguished, whether ‘basic’ or ‘mixed,’ that are similarly argumentative. This would present a serious problem to the efficacy and usability of the theoretical framework that is meant to provide context-based argumentative standards of normativity, since the number of types of standards to consider would increase enormously. If, on the other hand, all these types of dialogue are fundamentally argumentative, one would like to know what definition of ‘being argumentative’ is used. In particular, the information-seeking dialogue and the inquiry, basic types of dialogue that—according to Walton’s descriptions—do not necessarily involve any conflict or confrontation, as is commonly required for a discourse to be considered argumentative, are then problematic.\(^{10}\) Whichever view Walton may have intended to enforce, what seems to be lacking is a theoretical rationale for considering discourses or verbal moves to be argumentative which is independent of the specific empirical environment—or type of dialogue—in which they occur.\(^{11}\)

### 2.4 Practical problems in analysing Internet discussions

It is particularly important to this study, that the theoretical complications affecting the very central concepts of Walton’s ‘new dialectic’ may seriously impair practical usefulness of his approach in the task it was created for, that is, in the analysis and evaluation of argumentative moves in the various contexts of real-life arguments. This means that both empirical well-groundedness and the parsimony of the theory may be critically questioned.

In Walton’s view, a context-sensitive evaluation of argumentation requires a proper identification of the type of dialogue the arguers are actually involved in. More specifically, since Walton associates fallacies with illicit shifts from one type of dialogue to another, judging the functionality of the relation between the new and the old context (a basic criterion for the (il)legality of a shift) requires a good grasp of the (type of) context before the shift and after the shift. Whether the new dialogue is functionally relevant depends, according to Walton, after all on ‘retrospective evaluation’ of the goals of the original dialogue:

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\(^{10}\) Interestingly, Walton and Krabbe themselves point out in passing that an ‘argumentative’ type of dialogue is ‘conflict-centered’ (1995: 105).

\(^{11}\) The problems concerning Walton’s context-dependent account of fallacies are discussed at much greater length in: van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007 and van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming.
Some cases of retrospective evaluation are based on an explicit agreement by the two parties to take part in a certain type of dialogue. In other cases, conventions and institutions enable us to clearly make this determination. But in many cases of argumentation in everyday conversation, such agreements are implicit and can be determined only by making a contextual judgment of the expectations of the participants, by looking at the evidence given through their verbal exchanges, as the sequence of arguments proceed.

In some cases, it is not clear to the participants themselves, or to anyone else, exactly what type of dialogue they were supposed to be engaging in when they had an argumentative exchange, and it is precisely this indeterminacy that is often exploited by deceitful and fallacious arguments. In evaluating such arguments, the best we can do is make a conditional judgment that such and such an argument would be fallacious if evaluated from the point of view and standards of argumentation appropriate for a particular type of dialogue (Walton, 1998: 205-206).

What is remarkable in this passage it that, according to Walton, participants in a dialogue are supposed to be engaged in a certain type of dialogue, but may not be able to tell exactly what type. This confusion arises from the fact that the types of dialogue Walton distinguishes are theoretical categories, rather than ordinarily recognisable conversational contexts. The same participants would probably have no major difficulties in classifying their actual verbal activity as, for example, heart-to-heart-talk, sales talk, talk man-to-man, women’s talk, bull session, chat, polite conversation, chatter (of a team), chew him out, give him the low-down, get it off his chest, or griping, because all these labels represent, according to Hymes (1962: 24), ‘well known classes of speech events in our culture.’ Walton’s problem, then, is to ‘translate’ such native categories of speech events in a justifiable way into his six-fold taxonomy.

As discussed above, to facilitate this task Walton makes use of the concept of ‘mixed discourse’: ‘certain conversational types of speech exchanges which we tend to think of as univocal or homogeneous really turn out to be composite from the point of view of our typology’ (1998: 218). The three options that he proposes, i.e., ‘admixtures from other types of dialogue,’ ‘mixed dialogues,’ and ‘subdialogues’ can probably be supplemented by yet another one—not really entertained by Walton and possibly outside the scope of his perspective—in which a given speech event could be a poorly executed version of one of his six ideal types. Regardless of this complication, however, the fundamental analytic problem is that Walton offers no clear principle and—as a consequence—no applicable practical criteria for deciding which of these various options

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12 The research of ethno-linguists is often focused specifically on identification and classification of such ‘indigenous,’ i.e., commonly recognised and used, ‘terms for talk.’ See, e.g.: Carbaugh, 1989; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996.
an argumentation analyst ought to choose in his identification and evaluation of argumentative discussions in ordinary contexts.

