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Maneuvering strategically in a political interview: analyzing and evaluating responses to an accusation of inconsistency

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Responding to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview

Accusing a politician of being inconsistent is common practice for interviewers in a political interview. In a political interview, interviewers are interested in gaining information from their interlocutors but, more often than not, their questions require the politician to clarify and justify his views. Questions by means of which an inconsistency is pointed out are an excellent means of urging the politician to justify his views before the listening, reading or television-watching audience, that is, in fact, the primary addressee in a political interview. The audience presumably values political consistency and expects a politician who is inconsistent to account for this lack of consistency.

A charge of inconsistency may affect the politician's image in the eyes of the public negatively. The politician, being well aware of the possible damage, usually tries to answer in a way that makes him no longer look inconsistent. He will deny that there is an inconsistency, point at a change of circumstances justifying his change in view or avoid discussing the criticism. The following exchange from a political interview between BBC interviewer Jon Sopel and John Hutton illustrates how a politician avoids discussing the inconsistency of which he is accused. At the time of the interview, Hutton was the British Business Secretary of State. The fragment is an extract from an interview broadcast on

February 24, 2008 on the *Politics Show* in which the issues of the regulation of small firms, flexible working and agency workers are discussed.¹ In the question below, regarding the protection of agency workers, Sopel seems to suggest that Hutton's party takes a pro-business stance – in line with the party policy – not because this would be most appropriate in the present case, but in order to 'compensate' for frequent non-pro-business stances adopted lately. According to Sopel, the party that Hutton represents has a reputation of being pro-business, but has acted contrary to it lately in areas such as nationalizing Northern Rock, capital gain tax and the status of non-domiciled persons:

Jon Sopel:

The reason that you're taking many might say is a pro-business stance is that your reputation as being the party that is pro-business, has taken such a hammering over recent weeks. You look at the nationalization of Northern Rock, you look at the U-turn over capital gains tax, you look at the U-turn over non Doms, it hasn't been exactly a purple patch has it, for you.

John Hutton:

We've had a consistent view about agency workers over a number of years, about trying to get this balance right. So there's been no change in that position and we are currently trying to find a way forward with the European Commission and other governments in the European Union which is where this issue fundamentally, has to be addressed.

In this example, Sopel's question conveys two criticisms. Sopel first criticizes Hutton for taking a pro-business stance towards agency workers although this is not the best solution. Second, he criticizes Hutton for acting inconsistently over recent weeks in three areas. In his answer, Hutton does not address the criticism of inconsistency in the three areas, but concentrates instead on the issue of agency workers. He emphasizes that a consistent view on this issue has been maintained over the years. In addition, the first steps towards a good package of measures have been taken by discussing the issue with the European Commission.

In another interview, which took place on July 12, 2009 between Jon Sopel and Sir Gus O'Donnell, at the time Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Gus does not avoid discussing the inconsistency with which he is charged but finds a way to show that acting inconsistently can have a positive side:²

¹ All examples in this study have been selected from the BBC programme *Politics Show* (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/politics_show/default.stm). According to the BBC website (last visited on September 2, 2010), "The *Politics Show* interviews senior politicians - ministers, leading opposition figures and other influential people about their views and policies - and hold them to account for their decisions and actions." The examples in this study are presented as transcribed on the BBC website. For my purpose, a transcription that guarantees readability is sufficient, because prosodic and other conversational phenomena are irrelevant. The examples are reproduced as they appear on the BBC website (sometimes without question marks, commas, etc).

² For brevity, the word 'politician' is used to refer to the interviewee in a political interview. In my use, the word includes political decision-makers, people such as trade union leaders, senior leaders or any other public figure playing a role in national or international politics. These people may already hold or still seek to hold public office. Sir Gus O'Donnell, whom Sopel interviews on the efficiency of the Civil Service, does

Jon Sopel:

And you talk about efficiencies that you need to introduce. How efficient is it, the endless re-naming of government departments? We used to have a Department for Education, we now have the Department for Cushions and Soft Furnishings I think the civil servants call it because they can never remember the right way round that it's Children, Schools and Families. We had two years ago the heralding of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills which has been killed off two years later. So lots of letterheads, lots of name plates all changing all the time.

