

# Presupposing redefinitions

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## 1. Introduction – Definitions in argumentation

Words, and in particular “ethical” or “emotive” terms (Stevenson 1937: 18-19), are extremely powerful instruments. They can be used to modify our beliefs, our knowledge and our point of view, but also to conceal states of affairs (Schiappa 2003) to influence our judgments and decisions. More importantly, by changing the meaning of a word it is possible to modify the way reality is perceived by our interlocutor.

Zarefsky (1998) and Schiappa (2003: 111-112; 130) pointed out the implicit dimension of this act of naming reality, which they call “argument by definition”. Instead of putting forward a classification and support it by a definitional reason, the speaker simply names reality, leaving the definition unexpressed. Instead of stating or advancing a definition, he takes it for granted, considering it as part of the interlocutors’ common ground. This move is not a simple definitional act. The speaker is not defining, in the sense that he is not proposing or stipulating a definition. He is actually doing much more. He is presupposing a redefinition, or rather he is taking for granted a new, unshared meaning.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the structure of the act of presupposing can help understand the force and the dangers of implicit redefinitions, providing an instrument to assess their reasonableness. It will be shown how the persuasiveness of certain words can be represented by combined patterns of reasoning, which depend on definitions and values. By changing the definition of a word it is possible to alter the consequent evaluative reasoning. Redefinitions are not *per se* fallacious moves; on the contrary, there are often needed, especially if the boundaries of its *definiendum* are blurred and indistinct (Sager 2000: 216-217, Walton 2005: 169-173, Gallie 1956, Sorensen 1991). However, the speaker can define or redefine by performing different types of speech acts subject to specific conditions, of which the most troublesome is the implicit act of presupposing a definition.

By describing the conditions of this *non*-act, it is possible to understand the relationship between taking a proposition for granted and presuming its acceptance. On this perspective, presumptive reasoning becomes a crucial dimension of presupposition, allowing one to assess the reasonableness of tacit moves such as the implicit redefinition.

## 2. The persuasive dimensions of words

The power of definitions and redefinitions consists in the conclusion that the *definiendum* triggers or is used to support. For instance, concepts such as *war* or *terrorism* are usually judged negatively, and can be used to arouse negative emotions or elicit negative judgments. For this reason, naming can be considered a form of condensed argument composed of two dimensions, a classification of reality and a value judgment.

The distinction between the two aspects of the persuasive force of words was drawn by Stevenson in his analysis of ethical words. On his view, ethical or emotive words were described as words having the power of directing attitudes. Stevenson noted that words such as “peace”, “war” or “democracy” are not simply used to describe and therefore affect the cognitive reaction of the interlocutor. They can provoke a different type of reaction, emotive in nature. Stevenson called these two reactions “descriptive meaning” and “emotive meaning”, defining “meaning” as a stable correlation between the sign, a stimulus, and a psychological response of the addressee (Stevenson 1944: 54). Ethical words have the power of directing attitudes, arousing emotions and suggesting, or rather recommending, courses of actions. (Stevenson 1937: 18-19): “Instead of merely describing people's interests, they change or intensify them. They *recommend* an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists”.

These words have the tendency to encourage future actions (Stevenson 1938b: 49-50), and lead the hearer towards a decision by affecting his system of interests (Stevenson 1944: 210). Descriptive and emotive meanings can be interrelated or independent to each other. Some terms (for instance “peace” or “war”) have a positive or negative emotional meaning because their descriptive one refers to a state of affairs usually assessed positively or

negatively by the community of speakers (Stevenson 1944: 72). The two meanings are independent from each other in other words. For instance, the difference between “cur” and “dog”, “elderly maiden” and “old spinster” simply consists in the different emotive reaction that they arouse (Stevenson 1937: 23, Stevenson 1938a: 334-335). The power of ethical or emotive words was underscored by Stevenson, who pointed out the strict relation between definition and persuasion (Stevenson 1944: 210), claiming that “to choose a definition is to plead a cause, so long as the word defined is strongly emotive”.

