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Dialectical and Rhetorical Effects of Dissociation

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the dialectical and rhetorical effects of the use of dissociation in the various stages of a critical discussion which is held to resolve a difference of opinion between disputants. First, the way in which the resolution process evolves as a result of the use of dissociation is delineated; subsequently, the paper examines the way in which dissociation can be used for gaining a position that is the most favourable for promoting the standpoint of the speaker.

KEY WORDS: dissociation, dialectic, rhetoric, critical discussion

1. DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is one of the two general categories of argument schemes, association and dissociation, distinguished by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) in their taxonomy of argumentative techniques The New Rhetoric. In the various argument schemes that belong to association, the speaker establishes a link between two independent entities in order to transfer judgments of the audience about the one thing to the other one. In dissociation, the speaker splits up a notion considered by the audience to form a unitary concept into two new notions, one of which comprises the aspects of the original notion that the speaker considers real or central (term II), the other, the aspects that he considers apparent or peripheral (term I).

Dissociation can be used in various ways in argumentative discussions. In a dialectical reconstruction of these discussions, we can assign these various uses of dissociation to the different stages of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 1992, 2004) and we can analyze the dialectical functions that dissociation has in these various locations for resolving the difference of opinion. Once we have done that, we can examine how dissociation is employed to perform these dialectical functions in such a way that the rhetorical aim of the speaker, to reach a position that is the most advantageous for getting his standpoint accepted by the audience, so that the difference of opinion may be resolved in his or her own favor, is served best. In this way, we can explore the possibilities that dissociation offers a speaker or writer to maneuver strategically between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 1997, 2002). In earlier work (van Rees (2005), I have analyzed the dialectical functions of dissociation in the different stages of a critical discussion. In this paper, I will show how dissociation can be used for strategic maneuvering in these stages. I will use some of the same material I have treated earlier, now with this new question in mind.

In general, dissociation may enhance dialectical reasonableness because at the basis of dissociation there are two speech acts, distinction and definition, that belong to the type that van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) called usage declaratives,
which have the function of clarifying linguistic usage and structuring our conception of reality. Dissociation involves distinction, because through dissociation a notion that the audience regards as a conceptual unit is split up into two new notions, each comprising part of the original one. And it involves definition, because, as a result, the original term is newly defined and alongside the old one a new term is called into being, receiving a definition of its own (or the old term is replaced by two new terms, each with their own definition). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, in their extensive discussion of philosophical pairs that are the result of dissociation, have shown how dissociation may indeed be used to achieve greater precision and conceptual sharpness. In general, then, dissociation may serve dialectical reasonableness by enabling the speaker to execute the various dialectical moves in the successive stages of a critical discussion with optimal clarity and precision, making the statements in which it occurs optimally well-defined and well-delineated.

In general, dissociation may promote rhetorical effectiveness, because it is a technique through which a speaker may present a particular state of affairs in a light that is favorable to the speaker’s interests. As Zarefsky (1997, 2004) phrases it, dissociation may be used to define the situation. The granddaughter of Maria Montessori, responding to an accusation that her grandmother was vain and ambitious by countering with the dissociations that ‘she was not vain but loved beautiful clothes’ and that ‘she was driven, something different from ambition’, put Montessori in a rather more favorable light than her critics did. In addition, this definition of the situation through dissociation often is performed in such a way as to rule out any further argument. The distinction that the dissociation makes is presented as common knowledge and the two resulting notions are authoritatively declared different, as we may also observe in the response of Maria Montessori’s granddaughter just cited.

2 DISSOCIATION IN THE VARIOUS STAGES OF CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Apart from the general effects just mentioned, the dialectical and rhetorical effects of dissociation depend on the precise place in which dissociation occurs in the various stages of a critical discussion. Dissociation may be used for strategic maneuvering in all the stages of a critical discussion, the confrontation stage, the opening stage, the argumentation stage, and the concluding stage. In each stage, there are specific dialectical moves that have to be executed. I will first mention these dialectical moves, then I will specify in what way dissociation contributes to executing these moves, and finally I will sketch the rhetorical gain that dissociation can bring in the execution of these moves.