Sir Gus:

Well ministers decide and we're a very flexible civil service, one of the things we have to be.

In the discussion, Sopel questions whether Sir Gus is really aiming for more efficiency of the Civil Service, because he has taken measures that seem to point in the opposite direction. To support his charge of inconsistency between Sir Gus' words and actions, Sopel provides the example of two departments, the names of which have been changed several times during the last years. In order to avoid being judged negatively by the audience watching the interview, Sir Gus redefines what the interviewer claims to be a sign of inefficiency as an indication of flexibility, thereby giving the inconsistency a positive character. According to Sir Gus, the service he leads is flexible in the collaboration with ministers, who are in fact deciding about such changes as mentioned by Sopel.

Unlike the previous examples, in which the interviewer's accusations attribute an inconsistency to the politician between his words and his actions,³ the following argumentative exchange is a case in which the politician responds to an accusation of inconsistency between his words.⁴ The interviewer claims that the proponent of a standpoint cannot be committed to it because he is also committed to another standpoint with which the standpoint is inconsistent. By means of this accusation, he attempts to lead the politician to retract a standpoint, thus putting an end to the disagreement. The discussion took place on December 9, 2007 between Jon Sopel and Alan Duncan, at the time Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform:

Jon Sopel:

And on nuclear, the government says that obviously has to be part of the mix. Are you on that page as well.

not hold a political function, but is a British Civil Servant. In the literature on political interviews, the discussions with those who hold public offices without fulfilling political functions fall under the category of a political interview.

³ The actions are reconstructed in terms of propositional commitments. In the first example, the commitment attributed to the politician concerning Northern Rock can be reconstructed as *you have accepted to nationalize Northern Rock*.

⁴ There can also be an inconsistency between one's words or actions and one's principles. Such inconsistencies are particularly frequent in a political context: a politician says something or acts in a way that is incompatible with, for example, party policies.

Chapter 1

Alan Duncan:

Our policy is absolutely clear and it's again, very similar, we want approval for sites and designs. We want a proper carbon price, we want honesty about costs, with no subsidy. Get on with the decision to do something with the waste, again, David Cameron said that this week, and I think the government has been a bit slow on working out what to do with nuclear waste. So then people can invest and I think probably they will.

Jon Sopel:

You were rather more skeptical the last time I spoke to you when you were on this programme – we can just have a listen to what you said last time.

‘we think that the nuclear power sector, should be there as a last resort in many respects. We want to explore every conceivable method of generating electricity before we go to nuclear’

Alan Duncan:

so fluent.

Jon Sopel:

Yes. But you were completely different, you were very skeptical there. It has to be the last option, now you're saying, we're on the same page as the government and yes, let's get on with it.

Alan Duncan:

I think what's important with nuclear is to explain the policy. I think it's unhelpful to get hooked on two words and I think the policy as it has always been is exactly as I've just explained.

According to Sopel, Duncan's opinion expressed in the first turn of this exchange that he is in favor of “getting on with nuclear waste,” seems to suggest a view that favors the use of nuclear energy. This view, the interviewer claims, is exactly the opposite of what the politician said in a previous interview. Sopel quotes Duncan's earlier words which indicate that before he did not favor the use of nuclear energy, but instead advocated that it should be the last option. Consequently, one of the two inconsistent commitments should be given up. To avoid losing the discussion, Duncan responds by making a dissociation. Without doing so explicitly, he assumes a distinction between the nuclear energy *policy* (of which he now approves) and nuclear energy *practice* (which he earlier had opposed).⁵ The introduction of the dissociation enables Duncan to give a particular interpretation of his standpoint – presented as the less important one (concerning the practice) – in which he gives up this standpoint, while maintaining another interpretation of the standpoint (concerning the policy) presented as the most important one.