Stevenson noticed that the emotive meaning of a word cannot be defined, but it can be modified by two powerful tactics, quasi-definitions and persuasive definitions. In the first case, the descriptive meaning is maintained, while the emotive one is altered. The quasi-definition does not describe the *definiendum*, simply qualifies it in order to arouse contrary or different emotions. For instance we can consider the Don Juan’s definition of “fidelity” as “being trapped forever in the same relationship and as good as dead from youth onwards to the other pretty faces that might catch our eye!” (Molière 2000: 98) or the following definition of “peace” (Bierce 2000: 179):

1. Peace. In international affairs, a period of cheating between two periods of fighting

In these cases, the speaker describes what the words is commonly used to refer to, and qualifies it using epithets or metaphors eliciting negative instead of positive evaluations.

Persuasive definitions are much more powerful and dangerous tactics. They consist in modifying the extension of a term, so that it can be used to refer to a different fragment of reality, maintaining its emotive meaning unaltered. For instance, we can consider the following redefinition of “peace”, or rather, “true peace” (Barack Obama, *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address Oslo*, Norway December 10, 2009):

2. *Implicit redefinition: “Peace”*

Peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. Only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting. [...]A just peace includes not only civil and political rights -- it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.

Here the emotive meaning of “peace” is maintained, but its descriptive meaning is modified to include war operations. A last tactic can be considered as the combination of the two methods described by Stevenson. A word is simply renamed, so that its emotive meaning is altered by exploiting the descriptive meaning of the new *signifiant*. For instance, in order to avoid the negative value judgments triggered by a “war on terror”, under the Obama administration such military operations were simply renamed.<sup>1</sup>

3. This Administration prefers to avoid using the term “Long War” or “Global War on Terror” [GWOT]. Please use “Overseas Contingency Operation.”

The descriptive meaning of an “operation” is different from the one of “war”. As a consequence, the two concepts trigger distinct value judgments. The same state of affairs was named differently to take advantage of the “emotive” meaning associated with the new “descriptive” one.

### 3. Arguments in words

Stevenson’s account of emotive and descriptive meaning can be analyzed from an argumentative perspective as a twofold dimension of reasoning. On this view, Stevenson’s meaning, corresponding to the propensity of a word to elicit certain attitudes, can be thought of as a process of reasoning triggered or presupposed by the use of the word. The emotive and the descriptive meaning can be represented by two different patterns of argument, argument from values and argument from classification.

#### 3.1 Reasoning from classification

As Zarefsky and Schiappa suggested, naming reality can be conceived as a reasoning process aimed at the attribution of a predicate to a subject. The

1 Al Kamen, The End of the Global War on Terror. *The Washington Post* 24 March 2009, retrieved from [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2009/03/23/the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_global\\_war\\_on\\_t.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2009/03/23/the_end_of_the_global_war_on_t.html) (accessed on 18 March 2012).

most generic description of this mechanism has been introduced by Hastings (1963) and developed by Walton (1996: 54), who provided an abstract structure of argument representing the combination of the rhetorical predicate of “classification” (Hobbs 1979: 68) and the *modus ponens* logical rule. In the following scheme the rhetoric, or rather semantic, relation is stated in a generic fashion, not specifying on which grounds the predicate is attributed to the entity:

PREMISE 1:	For all $x$ , if $x$ has property $F$ , then $x$ can be classified as having property $G$ .
PREMISE 2:	$a$ has property $F$ .
CONCLUSION:	$a$ has property $G$ .

Table 1. Argument scheme classification / *modus ponens*

The generality of the semantic principle risks leading to forms of inference of the kind “ $x$  is blue, therefore  $x$  is a man”. For this reason it needs to be specified taking into consideration the ancient maxims of inference (Stump 1989, Green-Pedersen 1984). The passage from the property stated in the antecedent to the property attributed in the consequent needs to be grounded on the semantic definitory relation (Walton & Macagno 2008), namely the relation concerning the identity and difference between two predicates (Aristotle *Topics* 102a, 5-9). This type of argument can be represented as follows (Walton & Macagno 2010: 39):

PREMISE 1:	For all $x$ , if $x$ fits definition $D$ , and $D$ is the definition of $G$ , then $x$ can be classified as $G$ .
PREMISE 2:	$a$ fits definition $D$ .
CONCLUSION:	$a$ has property $G$ .

