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 4

Argumentative activity types in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation

4.1 Deepening the analysis of contextualised argumentation

The goal of this chapter is to complete the critical investigation of the theoretical approaches to the study of contextualised argumentation. To this end, I examine the conception of argumentative activity types in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation. By judging the merits of the pragma-dialectical approach in comparison with the two approaches discussed in the previous chapters, I will provide an answer to the theoretical question of the dissertation: 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?

Each of the two approaches to analysing contexts of argumentative discussions presented above can be shortly characterised by a distinctive line of development. On the one hand, Walton and Krabbe start from a normative theorising about various ‘systems of dialogue rules’ and then seek to integrate it with the descriptive study of ‘conventionalized conversational settings’ in their conception of dialogue types. On the other hand, Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus’ approach is rooted in pragmatic discourse analysis which is later enhanced by normative concerns (‘normative pragmatics’) and oriented towards practical ‘engineering’ of different argumentation designs. Thus, in their own, opposite ways, both these approaches take the important step towards assimilating the normative and descriptive perspectives to the study of argumentation in context.

For pragma-dialectics, the integration of the normative and the descriptive is not a result achieved later in the process of a reasoned development of a theory, but rather the very point of departure. The normative aspect of the theory rests on its dialectical basis, while the descriptive aspect lies in its pragmatic orientation (further refined by an incorporation of rhetorical considerations). This systematic combination allows pragma-
dialectics to be a comprehensive theory created with the goal of analysing and evaluating ordinary argumentative discussions, such as those held on Internet forums.

In order to fully examine the theoretical concepts of pragma-dialectics and its methodological tools useful in analysing online discussions, similarly to the approaches discussed above, I start from presenting the main conceptual underpinnings of pragma-dialectics (section 4.2); then I discuss the pragma-dialectical take on the contextuality of argumentation, based on the concept of argumentative activity types (section 4.3); finally, I assess the pragma-dialectical approach by applying the criteria of (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony (section 4.4).

4.2 Using the ideal model of a critical discussion

The normative edge of pragma-dialectics finds its philosophical justification, in the first place, in the critical rationalism propounded by Popper and Albert (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1988). Pragma-dialectics adopts the basic principle of Popper’s falsificationism: rationality of theses is measured in an ongoing exchange of ‘conjectures and refutations,’ rather than in a finite process of justification through unshakeable facts and proofs. In other words, rational theses (or opinions) are those that are in principle disputable and falsifiable, but endure attempts at being refuted in a regulated procedure of critical testing. Necessary in pursuing reasonableness is thus securing the best possible conditions for externalising criticisms and thoroughly testing the tenability of disputed opinions.

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst embodied this general philosophical ideal in terms of argumentation theory in the normative model of an ideal critical discussion (1984, 1992a, 2004). A critical discussion is a rule-governed dialectical procedure aimed at resolving differences of opinion on the merit by critical testing of standpoints advanced. The basic assumption of the model is that argumentation is meaningfully advanced only in response to (actual, potential, or merely anticipated) doubt regarding a certain standpoint. The point of departure for a critical discussion is thus an externalisation of a difference of opinion (in the ‘confrontation stage’) which can be subsequently resolved if those in disagreement set to do so and decide on their roles and common starting points for discussion (in the ‘opening stage’). The rules of the model clearly specify the rights and obligations of both parties to a discussion: the protagonist and the antagonist. In the central stage of a critical discussion—the ‘argumentation stage’—it is the protagonist who argues
for, or against, a certain standpoint, while the antagonist acts as a pure critic, who does not assume any positive or negative position, but solely casts doubt on protagonist’s argumentation. According to critical standards of reasonableness, in a critical discussion the acceptability of standpoints is tested in terms of the degree to which the protagonist’s argumentation supporting a given standpoint addresses all relevant criticisms by the antagonist. If the protagonist is able to successfully deal with all the critical reactions, then the difference of opinion is resolved (in the ‘concluding stage’) in his favour and his standpoint holds.1 If he fails to do so, it is the antagonist who can claim the victory, that is, uphold his doubt concerning the standpoint.2

This concise presentation should suffice to understand why the ideal argumentative discussion developed in pragma-dialectics is ‘critical’ – it is a conceptual model meant to stipulate the process of a reasonable resolution of differences of opinion in a way which optimises the testing of standpoints and arguments by optimising the possibilities for critical reactions. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst put it:

Critical reactions and argumentation play a crucial role in the resolution of a dispute. To really resolve a dispute, the points that are being disputed have to be made the issue of a critical discussion that is aimed at reaching agreement about the acceptability or unacceptability of the standpoints at issue by finding out whether or not they can be adequately defended by means of argumentation against doubt or criticism. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 34)

In short, pragma-dialectics, in its normative functional approach, makes it clear that every argumentation is a means of overcoming doubt or criticism.

