Inferentialism, persuasive definitions and practical reasoning

NORDIC INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE ON DISCOURSE & INTERACTION (NORDISCO 2012) LINKÖPING, NOVEMBER 21-23, 2012

Cătălin Florin STĂNCIUȘEŞCU
Department of Philosophy, Sociology and Political Science, University of Craiova, Romania
Objectives of this study

- To offer tools for identifying, in a text or discourse, linguistic devices which play the role of expressing patterns of what Brandom calls “material practical inferences” corresponding to different sorts of norms;

- To combine Anscombre and Ducrot’s descriptive approach to the analysis of argumentative discourse based on identification of what they call argumentative “operators” and “connectives” in a text or discourse (Anscombe and Ducrot, 1983), with Brandom’s deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice (Brandom, 2000) in order to particularize Walton and Macagno’s approach to the analysis of persuasive definitions based on argumentation schemes (Walton and Macagno, 2008; Macagno and Walton 2008; Walton, 2001; 2005) in a way that the persuasiveness of definitions is explained and analyzed in terms of their changing the norms implicitly corresponding to material practical inferences, rather than in terms of changing the meaning of terms they contain;

- To make the tools suitable for the analysis of deliberative discourse, the genus of which the political discourse is a species.
- Robert Brandom’s on practical material inferences and implicit normative vocabulary
- Attributing preferences or pro-attitude
- Undertaking of a commitment to one’s having a certain status
- Walton’s & Macagno’s approach to analysis of persuasive definitions
- Normative words as argumentative ‘operators’ or ‘connectives’
- Patterns of practical material inference and argumentation schemes
- Patterns of practical material inference, argumentation schemes and persuasive definitions. An example
Robert Brandom’s on practical material inferences and implicit normative vocabulary

- “Normative vocabulary makes explicit the endorsement of material proprieties of practical reasoning” (Brandom, 2000, p. 89)
- Different patterns of inference correspond to different sort of norms or preferences (Brandom, 2000, p. 90)
Attributing preferences or pro-attitude

*Prudential* pattern of practical reasoning

*Only doing A will help me achieve G,* so *I shall do A.*

Preference attributed: *To achieve G.*

The norm or pro-attitude (First person): *I want to achieve G.*

The norm or pro-attitude (Third person) attributed by a scorekeeper: *S wants to achieve G/ S prefers G.*
Attributing preferences or pro-attitude
Exemple (Brandom, 2000, p. 84):

Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry, so I shall open my umbrella.

Normative principle: I want (desire, prefer) to stay dry.

Implicit normative vocabulary: Want, desire, prefer

Preference attributed by a scorekeeper to the agent: S wants (prefers, desires) to stay dry.
Undertaking of a commitment to one’s having a certain status

Institutional pattern of practical reasoning

I am S (a social status; under certain circumstances C), so I shall do A.

Normative principle: Every x having the status S ought (under circumstances C) to do A.

Implicit normative vocabulary: ought to, should, etc.
Undertaking of a commitment to one’s having a certain status

Example (Brandom, 2000, pp. 90-91)

I am a bank employee going to work, so I shall wear a necktie.

Normative principle: Bank employees are obliged (required) to wear neckties.

Normative vocabulary: obliged, required.

“The scorekeeper will take... [the inference] to be a good inference for any interlocutor... such that the scorekeeper undertakes... [the] commitment to the claim that A is a bank employee... Here the norm implicitly underwriting the inference is associated with having a certain status, as employee of a bank. This pattern, where what matters is the scorekeeper’s undertaking a commitment to A’s occupying the status... corresponds to an objective sense of ‘good reason for action’ (according to the scorekeeper)” (Brandom, 2000, p. 91)
## Types of practical material inferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern of inference</th>
<th>Normative principle</th>
<th>Normative vocabulary</th>
<th>Inference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prudential pattern of practical reasoning</strong></td>
<td>I want (desire, prefer) to stay dry.</td>
<td>Want, desire, prefer</td>
<td>Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry, so I shall open my umbrella.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional pattern of practical reasoning</strong></td>
<td>Bank employees are obliged (required) to wear neckties.</td>
<td>Obliged, required</td>
<td>I am a bank employee going to work, so I shall wear a necktie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unconditional pattern of practical reasoning</strong></td>
<td>It is wrong (one ought not) to harm anyone to no purpose.</td>
<td>Ought/ought not</td>
<td>Repeating the gossip would harm someone, to no purpose, so I shall not repeat the gossip.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Walton’s & Macagno’s approach to analysis of persuasive definitions

- Persuasiveness of some words is explained and analyzed in terms of argumentation schemes (i.e. “patterns of inference representing common forms of argument in everyday conversational reasoning and other context” (Macagno and Walton, 2008, p. 210)) as attempt to change the referential or descriptive meaning of those words;
- Is based on the distinction between descriptive or referential/emotive meanings of terms;
- Can be used in analyzing different types of conflicts of opinions as conflicts of classifications and of values as arising from different strategies of redefinition of words;
- Persuasive definitions are analyzed using two argumentation schemes: argumentation scheme from classification and argumentation scheme from values.
Argumentation scheme from classification

**Individual Premise:** a has property F.

**Classification Premise:** For all x, if x has property F, then x can be classified as having property G.

**Conclusion:** a has property G.

Argumentation scheme from values

**Premise 1:** Value V is positive as judged by agent A (judgment value).

**Premise 2:** The fact that value V is positive affects the interpretation and therefore the evaluation of goal G of agent A. (If value V is good, it supports commitment to goal G).