Table 2. Argumentation scheme 1: Argument from definition

As Aristotle pointed out, the concept of definition can include different types of equivalences, the most famous (and controversial) of which is the definition by genus and difference. However, in addition to this classical method, the same concept can be defined in various fashions. For instance, “man” can be defined by genus and difference as the “reasonable animate being”, by property as the “being who can learn grammar”, by physical parts as the “being who has a head, two arms, two legs, etc...” The process of classification can be conceived as a type of reasoning proceeding from

definition (man is a reasonable animal; man is a biped without feathers), other definitional propositions (descriptions, operative definitions), or heuristic processes establishing an identity (classification by contraries, analogy, etc.). Moreover, different definitional sentences trigger different types of reasoning. The definition by genus and difference leads to a classificatory (affirmative) conclusion by means of a deductive *modus ponens*. However, definitions by contrary can only classify an entity by denying what the *definiendum* is not, proceeding by *modus tollens* or *modus ponendo tollens*. Other definitions warrant a classification abductively (parts are signs of the entity in definitions by parts; a cause is the explanation of an effect in an operative definition) or by means of analogy. The generic reasoning pattern named “classification” becomes on this view an umbrella term encompassing different types of semantic principles, each of them triggering distinct types of reasoning to support a classificatory conclusion. Below the most important types of defintory premises and the related principle of inference leading to an affirmative conclusion are represented:

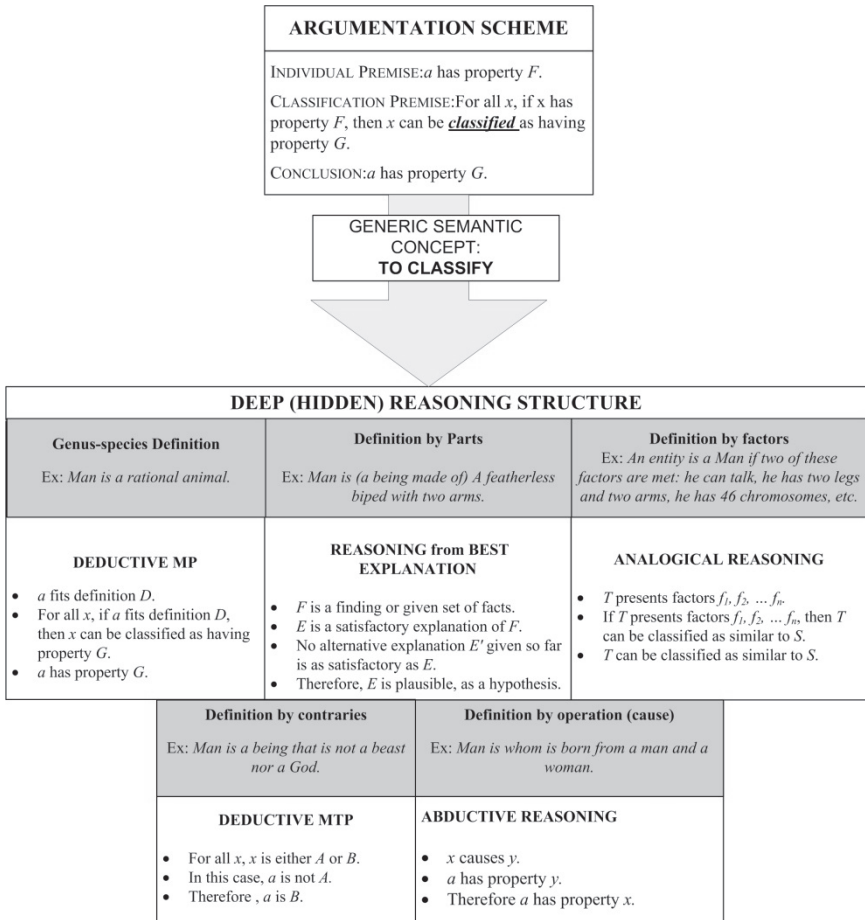


Figure 1. The reasoning and semantic dimensions of argument from classification

As shown in figure 1 above, argument from classification can be considered as a generic pattern describing the “descriptive meaning” of a word, which can be further specified by pointing out the semantic relationship between *definiens* and *definiendum*. However, the semantic relation determines the “deep logic” of the argument: the surface defeasible modus ponens hides more complex types of reasoning based on the meaning of the definitional premise.