To demonstrate the extent to which practical problems in applying Walton’s concepts to cases of real argumentative contexts may surface, I will attempt to shortly analyse an excerpt from an online discussion, going along the method employed by Walton and Krabbe in their case study of a complex dialogue on medical ethics (1995: 85-100). The following discussion took place in a Usenet newsgroup alt.politics almost exactly half year after Barack Obama was sworn in as the President of the United States. However, the controversy over his status as a ‘naturally born citizen’—a condition necessary to be an American president—was still stirred up by Obama’s critics. The centre of the controversy was the issue of Obama’s original American birth certificate. The initial seven contributions to the discussion, entitled by the first ‘poster’, Fragger: ‘<pssstt!> Libtrash! Where's Moonnigger's Birth Certificate? Hmmm...???’, develop in the following way.13

(2.1) <pssstt!> Libtrash! Where's Moonnigger's Birth Certificate? Hmmm...???
http://groups.google.com/group/alt.politics/browse_frm/thread/9cc0e570483bdaf07#

1. Fragger
Hmmm...???
Jul 27 2009, 3:13 am

2. KAM
Fragger wrote
> Hmmn...???
Jul 27 2009, 3:36 am

Already provided at the factcheck.org website and verified by the appropriate authorities as genuine. Now, since you are making the allegation, where's your copy of his Kenyan birth certificate? Or are you just too lazy and full of shit to provide one? Typical rightist.

The impotent right wing fascist kooks have no power and no say in the affairs of this country.

3. Grand Mal
Thought I told you once already.
Jul 27 2009, 4:18 am

4. Patriot Games
Nobody listens to DemocRATs:
http://www.imagedump.com/index.cgi?pick=get&tp=531734
Jul 27 2009, 2:48 pm

5. Grand Mal
Not long ago no black would ever vote Democrat and no racist would vote Republican. What happened?
Jul 27 2009, 3:31 pm

13 All fragments of online discussions are quoted here as they appear on the Internet, including spelling mistakes and Internet-specific editing. See Chapter 6 for a more elaborate explanation of how examples are presented.
To start a context-sensitive analysis of this case from Walton’s perspective, one has to decide what type of dialogue the participants contribute to. ‘Common sense’ would tell us that it is an Internet political forum discussion, probably no better and no worse than an average discussion one may encounter on an open forum like alt.politics. This, however, is not a category within Walton’s taxonomy of dialogue types. Hence the need to choose some (combination of) main dialogue types to grasp this case. It seems that at least a few options should be considered.

The first obvious guess can be that this is a case of a critical discussion – not only because it is ‘the most fundamental context of dialogue’ in which argumentation occurs (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 7), but also because many scholars have seen such open online forums for anonymous and thus symmetric discussions as a new incarnation of some ideals of critical argumentation. Indeed, some research into online discussions from the perspective of a critical discussion has been carried out (Aakhus, 2002b; Jackson, 1998; see below Ch. 3).14

Turning to the text of the discussion itself, we notice that in the topic of the discussion, and the message 1, Fragger denounces ‘liberal’ discourse (directly associated

14 As will be made clear in Chapter 3, these researchers employ van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s ‘critical discussion’ as a theoretically constructed ideal model for analysis and evaluation of actual discussions, rather than as one of many dialogue types to be found in argumentative reality.
with the Democrats, Obama’s party) by calling it ‘Libtrash,’ and, by means of a rhetorical question advances a standpoint, which can be reconstructed as ‘Obama’s (original, American) birth certificate is unavailable.’ The answer of KAM in post 2 can be reconstructed as a (multiple) argumentation for the opposite standpoint: ‘Obama’s birth certificate is available,’ because, first, it has been ‘already provided at the factcheck.org website’ and, second, it has been ‘verified by the appropriate authorities as genuine.’ If this analysis is correct, then, just as in the discussion on medical ethics examined by Walton and Krabbe, we have here an instance of a ‘conflict of points of view, the initial situation for a persuasion dialogue [of which a critical discussion is the most basic subtype – ML]. The respective theses of the two participants have been stated, and the goal of each participant is to show from the concessions of the other that she/he is right’ (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 91). However, an analyst of this dialogue is in a rather disprivileged position since, contrary to Walton and Krabbe who themselves wrote the dialogue they study, he cannot easily glimpse into the minds of participants to confirm what their goals are. Notwithstanding this difficulty, the analysis allows to conditionally label this discussion as a persuasion dialogue.