It is worth stressing that the model of a critical discussion is developed as a regulative ideal, rather than as a descriptive model: the model defines a perfectly reasonable procedure of dialectical argumentation under optimal conditions, aimed exclusively at resolving differences of opinion on the merits. Therefore, it is not meant to reflect the norms of some actual (even privileged) contexts for holding argumentative discussion.3 Apart from the basic fact that a critical discussion is a theoretical construction unknown to ordinary arguers, there are at least two factors which lead to complications in implementing in reality the ideal forms of argumentation stipulated in a critical discussion:

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1 Although only tentatively, as the standpoint can always be subjected to further critical testing in another critical discussion.
2 Which is different from claiming that the opposite standpoint holds.
3 Even though ordinary arguers can, and indeed do, recognise and accept norms embodied in the model of a critical discussion. This means that the norms of a critical discussion created as problem-valid, have the intersubjective validity and may also acquire the conventional validity. For an empirical study of this relation see van Eemeren, Garssen & Meuffels, 2009.
1) discussants—whether deliberately or inadvertently—may violate the rules of the ideal procedure; such violations amount to making foul argumentative moves traditionally conceptualised as fallacies; 2) actual contexts of argumentation fulfil to a limited degree the ideal conditions, either those stipulated in the very rules of a critical discussion (first-order conditions) or those presupposed by the model for actual discussions to succeed in resolving differences of opinion (higher-order conditions). 

The ideal status of a critical discussion reflects the idea that its function is, first and foremost, normative. Having a precisely formulated model allows argumentation critics to: 1) systematically detect departures from the ideal in ordinary argumentative discourse and analyse these departures as fallacies (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987, 1992a); 2) to grasp in a consistent manner various deficiencies of actual contexts of argumentative discussions and critique them as inefficient procedures for dialectical resolution of conflicts (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993).

The applicability of the model of a critical discussion to analysis and evaluation of real-life cases of argumentative discourse is significantly enhanced thanks to the rules of the model being formulated in the terminology of linguistic pragmatics, i.e., in terms of rights and obligations pertaining to the performance of conventionally recognisable speech acts (Austin, 1975 [1962]; Searle, 1969). The procedure for a critical discussion is thus composed of various types of speech acts used by arguers in daily verbal communication: advancing a standpoint, accepting or not accepting a standpoint (confrontation stage), challenging the protagonist to defend a standpoint, agreeing on some starting points (opening stage), arguing, casting doubt on arguments, counter-arguing (argumentation stage), requesting for clarification, defining (all the stages), agreeing on the outcome

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4 The most recent formulation of the 15 rules for a critical discussion in a speech act terminology can be found in: van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: Ch. 6. Their abridged version as ‘10 commandments’ instrumental in detecting fallacies is updated in: van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: Ch. 8. The second- and third-order conditions for argumentative discourse are discussed in van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs (1993: 30-34). The second-order conditions pertain to the attitudes and predispositions of the arguers; notably, for an ideally reasonable argumentation to proceed the arguers have to be resolution-minded, that is, they need to be ready to accept the resolution of a difference of opinion reached on the sole basis of the force of better argument, even if that implies admitting being wrong. The third-order conditions refer to the socio-political surroundings of argumentative discourse; ideally, arguers are peers openly defending or criticising all kinds of issues in a pluralistic environment free of hierarchical dependencies and ideological bias. Moreover, in the case of political disputes, they have equal and unlimited access to forums of public debate and deliberation.

5 The possibility of the pragma-dialectical model to serve as a basis for a critique of contexts has been, as described above, taken up especially by Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus.

