

The dialectical force of missing premises. Enthymemes as dialogical strategies

According to the ancient tradition, the peculiarity of enthymemes lies in its incompleteness and possibility of being reconstructed. However, as Braet (1999, p. 107; 1994, p. 22) pointed out, such characteristic of enthymemes is not described by Aristotle as essential, but rather as a property that enthymemes often have because of their epistemic nature (Hamilton, 1874, p. 389). On this view, the major premise of an enthymeme can be often taken for granted because commonly considered as likely.

In the logical and rhetorical tradition, enthymemes have been often described as syllogisms with an unexpressed premise (Sorensen, 1988; Hurley, 2003, p. 289). The hiding of a premise or a conclusion (Gough & Tindale, 1985) needed to make the inference correct transforms the syllogistic type of reasoning into a powerful rhetorical strategy for both the speaker and the hearer. The speaker can support the wanted conclusion without committing himself or herself to the truth of a controversial proposition, but at the same time implying its existence as an integral part of their argument; the hearer, on the other hand, can fill in the incomplete inference with any assumption or conclusion meeting the requirement of making the reasoning structurally correct (Burke, 1985). However, two crucial problems seem to arise: How can the hearer reconstruct the missing premise? How can the speaker take a premise for granted, and thereby know the interlocutor's knowledge?

The purpose of this paper is to explain the process of reconstruction of the missing premise from an argumentative and pragmatic perspective, drawing from both the Aristotelian and rhetorical tradition. The starting point of our analysis is the pragmatic possibility of reconstructing the missing premise, and therefore the possibility of taking it for granted. Considering the pragmatic tradition, Stalnaker (1974) and Burton-Roberts (1989) point out that what is taken for granted in a discussion does not imply prior assumption of the interlocutor's knowledge of the presupposed proposition. They maintain that, from a linguistic point of view, the act of taking for granted a proposition needs to be considered as a dialogical act of guessing (Stalnaker 1998: 8). Following Stalnaker's view, we can notice that this guess needs to be "educated", that is, made on the grounds of information that everybody knows because it represents communicative or linguistic rules, normal human behavior or connections between facts. On this view, the interpretative process triggered by the speaker and carried out by the hearer is grounded on presumptions, that is, a defeasible reasoning in lack of evidence (Rescher 1977: 1; Freeman 2005: 43) that carries the effect of shifting the burden of proof.

Such presumptions are different in nature, strength, and dialogical effect. The relationship between a sentence and its effect, and more generally, the use of linguistic instruments and their purpose, is a pragmatic presumption, which can be referred to as presumption₀. The principles guiding the conclusion about the hearer's knowledge are epistemic presumptions, which we can also call presumptions₁. Finally, the usual connection between facts and events, representing the expected and ordinary course of things, are close to the legal notion of presumptions of fact and can be labeled as presumption₂. In everyday reasoning we use such presumptions₂ whenever we talk about a person's character, or most of the objects surrounding us. We go to the supermarket presuming that it has not been destroyed; we trust a friend presuming that he has not become unreliable in the last few hours. The character of our friend, the continuance of existence of the supermarket are not proven, but simply inferred from a type of knowledge that does not reflect how things *are* (or how they are perceived by us), but how things *are usually related to each other*.

Enthymemes are therefore arguments hiding an implicit act, the act of presuming. We ground our dialogical move on principles that we advance as accepted, because they are, because we believe that they are, or because it is convenient for us to consider them as such. The speaker advances presumptions when he or she takes some proposition or piece of information for granted because in this fashion he can reconstruct the other's unknown knowledge and make the dialogue move on faster. However, advancing an enthymeme can be also a strategic move aimed at carrying out a specific dialogical effect. As Kauffeld noticed, ordinary presumptions do not always shift the burden of proof; however, they place on the interlocutor a different type of burden, the "risk of resentment, criticism, reprobation, loss of esteem" in the event he or she does not accept a presumptive conclusion (Kauffeld 1998: 264). Depending on the strength and nature of the presumption, the communicative risk of criticism may vary. For instance, not sharing pragmatic presumptions may lead to criticism regarding a speaker's ability to communicate; epistemic presumptions often carry a risk of negative judgment on the interlocutor's interests and knowledge ("everyone knows that!" or "how can you be not interested in *x*?"); finally, failure to accept factual presumptions shared by everybody may result in the accuse of poor judgment. For instance, replying "Why?" to the arguments "This is a bird; therefore it flies", or "He is a blind man. He cannot have seen the accident" would be usually perceived as awkward. The force of an act of presupposing also consists in an implicit threat of a negative ethical, epistemic or communicative judgment.