2.1 Confrontation stage

The confrontation stage of a critical discussion consists of three successive moves: the protagonist brings forward a standpoint, the antagonist raises doubt against this standpoint or criticizes it by bringing forward an opposite standpoint, and the protagonist responds to this criticism, either by maintaining his standpoint, or by withdrawing it. In each of these moves, dissociation can be employed.1

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1 Strictly speaking, one cannot speak here of protagonist and antagonist, since in the confrontation stage these roles have not yet been distributed. But since the discussant who brings forward a standpoint in practice usually is the one who takes on the defense and the one who brings forward doubt the one who fulfills the attacking role, for briefness sake, I use these terms in this context, too.
2.1.1 Standpoint

In the first move of the confrontation stage, in which the protagonist brings forward a standpoint, because dissociation involves a distinction, the specific contribution of dissociation to performing this dialectical move is that it serves to delineate a particular standpoint against the background of other possible standpoints. An example can be found in the following passage from an internet review of a Dutch comedian:

(1) In this time, in which the country appears to have an urgent need for comedians, real originality is absent. [Follow a number of examples that serve to support this claim – MAvR]

http://www.sjaakbral.nl/recensies.html

The author brings forward the standpoint that real originality among Dutch comedians is absent. This standpoint contains term II of a dissociation of the term ‘originality’, implicitly opposing it to term I, ‘originality which only is apparent’.

The rhetorical gain of dissociation in the first move of the confrontation stage is that the particular standpoint that it helps to delineate is easier to defend. First of all, through an expression such as ‘real’ or ‘true’, the standpoint becomes vague, because it is not clear what it is that distinguishes real originality from its fake equivalents. Thus, the protagonist can choose that interpretation that suits him best. In fact, as Zarefsky et al. (1984) showed with their analysis of Reagan’s use of the expression ‘the truly needy’, through this vagueness, the protagonist can maneuver to persuade radically different opponents, for example, in the case of Reagan’s defense of his proposal to curtail social security, both people who want to give financial support to the needy, and people who want to limit the use of social security. In addition, the dissociation makes it possible for the protagonist to immunize his standpoint against criticism. If someone points to a counterexample, for example a number of obvious cases of originality in Dutch entertainers, the protagonist can always maintain that in those counterexamples there is no question of real originality.

2.1.2 Criticism against the standpoint

In the second move of the confrontation stage, dissociation may occur in the criticism of the antagonist when he criticizes the standpoint brought forward by the protagonist by presenting an opposing standpoint. The antagonist then becomes protagonist of an opposing standpoint. The specific contribution of dissociation to performing this dialectical move, because it involves making a distinction between what is and what is not the case, is that the antagonist becomes protagonist of a multiple standpoint: not only does he bring forward the opposing standpoint, but he brings forward a particular other standpoint as well. The granddaughter of Maria Montessori, answering her grandmother’s critics, not only claims that Montessori was not vain, but also that she loved beautiful clothes.

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2 This section is concerned with dissociation occurring in a standpoint in the confrontation stage of the main discussion, not with a standpoint consisting of a proposal for dissociation. In the first move of the confrontation stage, dissociation takes the shape of a single assertion, +/p[t1]; dissociation in the form of a complex assertion, +/p[t1] . ~/p[t2], I reconstruct as belonging to the second move.
The rhetorical effect of dissociation in this move is that the standpoint of the initial protagonist is set aside and replaced by a standpoint that is more to the liking of the antagonist. This new standpoint, because the distinction made in dissociation is between central and peripheral aspects of a notion, tones down the standpoint of the initial protagonist. Maria Montessori’s granddaughter, replacing the allegation that Montessori is vain by the claim that she (merely) loved beautiful clothes, tones down the original accusation and thus removes the sting from it. A mere denial would, given the facts of the situation as the participants perceive it, be hard to defend. The dissociation offers a different perspective on those facts and thus opens the possibility for a defensible position. Moreover, because the standpoint of the initial protagonist is replaced by another one, it ends up being dismissed, if not refuted, without further ado. If Montessori’s granddaughter would have defended her grandmother through a mere denial of the allegations of her critics, that would have been merely the word of one party against that of the other, and one that would, given the facts of the situation as perceived by the participants, be at least questionable. Through the dissociation, Montessori’s granddaughter makes it appear that her opponents are mistaken; she gives her standpoint the status of a correction and of the better, if not indeed the last word on the matter. As a result, the opposing standpoint for which she does carry the burden of proof seems no longer to be in need of any argument.