6 Thanks to this pragmatic aspect, the pragma-dialectical model departs from the conceptualisation of argumentative discussions as formal dialectical games, whose rules are defined in terms of symbolised exchanges of logical propositions (cf. Barth & Krabbe, 1982; Hamblin, 1970; Walton, 1984).
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(concluding stage), etc. In particular, argumentation itself is given a precise definition as a speech act complex with special conditions for a felicitous performance (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1982, 1984). The pragmatic element of a critical discussion facilitates the usefulness of the model for heuristic purposes. Similarly to the normative role, the model can serve a heuristic function in two distinctive (even if interrelated) ways.

Firstly, it enables a principled process of argumentative reconstruction in which the analysis of discourse is limited to and focused on the study of analytically relevant argumentative moves (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992b, 2004: Ch. 4). Analytically relevant moves are those speech acts that may (at least potentially) play a role in the process of resolving a difference of opinion. Therefore, from all speech acts performed in a given piece of discourse those with a potential argumentative function (including those which are finally found to be hindrances to the process of a resolution) are selected as relevant objects of close argumentative analysis. Such a process is by no means mechanical, as it requires detailed, qualitative examination of contextualised discourse, in which complex issues of indirectness, implicitness, and multi-functionality of language-in-use have to be taken into account (van Eemeren et al., 1993).

Secondly, a critical discussion—the ideal context for argumentative discussions—allows to approach a great variety of actual contexts of communicative activity from the perspective of their argumentative functions. Such ordinary contexts of discussion can be, as Walton and Krabbe correctly observed, ‘grouped according to various differences and resemblances’ (1995: 66) but, as pragma-dialecticians contend, a consistent and systematic argumentative analysis and classification of contexts should be undertaken from a clearly specified argumentative point of view. A critical discussion, with its specification of the dialectical functions of discourse in the four stages of the process of resolving differences of opinion, provides the heuristic tools for ‘grouping’ various types of communicative activity according to argumentative ‘differences and resemblances.’ Shorty, it provides a unified framework for analysing the contextual conditions in many types of everyday discourse.

4.3 Strategic manoeuvring in various argumentative activity types

Pragma-dialectics, from the very outset, has considered the pragmatic analysis of the details of argumentative discourse as a prerequisite for a well-justified evaluation of argumentation. The evaluative (or normative) function can be seen as central to
argumentation theory. Disciplines such as logic (both formal and informal) and formal dialectics have been predominantly (if not exclusively) focused on developing standards for ‘valid’ argumentation, largely in detachment from problems of ordinary language. In effect, they are wanting when it comes to providing a cogent method for analysing naturally occurring, contextualised discourse (rather than invented individual cases). This is a rather serious shortcoming if one correctly assumes that the evaluation of argumentation is always quite directly dependent on its analysis: the more sophisticated, fine-tuned the tools for analysis are, the more accurate, true to life the evaluation can be offered. Methodology developed within the tradition of the pragmatic study of language use provides many of such useful tools. Pragmada dialectics has always applied pragmatic concepts, including these facilitating a context-sensitive approach to ordinary discourse. Therefore, it has consistently resorted to ‘deep-background analyses of situation and purpose’ in its method of reconstructing argumentative discourse (van Eemeren et al., 1993: 93). In the pragma-dialectical view, without due consideration of contextual conditions, many qualities of actual argumentation may remain obscure to an analyst:

The pragmatic grounding of argumentation in broader conversational activities is quite common. Arguments are frequently performed through speech acts other than simple assertives, and the argumentative force they have depends on the characteristics of the speech events in which they occur. Likewise, the standpoints that get expressed and taken up for argument have their sense and relevance established by the purposes of the activity in which they occur. (van Eemeren et al., 1993: 94)

In short: sense, force, and relevance of both arguments and standpoints are determined by the context of practical activity. This includes indirect and implicit features of argumentative discourse, such as unexpressed standpoints and premises, which can be properly reconstructed only with the help of a contextualised pragmatic analysis of discourse.

These are all important insights regarding contextual considerations in the study of argumentation, but, as pragma-dialecticians have lately proposed, argumentative analysis and evaluation of ‘broader conversational activities’ can be further enriched by an incorporation of a rhetorical dimension to analyses of actual discussions.