Propositions therefore can be taken for granted for strategic reasons. The speaker presumes the hearer's acceptance of such propositions in order to make his move less attackable by the hearer. Enthymemes can protect speaker's move because they hide a premise, and because they presume it. The questionable proposition can be hidden, so that the speaker avoids incurring explicit commitments and defining potentially vague terms. The hearer in order to advance his attack is therefore forced to reconstruct the possible commitment, opening up the possibility of retraction or rectification, or start a metadialogue aimed at clarifying the unstated or unclear concepts (Krabbe, 2003). On the other hand, the dialectical force of enthymemes is based on the presumptive nature of the missing premise. The hearer, in order to reject the argument, needs to face the burden of criticism, and fulfill the burden of proving a proposition taken for granted by everybody wrong. The speaker in such cases can always defend himself by refusing, correcting or retracting the attacked proposition. However, this strategic dimension of enthymemes has also a dark side. The absence of an explicit commitment and the reliance on presumptions allow both hearer and speaker to resort to the straw man. The hearer can reconstruct what the speaker has taken for granted or implied in the easiest fashion to attack or rebut; the speaker, when his argument is attacked, can defend his or her position by alleging a misunderstanding or a slanderous reconstruction of his or her reasoning.

Clear examples of these enthymematic strategies can be found in legal argumentation, both in trials and in justificatory argumentation. In the first case, a counsel can strategically attribute intentions to the prosecutor; in the second case, the judges can exploit the enthymematic form in which a normative text is stated. This second case, however, bears the conceptual problem of attributing communicative intentions to a collective agency (Marmor, 2008), which acts itself strategically, and deliberately leaves certain issues undecided. For this reason, from a rhetorical point of view, the well-known interpretative technique of finding the intention of the legislator can be reconstructed as an enthymematic strategy: a rhetorical move exploiting unexpressed or conflicting implicatures.

References

- Braet, A. (1999). The Enthymeme in Aristotle's Rhetoric: From Argumentation Theory to Logic. *Informal Logic* 19, 2: 101-117.
- Burke, M. (1985). Unstated premises. *Informal Logic* 7:107–118.
- Burnyeat, M. F. (1994). Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Logic of Persuasion. In D. J. Furley and A. Nehamas (Eds.), *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays (Proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium Aristotelicum)* (pp. 3–55), Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Burton-Roberts, N. (1989). *The Limits to Debate: A Revised Theory of Semantic Presupposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, J. (2005). *Acceptable Premises: An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gough, J. & Tindale, C. (1985). Hidden or Missing Premises. *Informal Logic* 7: 99-106.
- Hamilton, W. (1874). *Lectures on Logic*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons.
- Hurley, P. (2003). *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Kauffeld, F. (1998). Presumptions and the Distribution of Argumentative Burdens in Acts of Proposing and Accusing. *Argumentation* 12: 245–266,
- Kauffeld, F. (2003). The ordinary practice of presuming and presumption with special attention to veracity and the burden of proof. In Eemeren, F.H. van, *et al.* (Eds.), *Anyone Who Has a View: Theoretical Contributions to the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 136–146), Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Krabbe, E. (2003). Metadialogues. In F. H. van Eemeren, J. A. Blair, C. A. Willard & A. F. Snoeck Henkemans (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 641–644), Amsterdam: Sic Sat.
- Marmor, A. (2008). What does the law say? Semantics and pragmatics in statutory language. In P. Comanducci & R. Guastini (Eds.), *Analisi e Diritto 2007* (pp. 127-140), Torino: Giappichelli.
- Pagliari, F. & Woods, J. (2011). Enthymematic Parsimony. *Synthese* 178: 461–501.
- Rescher, N. (1977). *Dialectics: a controversy-oriented approach to the theory of knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rescher, N. (2006). *Presumption and the Practices of Tentative Cognition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sorensen, R. (1988). Are Enthymemes Arguments? *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 29 (1), 155-159.
- Stalnaker, R. (1974). Pragmatic Presuppositions. In Munitz, M., & Unger, P. (Eds.), *Semantics and Philosophy* (pp. 197-213), New York: New York University Press.
- Tindale, C. (1999). *Acts of arguing: a rhetorical model of argument*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Keywords

Interpretation, Enthymemes, Missing Premises, Presumption, Argumentation