The three examples presented so far show that a politician may respond to an accusation of inconsistency in various ways. Possible responses are avoiding discussing the criticism of inconsistency (*example 1*), giving the inconsistency a positive connotation (*example 2*) and retracting the earlier standpoint (*example 3*) so that the politician is no

⁵ Van Rees (2009: 31-44) provides various kinds of clues that can serve as indicators for the existence of a dissociation. Two of these clues are present in Duncan's response: (a) it comes in an attempt to resolve an inconsistency pointed out by the other party (*But you were completely different, you were very skeptical there*), and (b) one of the dissociated terms is valued as being more important (*what's important with nuclear is to explain the policy*).

longer committed to two inconsistent standpoints. In all these cases, in the context of a political interview the politician's response constitutes an attempt at turning the discussion in his favor by trying to create a positive image before the public. Because the public is in fact his primary addressee rather than the interviewer, who judges the outcome of the discussion in the long term (say, when deciding how to vote later), the politician designs his moves in a way that makes them more easily appealing to them. For example, Sir Gus portrays the inconsistency pointed out by Sopel between claiming efficiency and frequently renaming departments as a sign of flexibility in order to make his actions acceptable to the public. Sir Gus realizes that someone who cannot act consistently in such minor matters cannot be expected to manage the Home Civil Service well.

This study will be undertaken to gain insight into the kind of advantages a politician may obtain in responding to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview. In addition, the study will evaluate the quality of responses as they occur in the argumentative practice of a political interview. This evaluation will be carried out by applying criteria for identifying moves as reasonable or unreasonable. Such an evaluation is vital to judge whether the politician's responses make a constructive contribution to the exchange or obstruct the exchange in which the participants are involved. In 1.2, I will outline my theoretical framework for providing an analytic and evaluative account of responses to an accusation of inconsistency.

1.2 A pragma-dialectical perspective on argumentation

In order to analyze and evaluate a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency from an argumentative perspective, I will make use of the pragma-dialectical theoretical framework developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) and extended by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002, 2003, 2009) and van Eemeren (2010). The view of argumentation advocated in this approach and the tools developed for the analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse make this theoretical framework particularly suitable for the purpose of this study.

In the pragma-dialectical approach, argumentation is viewed as part of a critical discussion in which the participants try to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 1) define argumentation as "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." This view of argumentation makes it possible to study the argumentative moves at issue as part of an argumentative discourse in which standpoints

are defended and refuted so that they are tested for their acceptability. This means that in the kind of cases dealt with in this study a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency are seen as part of an argumentative exchange in which the politician attempts to convince the interviewer and the audience at home that his standpoint is acceptable. In the context of the institutional expectations inherent in a political interview, the politician's responses can be seen as refutations of the interviewer's criticism.

In a pragma-dialectical approach, the politician's responses are analyzed and evaluated by applying an ideal model of critical discussion. This model is a normative representation of how an exchange could proceed if it was aimed solely at resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. In the exchange, the politician adopts the role of protagonist of a standpoint and exposes it to the critical scrutiny of the interviewer acting as antagonist in the discussion. The pragma-dialectical model specifies the various stages that are to be distinguished in the resolution process, in each of which a particular aim is pursued. Thus, in the *confrontation stage* of a critical discussion, the aim is to make clear the difference of opinion that is at stake: clarity must be achieved as to which standpoints are disputed and the kind of criticism that the protagonist has to overcome. In the *opening stage*, the purpose is to establish the shared material and procedural starting points in accordance with which the tenability of the standpoint will be put to the test. The aim of the *argumentation stage* is to systematically test the arguments advanced in support of the standpoint. Finally, in the *concluding stage*, the outcome of the discussion is established: if the standpoint has been defended conclusively, the antagonist withdraws his doubt; if that is not the case, the protagonist retracts his standpoint. In either case, the difference of opinion can be said to have been resolved.