2.1.3 Maintaining or withdrawing

In the third move of the confrontation stage, the protagonist can use dissociation in his response to the criticism of the antagonist in two ways: to maintain his standpoint or to withdraw it (in the latter case the discussion ends there and then).

Maintaining

The specific dialectical contribution of dissociation by means of which the protagonist, after his standpoint has been criticized, maintains it, is that he gives a particular interpretation of his original standpoint and maintains his standpoint in that interpretation, while withdrawing it in another one. An example of this use of dissociation occurred in a feud between Eurocommissar Frits Bolkestein and TV personality Fons de Poel, in which Bolkestein initially brought forward the standpoint that de Poel made a fraudulent declaration against him with the IRS. De Poel criticizes this standpoint by denying that he did. Bolkestein reacts to this criticism in a rectification, saying ‘I meant “fraudulent declaration” not in the technical, fiscal sense of the word, but in the sense of cooperating in giving a patently false impression of things with regard to my tax declaration”. In this rectification, then, Bolkestein implicitly admits that de Poel did not make a fraudulent declaration in the technical, fiscal sense of the word, but at the same time persists in his opinion that de Poel made a fraudulent declaration, now in the sense of giving a patently false impression of things with regard to his (Bolkestein’s) tax declaration. The latter sense is presented as the one that matters, the former one as merely technical.

The rhetorical effect of this use of dissociation is that the protagonist can grant a concession on an interpretation of his standpoint that is presented as marginal, while taking a firm position on an interpretation that suits him better and that is presented as crucial. In this way, the protagonist can evade the criticism he received, by shifting to a standpoint that is easier for him to defend while at the same time giving the impression that he is maintaining his standpoint and did not shift positions.
Another example can be found in a passage from the first presidential debate between President Bush and Senator Kerry (September 30, 2004). Bush accuses Kerry of changing positions on the war in Iraq and brings forward the standpoint that ‘there must be certainty from the U.S. president’. Kerry counters that ‘certainty’ can get you in trouble and that it is better to acknowledge the facts and adapt your policy accordingly. Bush reacts to this opposition with a dissociation: ‘I fully agree that one should shift tactics and we will (...) But what I won’t do is change my core values’. The dissociation between mere tactics and core values enables Bush, by granting a concession on a minor point, to move away from a standpoint that has been criticized and to present his standpoint in a form that is better able to withstand criticism. In the meantime, Bush makes it appear that he firmly maintains his original standpoint.

\*Withdrawing\*

Dissociation can also be employed by the protagonist when, after his original standpoint has received criticism, he gives it up. The specific contribution to this dialectical move of dissociation is that it enables the protagonist to give a particular interpretation of his standpoint (which is presented as crucial) in which he withdraws it, while retaining it in another, irrelevant, interpretation. As a consequence, there is no longer a difference of opinion. An example of this can be found in a fragment from a radio interview with the public relations officer of the Public Prosecutor of the city of Rotterdam, Mr. Wesseling, in which he announces that Rotterdam, unlike the city of Groningen, will not prohibit posting an offending poster by the artist Serrano whose work is exhibited in Groningen:

(2) W: yeah well this is the Rotterdam point of view what I just told you  
I: isn't it a bit strange that in a small country like The Netherlands such diverging opinions reign between two large cities?  
W: eh well for the moment yes you assume that there is a difference of opinion it could very well be the case that in practice in the end it will lead to the same result

Implicit in Wesseling's first utterance is the standpoint that Rotterdam has its own point of view. When the interviewer questions the desirability of this, Wesseling distances himself from this standpoint. Dissociating opinions in the abstract from opinions in practice, he claims that “in practice” there is no difference of opinion between the two cities, in other words, Rotterdam does not have its own point of view. So, the PR officer, after the initial standpoint to which he committed himself received criticism, gives it up and there is no longer a difference of opinion.