7 In this regard, the approaches within the Informal Logic, as well as theories of Toulmin and Perelman can be criticised: ‘By dealing with isolated arguments, and neglecting the pragmatic aspect of the verbal and nonverbal context of the speech event in which they occur, as for an alternative to formal logic Toulmin and Perelman have less to offer for the study of argumentation than they claim’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 4).

8 Impossible, by the way, in in-principle de-contextualising methods of studying text such as content analysis.
The point of departure for the pragma-dialectical interest in the rhetorical aspect of discourse is a recognition of a special predicament that ordinary language users face in their day-to-day argumentation. On the one hand, every serious argumentation by definition involves certain commitment to reasonableness. It means that those who advance a certain standpoint and argue for it in order to convince critics—rather than to win them over by various tricks and stratagems, including manipulation, threat and ridicule—make claim to certain standards of reasonableness. These standards, in the pragma-dialectical theory, are embodied in the model of a critical discussion whose norms exactly prescribe what it means to convince a ‘reasonable critic’ by the force of better argument. On the other hand, also by definition, argumentation is meaningfully advanced only under conditions of a difference of opinion – and resolving this difference in one’s own favour is a goal of every genuine arguer. Taking this element into account means that ordinary arguers are most faithfully approached if seen as involved in an agonistic struggle in which victory or defeat are at stake, rather than as purely rational minds aimed at a disinterested quest for truth. What is at stake in ordinary argumentative discussions is thus a skilful reconciliation of one’s desire to win a discussion by getting one’s standpoint accepted by the opponent with the public expectation to do it in a reasonable way. These two distinct considerations may at times be conflicting, thus putting arguers in a predicament.

In order to grasp this predicament, pragma-dialectics understands ordinary argumentation as characteristically shaped by an interplay of two argumentative goals: the goal of being reasonable and the goal of being successful (persuasive). Traditionally, the study of reasonable argumentative discussions falls into the domain of dialectics, while the study of successful persuasiveness belongs to rhetoric. Pragma-dialectics, in its recent developments, tries to bring these two traditions together by incorporating rhetorical considerations into the dialectical framework of a critical discussion.

The basic assumption underlying the integrated pragma-dialectical perspective is that the dialectical and rhetorical goals may be neatly reconcilable (after all, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in being successful), but they may also diverge – in which case

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9 I adopt the following definition of argumentation: ‘Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 1). Functionally speaking, crucial in this definition is the formulation of the goal of argumentation as convincing someone who is necessarily ‘reasonable’ and, at the same, is a ‘critic’ which, until convinced, remains in disagreement over the standpoint proffered.
a certain tension in pursuing both goals simultaneously may arise. Ordinary arguers’ attempts at diminishing the possible tension between the claim to be reasonable and the desire to win are conceptualised in pragma-dialectics in terms of *strategic manoeuvring* (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999, 2000, 2002a). Strategic manoeuvres are defined as:

[...] methodical designs of moves, or ‘blue-prints’, for influencing the result of a particular dialectical stage to one’s own advantage, which manifest themselves in a systematic, co-ordinated and simultaneous exploitation of the opportunities afforded by the stage. (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 485-486)\(^\text{10}\)

Analysis of such manoeuvres is thus embedded in the model of a critical discussion which clearly spells out the argumentative functions of different stages of a rational dialectical procedure: the difference of opinion has to be clearly and fully externalised (in the confrontation stage), the starting points for discussion have to be unambiguously established (in the opening stage), the exchange of arguments and critical reactions has to take place (in the argumentation stage) to test the acceptability of a relevant standpoint on the basis of prior intersubjective agreements on starting points and, finally, the outcome of the discussion has to be decided (in the concluding stage) solely ‘on the merits’ of preceding argumentation. In short, according to pragma-dialectics, if arguers want be reasonable, they should aim at realising overt goals of all the stages of a dialectical procedure instrumental in resolving differences of opinion by the force of better argument.

Thanks to such systematic division, the agonistic, rhetorical quality of actual argumentative discussions can be orderly grasped by recognising that the dialectical objective of each of the stages has, as it were, its ‘rhetorical analogue’: arguers who want to be efficient in convincing opponents will attempt to, in the first place, frame the difference of opinion in an advantageous way, then establish these starting points that may be most useful in getting their point accepted, employ arguments or critical reactions that efficiently lead to an outcome they are after, and finally frame the outcome in terms of their argumentative victory (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002a: 138-139). In this way, the rhetorical goals of argumentative discussions are analytically grafted upon the dialectical goals distinguished in the model.