For each of the four analytically distinguished stages, the model of critical discussion specifies the speech acts that are analytically relevant, i.e. those speech acts that are used to perform argumentative moves that potentially contribute to the resolution process. The different kinds of speech acts specify the rights and obligations each party has in the critical exchange. For example, in the confrontation stage the protagonist who advances a standpoint has the right to maintain or retract his standpoint when he is confronted with the antagonist's doubt. In case the antagonist requests a clarification, the protagonist has the obligation to provide a 'usage declarative.'

As an analytic tool, the ideal model of critical discussion is an instrument for reconstructing argumentative discourse as it occurs in reality. For this purpose, a discussion as it is actually conducted must be reconstructed in terms of the ideal model. The reconstruction results in an analytic overview of the argumentative moves that the parties have made in the discussion. For example, because an accusation of inconsistency by the interviewer in a political interview is a criticism in response to a standpoint of the politician that is being interviewed, it constitutes an instantiation of the moves of casting

doubt and advancing an opposite standpoint. In terms of the ideal model of a critical discussion, such moves are reconstructed as occurring in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. The politician's responses to such criticism can be analyzed as playing a role in the definition of the difference of opinion. For instance, in example 2 presented in section 1.1, Sopel's accusation of inconsistency is a way of casting doubt on Sir Gus's claimed efficiency. Should the accusation have pertained to an inconsistency in starting points, it would have been reconstructed as a challenge in the opening stage and the interviewee's response as a reaction to that type of challenge. Possible reactions to the challenge include accepting the challenge, not accepting it or accepting it conditionally (van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans 2007a: 90).

As an evaluative tool, the ideal model of a critical discussion serves as a template against which argumentative moves can be assessed as reasonable or unreasonable. In the model, the exchange of speech acts is regulated by a critical discussion procedure specifying the rules in accordance with which the resolution of the difference of opinion could be achieved on the merits. The rules for critical discussion constitute for each stage the norms of reasonableness authorizing the performance of certain types of speech acts. For the discussion to proceed reasonably, fifteen rules have been formulated that need to be followed for a difference of opinion to be resolved on the merits (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 135-157).⁶ The evaluation of argumentative discourse is made by checking whether the argumentative moves carried out in practice adhere to the rules for critical discussion and thus contribute to the resolution of the difference of opinion. Starting from this dialectical view of reasonableness, a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency will be judged as reasonable when they make a contribution to the definition of the difference of opinion in the confrontation stage. If they hinder the critical testing procedure, they will be judged as fallacious. Given that an interviewer's accusation of inconsistency subjects the politician's standpoints to critical testing, it makes sense to evaluate the reasonableness of the politician's responses as part of the critical testing procedure. The result of such an evaluation can provide valuable insight into the quality of the argumentative practice of a political interview.

The model of critical discussion outlines the dialectical procedure for resolving a difference of opinion reasonably. In argumentative practice, however, arguers can be regarded as striving not only to satisfy the dialectical interest related to resolving the difference of opinion. They also have a rhetorical interest in resolving the difference of opinion in their own favor. In trying to balance both interests, the participants to a

⁶ In addition to the fifteen rules for critical discussion, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 190-196) formulated a set of ten rules known as "the code of conduct for reasonable discussants." The ten rules express requirements for reasonableness in a less technical language than the fifteen rules. They constitute a list of prohibitions of moves in an argumentative discourse that hinder or obstruct the resolution process.

discussion engage in strategic maneuvering (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2000, 2002, 2003, van Eemeren 2010), i.e. they put their standpoints to the test, but are also concerned with having their standpoints accepted. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser explain that in their attempt to remain dialectically reasonable and at the same time rhetorically effective, arguers make a topical selection that is most favorable to their position, take into account the audience whom they address and choose presentational means that are optimal for their purpose. For example, in the confrontation stage a politician can choose to respond to criticism by maintaining a standpoint (topical choice) that best meets the preferences of the audience (audience adaptation) and formulating it in a way that makes it the easiest to defend (presentational choice).