The rhetorical effect of the dissociation in this move is that the protagonist backs out from his commitment to a standpoint that he initially put forward, but makes it look like this is not the case and like he is not acting inconsistently: after all, his initial standpoint regarded something else, which moreover comprised an unimportant aspect of the matter.

2.2 Opening stage

In the opening stage, among other things, the discussants jointly establish the material starting points for the discussion, the concessions on the basis of which the standpoints will be defended. Dissociation can be used in proposing material starting points and in attacking these proposals. In actual argumentative discussions, the
opening stage seldom is explicitly executed, and therefore, in these discussions, we usually find the proposed material starting points and the criticism against these proposals in the arguments that are brought forward and in the criticism that is raised against the tenability of these arguments.

2.2.1 Starting points

When a protagonist uses dissociation in proposing a starting point (which in practice shows up as dissociation in an argument) on a sublevel something similar happens to what happens on the main level when a protagonist uses dissociation in presenting a standpoint. The dialectical result of dissociation by the protagonist in the opening stage is that the protagonist delineates a specific starting point for the defense of his standpoint against the background of other possible starting points. An example of this use of dissociation is provided by an ad that a new gossip magazine placed in the daily newspapers. In the ad, the magazine is promoted by the slogan ‘InMagazine, the weekly entertainment glossy about the real stars’. Through the dissociation InMagazine is implicitly opposed to gossip magazines that are about people who only can pretend to being a star, and this forms the starting point for the defense of the standpoint that we should buy the former magazine.

The rhetorical effect of dissociation in proposing a starting point is that it enables the protagonist to choose a starting point that serves him best in the defense of his standpoint and to rule out other possible starting points that suit him less well. Of course there are other magazines on the market that keep the reader up about the lives of famous people, but InMagazine covers the real stars, so that is the magazine to buy. Of course, the additional rhetorical advantages that accompany the use of dissociation in bringing forward a standpoint, from making the statement agreeably vague to immunizing it against criticism, pertain here, too.

2.2.2 Criticism against starting points

When an antagonist uses dissociation in his criticism against the protagonist’s proposal of a starting point (which, in practice, shows up as dissociation in an attack against the tenability of an argument), on the sublevel, something similar happens to what happens on the main level when an antagonist uses dissociation in attacking a standpoint. The dialectical result of dissociation by the antagonist in the opening stage is that the starting point that the protagonist proposed is rejected and is replaced by a different starting point. The following example presents an instance of the use of dissociation by the antagonist in the opening stage. Former Traffic Minister Jorritsma had been brought to book in Parliament because she wanted once again to adapt the allowable noise levels for Schiphol airport. Parliament defends the standpoint that adaptation is not to be allowed on the basis of the starting point that adaptation comes down to tolerating (and tolerating is no longer an allowable option). The minister defends her policy by attacking, through dissociation, the equivalence that forms the starting point of the argument made by Parliament.

(3) According to Jorritsma, the cabinet will not revert to a tolerance policy, as it was applied in 1997. “That was once, but never again, we said at the time. But tolerating is something quite different from anticipating on a change of law which everybody thinks should be put into effect.”

_De Volkskrant_ 22-1-1998
Jorritsma contests that adapting the allowable noise levels is the same as carrying out a tolerance policy. She dissociates between tolerance and anticipating a change of law that everybody thinks should be put into effect. The dissociation serves to reject the starting point of the symptomatic argument that Parliament brings forward.