The delicate balancing of the dialectical and rhetorical goals of argumentation takes place by means of ‘a systematic, co-ordinated and simultaneous’ management of ‘three inseparable aspects of strategic manoeuvring’: the adaptation to the demand of audience to

\(^{10}\) In the early work on strategic manoeuvring van Eemeren and Houtlosser sometimes also use the term ‘rhetorical strategy.’
which argumentation is directed, the selection from the topical potential of argumentation, and the choice of stylistic devices in the presentation of argumentation (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999: 484-486, van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 4). Each argumentative move—whether performed by the protagonist to support his case or by the antagonist to criticise the protagonist’s case—is thus imbued with strategic choices made in three different respects. For example, when it comes to the argumentation stage, the protagonist may address his audience in the way that he considers most in line with audience demand, expeditiously choose to advance the arguments he finds most convincing, and phrase them in the most appealing fashion. The antagonist, in turn, may resort to these criticisms that he thinks the audience finds decisive, choose to target these elements of the protagonist’s argumentation he finds weakest, and formulate his critical reactions and re-formulate the protagonist’s arguments in the way which is least charitable to the protagonist.

This simultaneous management of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, even if often implemented by the arguers without a full consideration of their detailed dialectical and rhetorical functions, can be assumed to be motivated by the protagonist’s aim to build the most successful case possible and, conversely, by the antagonist’s aim to launch the severest possible criticism (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002a, 2002b). In general, by manoeuvring strategically arguers try to make an advantageous use of the many options open to them at various junctures of a reasonable dialectical discussion.

The key idea is that strategic manoeuvring is a phenomenon of argumentative reality: it always occurs in concrete situations under specific contextual conditions. Moreover, since many types of regularly occurring contexts of ordinary argumentation have become socially recognisable together with their conventionally established communicative practices, one can say that strategic manoeuvring routinely takes place in various types of communicative activity. Such activities are characterised by recurring patterns of communicative behaviour which are often underlain by certain fixed expectations or even norms of communication. In this sense, they may be seen as institutionalised in a given communicative community. A great many types of such communicative activities can be distinguished, yet the focus of argumentation analysis is on these types which exhibit a clear argumentative aspect, that is, on argumentative activity types. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser explain:

[…] argumentative activity types are conventionalised entities that can be distinguished by ‘external’ empirical observations of the communicative practices in the various domains – or, as Thomas Goodnight would have it, ‘spheres’ – of discourse. Argumentative activity types manifest
themselves in various institutionalised variants, some of which are culturally established forms of communication with a more or less fixed format, such as political debates, legal defences, and scientific essays. (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005: 76)

In accordance with this description, a comprehensive pragma-dialectical analysis of various types of argumentative activity takes into account a few important factors influencing actual, contextually situated performance of argumentation. The first of them are the domains of discourse in which different activities belong. Domains of discourse are the broad spheres of ‘communicative practice’ primarily defined by the function, or ‘institutional point,’ that activities within the domain aim to realise in society. Recently, van Eemeren (2010) distinguished legal, political, problem-solving, diplomatic, medical, scholarly, commercial, and interpersonal domain of communication. In realising the institutional point of each of these domains some ‘genres of communicative activity’ are ‘prototypically implemented’ (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5; see table 4.1).

Another important factor are the institutions in which particular activities take place.Pragma-dialectics understands institutions as systems of socially constructed rules with their associated sanctions. In such a broad view, anything from court hearings to pub chats are institutions; therefore, these types of communicative activity which are informal, yet clearly recognisable and thus subject to participants’ expectations, are not excluded from systematic analyses. At the same time, one can speak of institutions in the strong sense, i.e., those constituted by formal written rules and explicitly connected to functioning of the state or business (parliament, court of law, bank), and institutions in the weak sense, i.e., those built up of informal, largely unwritten conventions without any explicit connection to the functioning of the state or corporate administration (family dinner, playground, pub).