### 3.2 *Argumentation from values*

Stevenson described the emotive meaning as a propensity to encourage actions. The relationship between words, meaning and values (or, rather, hierarchies of values, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1951), can provide an explanation, from a rhetorical perspective, of the reason why words can lead to value judgments and decisions. On this view, values can be thought of as the reasons for classifying something as desirable or not, and at the same time be used to encourage action. By pointing out the qualities of a course of action, an event or an object that the interlocutor considers as valuable (desirable), the speaker can provide him with a reason to act in a specific fashion. This twofold process of reasoning can be described as follows:  $x$  (an action, an object, or a viewpoint) can be judged positively or negatively according to a value (or rather a hierarchy of values)  $V$ ; according to the desirability of  $x$ ,  $x$  can become an action worthy for the agent or not. Values represent the criterion for establishing the desirability of a course of action, and the generic form of reasoning based on them can be represented as follows (Walton, Reed & Macagno 2008: 321):

PREMISE 1:	Value $V$ is positive (negative) as judged by agent $A$ (value judgment).
PREMISE 2:	The fact that value $V$ is positive (negative) affects the interpretation and therefore the evaluation of goal $G$ of agent $A$ (If value $V$ is good (bad), it supports (does not support) commitment to goal $G$ ).
CONCLUSION:	Value $V$ is a reason for retaining (retracting) commitment to goal $G$ .

*Table 3.* Argumentation scheme 2: Argument from values

This pattern of argument can be further specified considering its two dimensions, the process of evaluation (a specific kind of classification, Von Wright 1963) and the decision-making reasoning. The first step consists in classifying an action or a state of affairs as desirable or not according to our hierarchy of values. For instance, security, justice or richness can be evaluated as preferable to peace and human life by someone, while others can consider these latter values as the most important ones. The classification of an action as “an act of war” can be evaluated differently according to the hierarchies of values of the audience. The different reasons underlying this value judgment were outlined in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Topics* in form of



commonplaces or topics. Such topics can be conceived as possible different ways of defining what is “good” according to possible situations and points of view. Since the meaning of “good” is partially determined by the object of its predication (Vendler 1964), these commonplaces are useful for warranting the classification, such as the following ones (*Rhetoric* 1363b 13-16):

Now we call “good” what is desirable for its own sake and not for the sake of something else; that at which all things aim; what they would choose if they could acquire understanding and practical wisdom; and which tends to produce or preserve such goods, or is always accompanied by them;

What “is to be chosen for its own sake” can be established on the basis of a person's experiences or culture. On this perspective, hierarchies of values are forms of relativistic definitions of what is desirable.

The second component of reasoning from values is the reasoning passage from moral judgment to action. The relationship between will, and desire, and action is underscored in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. What is good, or appear as such, is maintained to be the goal of a decision to act (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a, 15), as “everything aims at the good” (*Topics* 116a, 18). For instance, an act of war can be judged negatively, and for this reason it can be used as a reason for criticizing a military intervention or voting against a party supporting it. The decision-making process can be thought of as a pattern of reasoning connecting an action, or rather a “declaration of intention” or commitment (von Wright 1972: 41) with its grounds (Anscombe 1998: 11). Depending on whether the speaker is assessing a *specific* course of action based on its consequences, or a possible way to achieve a goal, the type of reasoning has different forms. The first and simpler form of argument is the *argument from consequences* (from Walton, Reed & Macagno 2008: 332):

PREMISE 1:	If <i>A</i> is brought about, good (bad) consequences will plausibly occur.
PREMISE 2:	What leads to good (bad) consequences shall be (not) brought about.
CONCLUSION:	Therefore <i>A</i> should be (not) brought about.

Table 4. Argumentation scheme 3: Argument from consequences

For instance, classifying an operation as an “act of peace” or as “pacification” can trigger a reasoning from positive consequences: since such an operation *leads* to peace, and peace is desirable, the operation shall be supported.

The other form of reasoning, called *practical reasoning*, proceeds from a purpose to the possible means that can bring it about (Walton, Reed & Macagno 2008: 323):

PREMISE 1:	I (an agent) have a goal $G$ .
PREMISE 2:	Carrying out this action $A$ is a means to realize $G$ .
CONCLUSION:	Therefore, I ought to (practically speaking) carry out this action $A$ .