The dialectical result of attacking a starting point is that the protagonist can no longer defend his standpoint on the basis of this starting point. An additional dialectical result specific for the use of dissociation is that, just as was the case with attacking a standpoint, through dissociation a multiple difference of opinion, this time on a sublevel, is created. The antagonist does not only assert that something is not the case, but he also asserts that something else is the case (Jorritsma, for example, implicitly claims that adapting allowable noise levels is the same as anticipating a change of law that everybody thinks should be put into effect), and thus he creates a starting point for an opposing standpoint of his own.

The rhetorical effect of an attack by means of dissociation on a starting point is the same as that of such an attack on the standpoint. The starting point of the protagonist is simply replaced by one that suits the antagonist better, toning down the original one, and as a result the protagonist’s proposal for a starting point is resolutely dismissed, without any argument. In this way, the antagonist can escape a conclusion that he would be committed to on the basis of his acceptance of the starting point. In addition, the antagonist establishes a starting point that is eminently suitable for defending an opposite standpoint of his own. The debate about adaptation of the noise levels of Schiphol airport is a case in point. Minister Jorritsma tries to escape the conclusion that she would be committed to if she accepted the starting point that adapting the noise levels comes down to tolerating (in view of her earlier acceptance of the symptomatic relationship ‘tolerating cannot be allowed any longer’ that Parliament refers to). It is difficult to just straightforwardly deny the tenability of the starting point; after all, in the past, tolerating was just what everyone called the adaptation of the noise levels. The dissociation between tolerating and anticipating a change of law allows her to present a different perspective on the situation. Note that she doesn’t even take the trouble to assert, let alone defend, that adaptation does not come down to tolerating; she just archly states that tolerating is something different from anticipating. Last but not least, she now has created a starting point that suits her own position much better: adapting the allowable noise levels is perfectly all right; after all, it merely anticipates on a change of law that everybody wants.³

2.3 Argumentation stage

In the argumentation stage, the starting points that have been established in the opening stage are connected to the standpoint by the protagonist by means of the application of an argument scheme. The antagonist criticizes the application of this argument scheme by asking critical questions. When the criticism is directed against the argument scheme that connects the argument with the standpoint of the protagonist, the antagonist does not reject the argument as such, but questions whether

³ These dialectical and rhetorical effects also apply in cases where the opposing position is implicit, for example in the case of a terminally ill Dutch Reformed elderly lady who pleaded with her doctor for ending her suffering by the argument ‘I am not asking for euthanasia, I only want a little injection to help me die’. Implicitly she is opposing the argument (generated by her religious conscience and projected onto her doctor) that an intervention is not allowed, because that would be euthanasia, and that is unallowable.
it is relevant or sufficient for the standpoint. The antagonist can ask three kinds of critical questions, undermining the relationship between argument and standpoint. By means of dissociation, the antagonist can attack the relationship as such, pointing out that X is not a real cause of, or not really typical of, or not really similar to Z (first critical question), he can attack the second term of the relationship, pointing out that the argument does not support the standpoint that has been put forward, but another one (second critical question), and he can attack the first term of the relationship, pointing out that it is not the argument that has been put forward that supports the standpoint, but another one – that happens to be not applicable – (third critical question).

2.3.1 First critical question

With the first critical question the relationship posited by the protagonist is attacked by showing that it is only apparent, not real. An example of the use of dissociation in such an attack is given in the following passage from a letter to the editor of an Australian newspaper:

(4) Putting more buses on roads will not solve southeast Queensland's transport problem. It fixes the symptom of too many cars on the road by replacing them with too many buses. Like the inept doctor who treats the symptoms rather than the disease, it is neglecting the real cause of the problem -- large numbers of people scattered throughout the southeast who need to travel to other places in the southeast.

_The Courier Mail_ 12-3-2007

From this passage we can reconstruct a debate in which the advocates of putting more buses on the road to solve southeast Queensland’s transport problem apply a causal argumentation scheme: buses will solve the transport problem because buses reduce the number of cars on the road and the great number of cars is the cause of the transport problem. The antagonist, in addition to questioning whether buses will actually reduce the number of cars on the road, attacks the causal relationship between the number of cars and the transport problem by dissociating between real cause and mere symptoms.