The concept of strategic maneuvering can be used to understand how the arguers' various choices contribute to remaining reasonable while trying to obtain at the same time an advantageous outcome of the discussion. By making use of this concept, the analysis of a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency does justice both to the dialectical interest in maintaining reasonableness and to the rhetorical interest in being effective.

In addition to playing a role in analyzing argumentative discourse, the concept of strategic maneuvering can also be useful in the evaluation of argumentative moves. The identification of fallacies is better accounted for if one pays attention to the inherent tension that exists in the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical and rhetorical interests in argumentative moves. Fallacies are seen as the result of failing to find the appropriate balance between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness. The imbalance manifests itself in the fact that arguers allow their commitment to having a reasonable exchange to be overruled by their interest in rhetorical effectiveness. In cases in which the balance is not maintained, an arguer's move can be said to have derailed (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2003). The evaluative account of a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency can benefit from this view because the responses can be seen as dialectically sound as long as the pursuit of a *favorable* definition of the difference of opinion does not hinder the critical testing process; otherwise they are fallacious.

In addition to understanding that arguers maneuver strategically whenever they are involved in an argumentative exchange, it is important to realize that the maneuvering always takes place in a certain institutional context, i.e. in a conventionalized activity type "that can be identified on the basis of careful empirical observation" (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005: 76). In the case of an activity type that is predominantly argumentative, such as a political interview, an *argumentative* activity type is at issue. Starting from the general characteristics of the activity type and its specific characteristics that are important from an argumentative perspective, it is possible to identify the institutional constraints

imposed on the strategic maneuvering. By gaining insight into these constraints, an analyst can account better for the arguers' possibilities to steer the discussion in their own favor.

The conventions of a political interview play a significant role in examining a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency. It is, for example, important that a politician cannot escape from providing an account of his words and actions regarding an issue chosen by the interviewer. Although this constraint limits his possibilities to advance opinions on any matter, at the same time it opens up an opportunity for him to redefine difficult issues to his advantage. A case in point is Sir Gus' response to Sopel's accusation of inconsistency in which he addresses the accusation but redefines being inconsistent as a sign of flexibility.

Characteristics of the argumentative activity type can also be useful in the evaluation of the argumentative moves. The general criteria that are used to determine whether a move is fallacious need to be interpreted and amended in the specific context in which the move is advanced. For instance, in the context of a political interview judging whether a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency are sound or not needs to take into account the roles of the participants. The interviewer should challenge the politician and the latter should leave open this possibility by avoiding resorting to tactics that have the effect of inhibiting the interviewers from pursuing a particular line of inquiry. In the next section I will formulate the research questions that will be answered in the various chapters.

1.3 Objectives and method of the study

The major objective of this study is to provide an analytic and evaluative account of a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview. These responses are examined as confrontational strategic maneuvers by means of which a politician attempts to balance dialectical reasonableness with rhetorical effectiveness. The analytic account will make clear what the strategic function of the politician's responses is and the evaluative account will provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for judging the reasonableness of these argumentative moves in a political interview. By aiming to realize the objective of providing an analytic and evaluative account, this study is situated within a larger project dealing with confrontational strategic maneuvering in political argumentation. The project is aimed at examining *Strategic maneuvering in argumentative confrontations: Norms and criteria, manifestations and effects* as it occurs in public

political discussions.⁷ As part of this larger project, Mohammed (2009) concentrated on the examination of the British Prime Minister's strategic maneuvering with the use of an accusation of inconsistency to criticize members of the Opposition in Question Time. Tonnard (2010) analyzes how one-issue politicians in the General Debate in Dutch Parliament maneuver strategically by exploiting presentational devices to create a polarizing effect among the parliamentarians and the voting public.