**Conclusion:** V is a reason for retaining commitment to goal G.
Normative words as argumentative ‘operators’ or ‘connectives’

- Anscrombe’s and Ducrot’s radical argumentativism:
  - Some words play the role of argumentation operators or connectives indicating what is being defended; ex. almost, even, only, but

- Ex. (van Eemeren, 1995, p. 149): in the following dialog “but” emphasizes the opposition between two possible conclusions ("Abortion should not be legalized" and "Abortion should be legalized“) and the fact that the speaker opts for "Abortion should be legalized“;
  - The sanctity of all human life has always been a foremost principle of our Christian Party. It would be to go against that principle if we now went along with the proposal before us to legalize abortion.
  - You are right to set such store by the sanctity of human life, but you cannot include a six-week fetus.”
Normative words as argumentative ‘operators’ or ‘connectives’ (Brandom)

- Argumentativity of normative vocabulary (Brandom):
  - Different patterns of inference correspond to different sort of norms;
  - Normative vocabulary – ‘prefer’, ‘obliged’, ‘ought’ – “is used to make explicit the endorsement of a pattern of material inferences” (2000, p. 90)

- “The use of normative vocabulary such as ‘should’ expresses the attribution to an agent of commitment to a pattern of practical reasoning” (2000, p. 95).

- The descriptive dimension of analysis based on identification of normative vocabulary: in texts or discourses normative vocabulary is implicit, so the analysis consists in identifying bits of vocabulary having a normative potential used by a speaker: ex. “shall” can be interpreted normatively as “should” by an attributor.
Both types are defeasible or non-monotonic, and presumptive in character (Walton, 2006, pp. 84-124; Brandom, 2000, pp. 86-89);

Both types are suitable for expressing bits of practical reasoning, i.e. inferences whose conclusions express intentions to act or proposals to act (Walton, 2009; Brandom, 2000, ch. 2);
“The term ['subsidiarity'] invariably occurs in the vicinity of a seriously damaging question: What remains of the democratic forms of government achieved by the nation states when EU takes charge of their legislation? The answer is that we must apply the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, according to which decisions are all to be taken at the ‘lowest level compatible with the project of Union’! ‘What is this lowest level?’ you may ask, and ‘Who decides which decisions are to be taken there?’ The only possible answer to the second of these questions – namely, ‘the EU apparatus, including the European ‘Court of Justice’’ – removes all meaning from the first. To say that the nation states have sovereignty in all matters that they are competent to decide, but that the EU apparatus decides which matters those are, is to say that the nation states have no sovereignty at all, since all their powers are delegated. In other words ‘subsidiarity’ effectively removes the sovereignty that it purports to grant, and so wraps the whole idea of sovereignty in an impenetrable cloud of mystery... the term ‘subsidiarity’ has a legitimate use... the term refers to the absolute right of local communities to take decisions for themselves, including the decision to surrender the matter to a larger forum. Subsidiarity places an absolute brake upon centralizing powers, by permitting their involvement only when requested. In EuroSpeak, however, ‘subsidiarity’ has the opposite sense, providing a comprehensive authorization to the EU institutions, to expropriate whatever powers they might deem to be theirs. By purporting to grant powers in the very word that removes them, the EU constitution wraps the whole idea of decentralized in mystery. A similar mystery is enshrined in such words as ‘proportionality’, ‘solidarity’...”.

(Scruton, 2006, pp. 164-165).
According to Walton’s and Macagno’s approach, redefinition of ‘subsidiarity’ can be analyzed as:

- a conflict of classifications:
  - ‘subsidiarity’ as it is defined by EU versus ‘subsidiarity’ as it is defined by the author;
- and as a conflict of values:
  - Different definitions of ‘subsidiarity’ correspond to different values: ‘sovereignty’ as it is defined by a ‘localist’ (the author) versus ‘sovereignty’ as it is defined by EU.

According to Brandom’s approach to practical reasoning, the same redefinition can be seen as a conflict of normative principles (in Brandom’s sense) rather than as a conflict of classifications or values that arises from the author commitment to his status as a ‘localist’ or ‘conservative’ intellectual.
As a result, argumentative schemes from classification and values can be used in analyzing the implicit norms made explicit by the practical material inferences identified;

For example, the persuasive definition introduced by the normative terms ‘referential’ and ‘legitimate’ expresses the preference of the author for a specific definition of ‘subsidiarity’ (which can be analyzed using the prudential pattern of inference);

The normative terms ‘referential’ and ‘legitimate’ also indicate the that the persuasive definition play the role of a conclusion of a practical inference; they suggest the description of ‘subsidiarity’ that should be adopted;

The author’s political position, his commitment to the status of a ‘localist’ in the dispute generally known as a dispute between ‘localists’ and ‘centralists’, can be seen as a premise in the arguments whose conclusions can be interpreted as proposals to change the opposite definition of ‘subsidiarity’, and therefore, by the an ‘institutional’ pattern of inference.
References

WALTON, Douglas, Fabrizio MACAGNO, „What we hide in words: emotive words and persuasive definitions”, Journal of Pragmatics, 42, 2010 (1) [preprint].