Immediately, however, a ‘flavour’ (or perhaps a ‘sub-dialogue’) of an inquiry is introduced by KAM: in his argument, he gives the name of a website where the information under question is provided (factcheck.org). In fact, if one goes to the address given (precisely: http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/born_in_the_usa.html) one can find high-resolution photographs of Obama’s birth certificate, along with the accompanying text explaining in great detail that ‘the certificate has all the elements the State Department requires’ for proving citizenship to obtain a U.S. passport.’

Right after this matter is settled (at least for KAM), the dialogue seems to get back to a critical discussion: KAM expresses a request (directed to Fragger) to provide an argument for his case. Such requests are one of the basic moves in the so called

15 Such a standpoint of course can be (and often is) further used as a sub-standpoint in a broader dispute, where the main issue is Obama’s legality as the President.

16 See Walton and Krabbe, 1995: 8: ‘This case, although it was written (invented) by the authors themselves, is a natural enough case of a segment of persuasion dialogue, involving several key features of argumentation related to problems of commitment modeling, that it could provide plenty of material for further analysis.’ It is one of the major assumptions of this dissertation that argumentation analysis should focus on actual cases of argumentative discourse, especially when ‘conversational contexts of argumentation’ are studied. Only such study can extend our knowledge of real-life argumentation and extend beyond the methods of both formal and informal logicians who seem to be stuck in a vicious circle of analysing what they themselves have created.

17 Here is a ‘hyperlink’ to the official document published online by American authorities: ‘U.S. Department of State Application For A U.S. Passport’ (http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/100004.pdf).
'argumentation stage' of a critical discussion (as distinguished in their model by van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984: Ch. 5). True, this particular request contains a fallacy known as *ad ignorantiam* (my opinion is correct until you prove that your contrary opinion is correct), but it is a speech act of a clear argumentative relevance. In the next sentence, however, a dangerous shift to (or perhaps just a flavour of) a quarrel (a subtype of eristic dialogue) is introduced: *KAM* uses very explicit ‘abusive’ (‘are you just too lazy and full of shit to provide one?’) and ‘circumstantial’ *ad hominem* attacks of the ‘poisoning the well’ variety (‘Typical rightist,’ ‘The impotent right wing fascist kooks’). This, again, resembles a situation noted by Walton and Krabbe in their case: ‘there could be an opening here for the dialogue to degenerate into a quarrel or negotiation’ (1995: 94). Such a degeneration, however, does not happen, since both initial arguers suspend their participation here and leave the floor to other online discussants.

The dialogue between *Grand Mal* and *Patriot Games*, similarly, consists of an expression of a standpoint (‘Not long ago no black would ever vote Democrat and no racist would vote Republican’), request to provide ‘CITED’ claims, provision of arguments supported by such claims (http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1523692/posts), and severe abusive *ad hominem* attacks (‘You’re a Canadian RETARD...’), preceded by *Patriot Games’* inquiry into the unique IP address of *Grand Mal*, which allows to assign his PC to a concrete geographical location. These attacks, again, do not lead the discussion to degenerate into an all-out verbal fight.

In short, we may have here a persuasion dialogue (critical discussion) which certainly does not proceed straight to the resolution of the conflict by verbal means, but rather takes many twists and turns which, going by Walton’s model, can be interpreted as shifts to and from, or maybe as admixed flavours and overtones of, quarrels and inquiries.

Yet, the convoluted conversational exchange in discussion (2.1) may also be seen as a case of an inherently ‘mixed dialogue.’ Probably, such dialogue would be close to a ‘political debate,’ characterised by Walton (see above) as a complex of five general dialogue types. The difference would be that, since no politicians deciding on a course of

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18 While in fact both cases may be *incorrect*.

19 In van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s terminology (1992b, 2004: Ch. 4), it is a move which is relevant ‘analytically’ but not ‘evaluatively.’

20 Even thought *Grand Mal’s* last contribution, which is a direct response to *Patriot Games*’ message no 8, is the following: ‘Aw, c’mon duckie, don’t be so ‘rough trade’. I bet you’re just a sweetie but you’re all bound up in the closet and can’t be yourself because your daddy used to bring home black guys when your ma was working afternoon shift at the slaughterhouse. If you’d just let go and move your sweet ass to New York or San Francisco you could be who you were born to be.’
action are (explicitly) involved here, such mixed dialogue would be less of a deliberation, negotiation and information-seeking, but more of an inquiry (considering the immediate availability of the vast resources of the Internet). The major ingredients of the mixture would be the persuasion and the eristic dialogue, as is usually the case with debates in general (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 83-84).