Analyzing and evaluating a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency from an argumentative perspective is crucial to fully understand what happens in a political interview. Previous studies in which such responses have been dealt with have been in the first place carried out by discourse analysts (Jucker 1986, Clayman and Heritage 2002, Piirainen-Marsh 2005, Emmertsen 2007). They concentrated on the description of the form, practice and function of a politician's responses by viewing the transmission of information as the core activity in a political interview, while ignoring the vital role of argumentation. The latter becomes clear if one realizes that asking for an account (by the interviewer) and providing an account (by the politician) are the central objectives of a political interview, and the final aim is convincing an audience of the acceptability of one's opinions. Only a few studies have been conducted in which a political interview is recognized as an argumentative discussion and the participants' contributions are seen as oriented towards convincing an audience (Fetzer and Weizman 2006, Johansson 2005, Fetzer 2007). Although these studies show a better understanding of how arguers typically behave in a political interview, they lack a systematic theoretically-situated analysis that could provide an insight into the argumentative function of a politician's moves. In addition, these studies are not concerned at all with the quality of the arguers' contributions.

To achieve the main objective of this study, I will first specify a finite number of analytically relevant responses which a politician, acting as protagonist, can give in an argumentative confrontation when he is faced with an accusation of inconsistency. Next, I will characterize the political interview as an argumentative activity type by describing the relevant conventions that characterize this activity type argumentatively. Finally, the institutional insight gained from the characterization of the macro-context of the argumentative activity type will be used in the analysis and evaluation of one particular kind of response which a politician gives to an accusation of inconsistency involving the retraction of one of the (allegedly) inconsistent standpoints.

⁷ The project has been financed by the National Science Foundation (NWO) in the Netherlands and has been carried out at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) as part of the research concerned with *Argumentation in discourse*.

The following research questions will be answered:

1. Which analytically relevant responses can a protagonist give in answer to an antagonist who accuses him of an inconsistency?
2. Which constraints do the rules of a political interview impose on the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness?
3. What is the strategic function of a politician's retraction of a standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview?
4. On which conditions is a politician's retraction of a standpoint an instance of reasonable strategic maneuvering?

1.4 Organization of the study

To make clear how the four research questions in section 1.3 will be answered, I will now explain the structural division of this study. The study is divided into six chapters. Except for the introduction (*Chapter 1*) and the conclusion (*Chapter 6*), each of the chapters answers one of the four research questions formulated in the previous section.

Chapter 2 gives an answer to the first research question that aims at establishing the analytically relevant responses which a protagonist can provide when it is pointed out that his standpoint is inconsistent with another standpoint. An accusation of inconsistency is characterized as being aimed not only at making the addressee understand that he is being criticized for an alleged inconsistency. It is also designed at securing a response that answers the charge. Specifying the responses that answer the charge is possible by taking into account the analytically relevant moves that the accusation at hand can instantiate. It will be shown that a charge of inconsistency is a form of criticism and the responses to it constitute the answers to such criticism.

The second research question concerns the constraints the conventions of a political interview impose on the arguers' strategic maneuvering. In *Chapter 3*, I will identify the pertinent institutional constraints on the arguers' maneuvering by characterizing a political interview as an argumentative activity type. I will describe and discuss the conventions affecting the initial situation of a political interview, the procedural and material starting points, the argumentative means and the possible outcome of the discussion.

The third research question, dealing with the strategic function of a politician's retraction of a standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency, will be answered in *Chapter 4*. In this chapter, I will provide a detailed analytic account of the move at hand by making use of the insights into the institutional context gained in Chapter 3. It will thus be

Chapter 1

possible to explain the advantages that a politician may still obtain in a political interview when he has no other choice to respond to an accusation of inconsistency than by retracting a standpoint.

In *Chapter 5*, I will answer the fourth research question concerning the conditions on which the politician's retraction of a standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency is a reasonable instance of strategic maneuvering. The evaluative account will be based on the view that a politician's response is reasonable when his attempt to pursue a favorable definition of the difference of opinion does not obstruct the critical testing process; otherwise it is fallacious. I will formulate soundness conditions for the evaluation of a politician's response which will be applied to the cases analyzed in Chapter 4.

The last chapter, *Chapter 6*, is the conclusion of this study. I will outline the findings from the previous chapters and propose some directions for future research.