The dialectical result of an attack on the relationship posited by the protagonist between standpoint and argument is that the standpoint of the protagonist does no longer stand supported. The dissociation contributes to this effect in a specific way: by pointing out that it is only apparent and not real, it provides an alternative interpretation of the relationship.

The rhetorical effect of an attack on the relationship between standpoint and argument is that it strikes the relationship in the heart: the connection attempted by the protagonist is severed by exposing it as merely apparent. Doing this by means of a dissociation is stronger than the simple disassociation that would be established by just contending that the connection does not hold: it provides an alternative, suggesting, in the case of the above example, that there is a real cause, one that the protagonist mistakenly neglected. In this way, the antagonist can create a starting point that is favourable to his own position (which, in the case of the said example, is that it is not buses, but an integrated transport system, including trains, that would do the job).
2.3.2 Second critical question

With the second critical question the relationship that is expressed in the argument scheme is attacked by showing that the argument leads to a different consequence, is comparable with something else, or is symptomatic for something else than what is postulated in the relationship. An example of the use of dissociation in such an attack is given in the following conversation:

(5)  A: he is a good manager
    B: well, he certainly couldn't prevent that subsidy cut-off
    A: yes, he isn't a good crisis manager, but as a general manager he's just fine

B applies the symptomatic relationship that not being able to prevent a subsidy cut-off is a sign of not being a good manager. A attacks that connection by dissociating between general (true) management and crisis management, implicitly contending that not being able to prevent a subsidy cut-off is not a sign of not being a good manager, but of something different, namely, of not being a good crisis manager.

The dialectical result of an attack on the second term of the relationship by pointing out that the argument does not support the standpoint that has been put forward, but another one, is that the standpoint of the protagonist does no longer stand supported. The dissociation contributes to this effect in a specific way: it provides an alternative interpretation of the second term of the relationship.

The rhetorical effect of an attack on the second term of the relationship through dissociation is that the antagonist suggests that the postulated conclusion only holds for a trivial aspect, but that it does not apply to the heart of the matter. By providing an alternative conclusion (the trivial one), he leaves no longer open the question whether the argument is relevant for the standpoint, but, ‘proves’ that it is not, while doing away with the need for any further argument. As a result, the antagonist can evade a conclusion that he would have to subscribe to given his acceptance of the argument and of the argument scheme. In the example above, the antagonist, by contending that from the fact that someone who can’t prevent a subsidy cut-off one can merely deduce that this person is not a good crisis manager, not that he is not a good manager, can escape the conclusion that he would have to subscribe to given his acceptance of the argument of the protagonist and the symptomatic argument scheme that the protagonist applies, and he does so without running the risk of being accused of inconsistency. In addition, by dismissing the conclusion that B draws, A gives an indirect defense of his own standpoint, while shifting away the attention of the audience from the independent defense of which that standpoint stands in need.

2.3.3 Third critical question

With the third critical question the relationship that is expressed in the argument scheme is attacked by showing that it is not the argument given, but something else (which happens not to be the case) that leads to the postulated consequence, is comparable to the postulated object for comparison, or has the postulated characteristic. An example of the use of dissociation in this kind of attack is the following fragment from a television debate in which movie producer Matthijs van Heijningen defends the claim that he has not lost his passion:
Van Heijningen makes use of a symptomatic argument scheme: producing a lot of movies points to passion. De Jong attacks the first member of the relationship that the scheme expresses by dissociating between movies that are produced because the producer really wants to, and movies that are produced because the producer has to. Only producing the first type shows that the producer has not lost his passion. De Jong does not contest that van Heijningen is producing four movies (in this sense he does not contest the tenability of the starting point), but he does contest that van Heijningen produces the kind of movies that enables the application of the symptomatic relationship.