Furthermore, all the institutional restrictions and opportunities prevalent in a given type of argumentative activity are construed as conventional. Conventions, thus, spread on a continuum from explicitly stated and strictly enforced rules (characteristic of, but not limited to, the institutions in the strong sense) to unwritten expectations of a ‘proper behaviour’ (characteristic of, but not limited to, the institutions in the weak sense). Such conventions, whether explicit or implicit, are assumed to be functional in achieving the institutional goals of the argumentative activity type. An ‘institutional goal’ is the aim of communication which is conventionally assigned to each particular activity type within a given domain of communication (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5).
What is of special importance here is that pragma-dialectical analyses of particular institutional goals and conventions of different argumentative activity types are clearly based on ‘empirical observations’ (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005: 76). That is because, by definition, the concept of activity types pertains to actually exercised communicative practices, rather than to some theoretical constructs, as is the case with Walton’s ‘dialogue types.’ All the same, the study of varied argumentative activity types can be carried in a consistent and systematic way thanks to its grounding in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, which developed a normative model of an ideal argumentative discussion.
It means, precisely, that argumentative activity types are characterised along four parameters which mirror the division of a critical discussion into four stages: the initial situation (confrontation stage), starting points (opening stage), argumentative means (argumentation stage) and the outcome (concluding) (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005; see table 4.1). A critical discussion is thus used as a heuristic tool for analysing all recognisable argumentative activity types, but is never considered as one of them.

The fact that the model for a critical discussion can be applied to the full plurality of argumentative activity types that can be discerned, does not imply that all these argumentative activity types have as their purpose an ideally reasonable resolution of a difference of opinion on the merits. Rather, this purpose can be ascribed analytically only to the argumentative exchanges occurring within these activities. At the same time, a clear grasp of the particular institutional goals that characterise each of the various argumentative activity types is a prerequisite for explaining the specific ways in which argumentation is disciplined in each particular activity type. In the pragma-dialectical view, the conventions of a given activity type instrumental in achieving its goal are best understood for the purpose of argumentation theory as context-specific restrictions and opportunities regarding particular modes of strategic manoeuvring. This is most evident in highly institutionalised contexts such as Prime Minister’s question time in British House of Commons (Mohammed, 2009). The institutional goal of this type of argumentative activity is formulated as: holding the Government to account concerning its general performance. In realising this goal, various conventions of proper parliamentary behaviour are in force. One can clearly see how some of these conventions affect the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring mentioned above: (1) in adapting to the audience demand, arguers have the opportunity to manoeuvre between three different audiences: first, by a parliamentary convention, every speaker officially addresses the Speaker of the House of Commons; second, quite obviously, the Prime Minister addresses his defences to the members of the Opposition who, in turn, address their criticisms to the Prime Minister; however, third, the primary audience that the politicians on both sides seek to satisfy in their (televised) argumentative exchanges is the broad electorate that decides during elections which of the parties is fitter to govern the country (Mohammed, 2009: Ch. 3); (2) when it comes to the topical potential of argumentation, question time is limited to arguing for and against the policies of the British government; (3) in terms of appropriate presentational devices, the members of the Opposition are restricted to exclusively ask questions: therefore, all their opinions and criticisms have to be veiled in the form of a question (Mohammed, 2009).
The impact of institutional constraints on the way arguers make strategic choices in their discussions is clearly distinguishable in well-formatted types of activity. However, it also plays a role in ordinary, informal activities such as online political forum discussions. The pragma-dialectical framework allows for a comprehensive, methodical study of specific constraints in this informal type of activity.

4.4 Conclusion concerning the required analytic approach

As befits ‘a systematic theory of argumentation’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004), pragma-dialectics has been developing over the last thirty years in accordance with a clearly delineated research programme. The question relevant here is how the pragma-dialectical systematicity affects the study of contextual conditions for argumentation in online political forum discussions compared to other theoretical approaches, namely, these of Walton and Krabbe, as well as Jackson, Jacobs, and Aakhus. In order to fully answer this question, and thus to conclude theoretical investigations regarding the contextuality of argumentation, pragma-dialectical concept of argumentative activity types is briefly assessed along the criteria set out in section 2.1: (theoretical) efficacy, (empirical) well-groundedness, and (methodological) parsimony.