The eristic aspect may however be so prominent in online dialogues, as seems to be the case in discussion (2.1) analysed here, that one would instead be inclined to classify such online exchanges as belonging to the class of eristic dialogues altogether. Indeed, one may easily find an appropriate candidate termed by Walton and Krabbe as ‘eristic discussion’ and described in the following way:

The eristic discussion is a type of dialogue where two participants engage in a verbal sparring to see who is the more clever in constructing persuasive and often tricky arguments that devastate the opposition, or at least appear to. [...] The goal is to settle the intellectual hierarchy by having a verbal contest of arguments. [...] the eristic discussion is closer to the critical discussion than the quarrel is [...] [but] serious attempts to convince the other party are lacking. Instead, one tries to trick one’s opponent by stratagems that would be fallacious from the point of view of persuasion dialogue. In the eristic discussion, an outrageous fallacy may be the best and most successful technique to persuade your audience. (Walton & Krabbe, 1995: 78-79)

This model of eristic discussion (meant to be normative) seems to grasp quite realistically many characteristics of contentious online discussions. It is unclear, though, how such a brief depiction can support a context-sensitive analysis and evaluation of online disputes. Even if, contrary to Walton and Krabbe’s intentions, one approached eristic discussion as a descriptive model, it is not developed in enough detail to give a nuanced view of peculiarities of online, or any other, eristic argumentation. As a normative model, it is affected by the general theoretical difficulties of Walton and Krabbe’s proposal discussed above. For example, is it the case that ‘most successful’ arguments of eristics (e.g. *ad hominem* attacks), being ‘outrageously fallacious’ in other contexts, are actually reasonable

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21 Walton’s view of the dialogue type of deliberation (1998: Ch. 6) precludes analysing online political discussions as instances of deliberative political activity. In particular, for Walton (1998: 153): ‘Deliberation, in this sense as a type of dialogue, is highly cooperative and has only a small adversarial component. It is a kind of joint effort to collaborate in working together towards implementing goals that two parties have in common, where they share a set of circumstances or where these circumstances are relatively similar for the two parties.’ Contrary to these characteristics, online political discussions (an analysed below in Chapter 6) are adversarial and are not directed towards joint actions.

22 It also closely resembles Weger and Aakhus’ (2003) conclusions of their empirical study of online chat room discussions, in which they propose to treat chats as ‘wit-testing dialogues’ (see section 3.3).

23 See, however, recent attempts by van Laar (2009a).
in this type of dialogue by virtue of their efficiency in persuading the audience (or the opponent), and thus should be applauded from an argumentative point of view?

Even if these questions regarding eristic discussions were consistently answered, the basic problem would still remain – Walton’s theory offers no analytic criteria to prefer one of the options over others in deciding which type of dialogue we are facing.\(^\text{24}\) In the concrete case, how can we best categorise the online discussion analysed above? Is it a critical discussion with ‘overtones’ of eristics and inquiry, a critical discussion with ‘embedded’ subdialogues, a ‘mixed dialogue’ (i.e., a political debate which combines mainly critical discussion, eristics, and inquiry), an ‘eristic discussion,’ or maybe just an online discussion which assessed from the perspective of a critical discussion turns quite often fallacious?

In sum, Walton and Krabbe’s theory correctly points out two assumptions fundamental in studying ordinary argumentative contexts: 1) that argumentation can be properly analysed and assessed only after the context of its use is thoroughly examined; and 2) that in doing so analysts should combine descriptive and normative considerations. Unfortunately, their proposal seems to fail to meet any of the three criteria specified in section 2.1: (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony.