The dialectical result of an attack on the first term of the relationship, pointing out that it is not what the argument states that supports the standpoint that has been put forward, but something else, is that the standpoint of the protagonist does no longer stand supported. Again, the dissociation contributes to this effect in a specific way: the dissociation provides an alternative interpretation of the first term, which opens the way for the antagonist to point to an exception to the rule that is inherent in the relationship that the protagonist postulates, and to contend that the starting point of the protagonist does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that he defends.

The rhetorical effect of an attack on the first term of the relationship through dissociation is that the antagonist can escape a conclusion that he would be committed to on the basis of his acceptance of the argument and of the argument scheme. In the example above, de Jong cannot deny that van Heijningen produces a lot of movies, and that on the basis of the symptomatic argument scheme that van Heijningen applies, the conclusion that the latter has not lost his passion inescapable, but by dissociating between making movies in a trivial sense, because you have to make them, and making movies in the sense that matters, because you want to make them, de Jong splits off a kind of movie production that does not signal passion, and is able to escape the conclusion he is committed to without running the risk of being accused of inconsistency. In this case, as in the previous one, in addition he gives an indirect defense of his own standpoint by dismissing the standpoint of the opponent, thus shifting the attention of the audience away from the need to defend his own one independently.

2.4 Concluding stage

In the concluding stage, protagonist and antagonist jointly establish the outcome of the defense of the standpoint of the protagonist in the preceding stage. Both participants can use dissociation in their formulation of the standpoint which they conclude is tenable or, as the case may be, should be retracted. The specific dialectical contribution of dissociation in this stage is that it enables the participants to give a more precise interpretation of the standpoint which the participants decide has or has not proved tenable in view of the criticism brought forward against it. An example can be found in the concluding stage of a discussion in the British TV show Kilroy.
between a woman who has been swindled by a con man and members of the public, with regard to the question whether the woman has not her own greed to blame for her losses. After first denying it, in the end Beth admits to her greed:

(7) Lyn: [easy money [so it's gree::d]
Beth: [I'll admit, -]
Lyn: it's a form of greed
Beth: yeah but I'm not a greedy person

Immediately after her opponent has reaffirmed Beth’s admission that she was led by greed, Beth makes a dissociation between her deeds and her person, thereby limiting the scope of the conclusion.

The rhetorical effect of dissociation in the concluding stage is that the protagonist or antagonist can choose the interpretation of the conclusion that suits him best, without running the risk of being accused of shirking the commitments that he took upon himself in the earlier stages of the discussion. Also, in this way, the speaker can evade unwelcome consequences of the conclusion that has been reached. Even though Beth in the end retracts her standpoint that she was not driven by greed in her dealings with the conman and accepts the standpoint that she was, through her dissociation between deeds and person she can escape the unfavorable implication that she is a greedy person.

3 CONCLUSION

As I have shown in the above, dissociation can be used in a number of dialectical moves, in various places in the various stages of a critical discussion. It can be used in bringing forward standpoints, arguments and conclusions, and it can be used to attack standpoints, arguments, and argument schemes. Dissociation can, in principle, enhance the dialectical reasonableness of these tasks because the usage declaratives that it involves in principle have a clarifying function. They may help to give a more precise interpretation of statements and to draw a finer line between what is and what is not the case.

At the same time, dissociation fulfills the dialectical tasks of the moves in which it occurs in particular ways, that open up rhetorical possibilities. The specific characteristics of dissociation, providing alternative interpretations of a term and making a distinction between central and peripheral aspects of a notion, are relevant here. By virtue of these characteristics, dissociation may help protagonists to choose those standpoints and starting points that are easiest to defend and most persuasive, and it may help antagonists to do away as quickly and firmly as possible with the standpoints and arguments of the protagonist, and it may help both to draw the conclusions that are the most favorable as possible to their own position. In addition, it allows them to do so, even when earlier they have committed themselves to positions or starting points that imply positions that are radically different from the ones they ultimately are willing to take, without seeming inconsistent.

link to commentary

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4 The example is quoted from Thornborrow (2007).
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