*Table 5.* Argumentation scheme 4: Practical reasoning

For instance, freeing people from want and need in countries governed by dictators can be regarded as highly desirable. In order to achieve this goal, the agent can perform various actions that are the sufficient conditions to bring about the desired state of affairs. Among this paradigm of choices, the agent chooses the best one, based on his values or preferences. Obviously, such a paradigm can be altered by the speaker: for example, waging war can be shown to be the only (reasonable, possible) means for freeing “enslaved” populations.

#### 4. Presupposing definitions

Stevenson pointed out how words can be used to affect the interlocutor’s decisions. The distinction between the different types of reasoning triggered by the use of a word can show how redefinitions can affect the evaluation of the state of affairs referred to. Definitions, or definitory statements, are the premises of classificatory reasoning, which are often taken for granted because considered as part of the common ground. However, words can be, and often are, redefined. On the one hand, redefinition is not only a common move, but it is often necessary in order to clarify concepts or highlight new perspectives on them. On the other hand, however, by modifying the definition of a word the speaker can ground the implicit evaluative reasoning of the interlocutor on different premises. How is it possible to distinguish mischievous uses of definition from the legitimate or persuasive ones?

#### 4.1 Definitions and implicit definitions

Definitions can be considered as statements concerning the identity between two concepts, which can be shared or controversial. When a new definition is advanced, it becomes a standpoint that needs to be supported by reasons if not accepted by the interlocutor. A definition, or a redefinition, is an implicit claim in favour of a new use of an existing word (Schiappa 2003), and needs to be open to challenge. We can conceive a redefinition as a standpoint conflicting with the shared opinion on a word use and for this reason it is presumed not to be accepted. There is nothing wrong with redefining a word; the crucial problem is how a redefinition is introduced. For instance, we can consider how Obama redefined the concept of “hostilities” to classify American airstrikes in Libya. In order to avoid Congress authorization to continue the “hostilities”, Obama adapted the meaning of such word to exclude bombings and operations conducted by unmanned aircrafts (*Obama Administration letter to Congress justifying Libya engagement*, June 15th, 2011, p. 25):

Implicit redefinition: “Hostilities”

The President is of the view that the current U.S. military operations in Libya are consistent with the War Powers Resolution and do not under that law require further congressional authorization, because U.S. military operations are distinct from the kind of “hostilities” contemplated by the Resolution’s 60 day termination provision. [...] U.S. operations do not involve sustained fighting or active exchanges of fire with hostile forces, nor do they involve the presence of U.S. ground troops, U.S. casualties or a serious threat thereof, or any significant chance of escalation into a conflict characterized by those factors.

Instead of explicitly arguing for a new definition, or rather a specification, of the concept, Obama takes it for granted. He does not reject the shared one or attacks it based on its vagueness. He does not even suggest that it should be better clarified. Instead, he supports the claim that the US are not engaged in any hostilities in Libya as ground troops have not been deployed, nor have ground battles been fought. He takes for granted that “hostilities” means only “active fighting by ground troops”, which does not correspond to any accepted definition of the term according to ordinary or military dictionaries. This move suggests a crucial question: How is it possible to take for granted a proposition, and what are the boundaries of this implicit (non-)act of

discourse? The notions of pragmatic presupposition and act of presupposing can provide a possible explanation.

#### 4.2 *Pragmatic presuppositions*

Presuppositions are considered as properties of the use of sentences, or rather, statements (Strawson 1950, 1952, Karttunen 1973, Kempson 1975, Wilson 1975, Keenan 1971). This pragmatic view extends the notion of presupposition to several phenomena of meaningfulness constraints (Austin 1962: 34; 51), such as selectional restrictions, coherence relations and felicity conditions. Several phenomena are labeled as presuppositions, including some dimensions of the representation of lexical meaning, the wider class of felicity conditions of speech acts and coherence relations. The common characteristic of all these phenomena is that a proposition  $p$  is presupposed when it is taken for granted in performing a speech act, whose felicity depends on the interlocutor's acceptance of  $p$ . To presuppose a proposition is "to take its truth for granted, and to assume that others involved in the context do the same" (Stalnaker 1970: 279, Stalnaker 1974: 200). This "taking a proposition for granted" has been analyzed as Stalnaker as a propositional attitude, which can be interpreted as an action of a kind (Stalnaker 2002: 701). As Kempson put it (1975: 190), presupposing amounts to treating a proposition as part of the common ground:

The speaker believes that the hearer knows (and knows that the speaker knows) a certain body of propositions (i.e. there is a Pragmatic Universe of Discourse) and in making a certain utterance " $*\psi p$ " he believes that the hearer, knowing the conventions of the language and hence the conditions for the truth of the proposition in question, will recognise a subset of those conditions as being part of that Pragmatic Universe of Discourse and hence neither assertible, deniable or queriable [...].