Firstly, the conception of dialogue types is affected by a major theoretical confusion: it is not clear if the dialogue types are primarily normative models used in an evaluation of actual arguments or rather descriptive models helpful in their analysis. In result of this confusion, the status of the goals and rules of each of the dialogue types is vague: one may wonder why exactly these types of dialogue are chosen for analysis and in what sense their goals are argumentative. However, even if this were clear, Walton offers no models of dialogue types in terms of clearly laid out sets of rules for securing the functionality of moves relative to the main goal of a given dialogue.\(^\text{25}\) That is to say that models of dialogue types are theoretically underdeveloped. Therefore, one cannot be sure if the ‘rules’ of varied types of dialogue are externally stipulated by Walton himself, or

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\(^{24}\) Walton attempts to explicitly address this problem in the following way: ‘In a given case, that is, a text of discourse containing argumentation, certain indications in the discourse will point to what type of dialogue exchange the participants are supposed to be engaging in’ (Walton, 1998: 8). These remarks are, however, not only not very helpful, but also verge on circularity. ‘Supposed to’ denotes a certain (weak) obligation which one can live up to or not. Therefore, the obligation must be established before one’s actions. If this obligation is reversely, as Walton suggests in this passage, judged on the basis of one’s actual (verbal) actions, then one is always supposed to do what one is doing.

\(^{25}\) The only exemption being the ‘permissive’ and ‘rigorous persuasion dialogue’ modelled by Walton and Krabbe with the use of formal logical concepts (1995: 123-172).
Secondly, and most importantly, Walton’s approach is ill-suited as a starting point for carrying out empirical research focused on actual contexts of argumentation, online political forum discussions in particular. This is partly due to the fact that the characteristics of various dialogue types are meant to be normative, and may thus be seen as deliberately not grounded in a methodical research of empirical reality. However, considering the problems mentioned above, it is hard to envisage how the concept of dialogue types can enrich our knowledge of actual conversational contexts of argument. Notably, since Walton’s theoretical concepts and analytical tools are vague, it is very difficult to apply them in a way that would produce empirical results giving new insights into the argumentative qualities of online discussions. Simply put, once confronted with actual online discourse Walton’s concepts generate difficulties (if not inconsistencies) that seriously impede efforts at drawing a methodologically strong, coherent picture of conditions for argumentation in online discussions.

Thirdly, the theoretical and empirical weaknesses have a serious bearing on the analytic tools and general parsimony of Walton’s conception. As described above, in the situation where consistent criteria are lacking for considering actual argumentative discussions as belonging to one type of dialogue or another, analytic choices made by an argumentation critic in complex cases of real-life discourses will always be, to a large extent, ad hoc and arbitrary. At the same time, they are vital to argumentation evaluation: for example, by which standards associated with the six basic types of dialogue should we judge the arguers’ performance in an online political discussion if we take it as a ‘mixed’ speech event? Walton’s solution would probably be in line with the political debates at large: ‘it is conditionally permissible to evaluate a political debate [...] from a point of view of a critical discussion’ (1998: 224). Having been granted such important and reasonable

26 Two pertinent examples of such evaluative differences can be mentioned here. According to Walton, an argument to the person is perfectly fine in an eristic dialogue, but in the context of both a critical discussion (persuasion dialogue) and an inquiry it easily becomes a fallacious *argumentum ad hominem*. Next, retraction of previously incurred commitments is certainly allowable in eristics (‘I said so before, now I don’t, and so what?’), conditionally allowable in a (permissive) persuasion dialogue, but unacceptable in inquiry defined by ‘the property of cumulativeness’ (which means, according to Walton (1998: 70), that in an inquiry ‘the participants can’t change their minds’).

27 Compare, however, the following passage: ‘Even though a text of discourse of a political debate may contain elements of negotiation, persuasion dialogue, and so forth, we can still look at it from the point of view of a deliberation and use the normative structure of deliberation as a model for evaluating the argumentation in the debate ’ (Walton, 1998: 173).
‘conditional permission,’ an analyst may still wonder why he could not use a critical discussion as an evaluative model in the first place, instead of going through the trouble of trying to get at the nature of the varied ‘dialogue types’ the participants were ‘supposed to be engaging in,’ without being given a clear and applicable method for doing that. In this respect, Walton’s concept of dialogue types would simply not pass the test of Occam’s Razor, that is, it would not meet the criterion of parsimony. By propounding the method of analysis of well-known speech events, such as political debates, in which they are composites of five types of his taxonomy, Walton multiplies theoretical beings with little practical gains – in the end, they can be ‘conditionally’ evaluated by standards of a critical discussion. Moreover, other options (such as shifts and admixtures) further complicate the picture.

All in all, such theoretical and analytic predicaments seriously diminish the usefulness of Walton and Krabbe’s approach. Therefore, other approaches to the study of contextualised argumentation are discussed in the following two chapters.

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28 Walton’s ‘dialectical method of evaluating arguments’ (1998: Ch. 10) does not address, let alone solve, these problems.