First, pragma-dialectics offers a comprehensive theoretical framework with clear distinctions regarding the status of contextual considerations in the study of argumentation. Contrary to both Walton and Krabbe and Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus, it recognises only one model of argumentation, i.e., the ideal model of a critical discussion. This model is not a context of argumentation, not even a privileged one; it is, rather, a normative theoretical construction indispensable in a systematic study of ordinary argumentation. To this end it plays, in the first place, a heuristic function – it allows for a methodical research into the various, actually practised types of argumentative activity. The results of such research give us knowledge of fixed conventional preconditions that influence the patterns of strategic manoeuvring in a given type of context. This is crucial to analysing the patterns of reacting critically in the activity type of online political forum discussions. In the second place, the model of a critical discussion plays a normative function – for various activity types, specific contextual criteria can be established for the application of the generally
formulated rules for a critical discussion (see: van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2007; van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming).11

In short, pragma-dialectical activity types are empirically recognisable types of communicative practices approached from the perspective of a normative model. In this way, a conceptual confusion of what constitutes a normative model and what a description of a conventionally regulated contextualised practice is avoided. As a result, the pragma-dialectical approach is theoretically efficacious to the task of a methodical investigation of specificities of argumentative activity types, such as online discussion forums.

Second, an empirical study of various contexts of argumentative discourse across distinct domains of communication is an inherent part of the pragma-dialectical research programme. Contrary to the approach of Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus, pragma-dialectical concepts have not been developed in direct correspondence with empirical analyses of varied designs for computer-mediated communication. However, the theoretical and methodological tools are suitable for undertaking such research: Internet-specific restrictions on and opportunities for reacting critically can be examined in terms of conventional constraints of the argumentative activity type of online discussions, constraints that affect online arguers’ strategic manoeuvring. The results of empirical observations of Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus may be of help in pragma-dialectical research – in the end, both these approaches share a great many similarities, especially when it comes to the methods of analysing actual discourse occurring ‘in the context of practical activities’ (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993, 1997).

This brings us to the final criterion, that is, the methodological adequacy of the approach to the study of the relation between the conditions prevalent in the context of online discussions on the patterns of reacting critically. What pragma-dialectics offers in this respect is a well-organised framework for analysis and evaluation of contextualised argumentation in which, among other things: the four parameters (initial situation, starting points, means of argumentation and criticism, possible outcome) of an activity type can be clearly distinguished and examined; actually performed moves can be reconstructed as being affected by one (or a combination) of these parameters; specific types of moves, such as critical reactions, can be elucidated in terms of their dialectical and rhetorical

11 As discussed in Chapter 2, both these issues are problematic in Walton’s theory: first, in his account every actual context of argument is treated as emergent, rather than fixed, and thus amenable to ‘admixtures’ of and ‘shifts’ to and from various ‘dialogue types’ depending on how exchanges actually develop; second, the contextual criteria for applying a certain standard of reasonableness come together with contextual criteria for the choice of the very standard, and thus cannot be distinguished (both practically and analytically).
functions. In all these tasks, pragma-dialectics makes use of pragmatic and rhetorical insights which allow for catching verbal nuances of ordinary language in use, such as indirectness and implicitness, which are central to a sensitive, contextualised reconstruction of argumentation.

When it comes to the evaluation of arguments and criticisms, pragma-dialectics universally, regardless of the context, relies on the rules of an abstract normative model of a critical discussion. However, it resorts to contextual cues in applying these rules: specific criteria for deciding whether a norm of reasonableness has been violated or not may considerably differ from one context to another. In such a framework, actual argumentative discourse can be evaluated in a way which is at the same sensitive to contextual peculiarities and consistently grounded in one normative model of a critical discussion. This is in sharp contrast to Walton’s concept of dialogue types in which the risk of following confusing, or even patently inconsistent, evaluative procedures concerning actual discussions sometimes cannot be avoided.

All in all, if the decisive factor in evaluating approaches to analysing contexts for argumentation reviewed here is their functionality in empirically strong and theoretically consistent analysis and evaluation of the patterns of discourse characteristic of online political forum discussions, then the pragma-dialectical approach is a better choice than the conceptions of Walton and Krabbe, as well as Jackson, Jacobs and Aakhus. Therefore, it serves as a basis for the empirical studies conducted in the following chapters.