In particular, for the purpose of this paper a specific type of pragmatic presupposition will be inquired into, the presupposition of definitional sentences. For this reason, it is necessary to investigate how definitions can be presupposed in discourse, or rather how they can be triggered.

### 4.3 *Presuppositions of discourse relations*

Definitions, being the implicit premises of a classificatory argument, need to be inquired into taking into consideration the linguistic structure of discourse relations, or, rather, connectives. Karttunen (1973: 176) described how presuppositions can be triggered by predicates of higher level, the connectives, whose linguistic arguments are discourse sequences. Connectives link sequences and presuppose specific relations between them. For instance, we can consider the following famous case (Lakoff 1971: 133):

I. John is tall, but he is no good at basketball.

Lakoff notices that (I) is composed of an assertion (John is tall, and he is no good at basketball) and a presupposition (If someone is tall, then one would expect him to be good at basketball). The effect is a denial of expectation, which was described by Ducrot as the contradiction by the second conjunct of a presupposed conclusion (in this case, “John is good at basketball”) (Ducrot 1978). Similarly, the connective “and” presupposes a common relevance or topic (Lakoff 1971: 128, Kempson 1975: 58), which can be observed in the following cases (Kempson 1975: 56; 61):

II. The Lone Ranger rode off into the sunset and mounted his horse.

III. Pope John is dying and the cat is in the bath.

Both sentences are unsound because the relationship between the two conjuncts seems to be missing, or rather is unavailable to the interlocutors in normal conditions. In (II) the conjunction presupposes a temporal sequence that is commonly perceived as impossible, while in (III) the (causal) relationship cannot be even retrieved. Subordinate connective specify more precisely the type of relationship between the sequences. For instance, the predicate “therefore” presupposes that the first sequence is a reason supporting the second one (see also Grice 1975: 44).

Both in case of coordination and subordination, text sequences are connected in a similar fashion. In subordination the predicate is explicit and imposes a set of specific coherence conditions, or pragmatic presuppositions (Vanderveken 2002: 47, Bach 2003: 163), on its arguments (Grimes 1975: 162). In coordination, an explicit or implicit predicate hides a deeper relationship (Ballard, Conrad & Longacre 1971) that needs to be reconstructed in order to understand the role and the conditions of the discourse segments or sequences. For instance, coordination can express

temporal, causal, explanation relations, imposing specific requirements on their sequences, such as a causal or temporal order of the sequences. In all cases, a “high level notion” or “logical-semantic connective” (Rigotti 1993, Rigotti 2005, Rigotti & Rocci 2001) connects the propositions expressed by the clause; such a notion, or predicate, can be expressed or not, and specified or not. In all cases, the sentences or clauses are connected by an abstract, high level and generic semantic relation that imposes specific requirements on its arguments. There can be several high-level relations: explanation, narration, contrast, etc. (see Lascarides & Asher 1993). However, only one of such relations, namely motivation or support, will be considered here. We can analyse the following interpretation and reconstruction of the aforementioned argument used by Obama to classify the airstrikes in Libya:

- IV. (A) Our operations do not involve the presence of U.S. ground troops. (B) (*therefore*) Our operations are not “hostilities”.

In this case, a higher level predicate connecting the discourse moves needs to be reconstructed. We can represent it linguistically as the connective “therefore”, expressing a relation of motivation (Rigotti & Rocci 2006). Such a relation needs to support the attribution of a predicate (to be a case of hostility) in *B* to the same subject of the previous sequence (*A*). The attribution of a predicate on the basis of actions or qualities attributed to the same subject can be usually presumed to be a classification. Obviously, the specification of the relation depends on several factors, such as the type of property attributed. This relation requires that the quality or event expressed in the first sentence represents a classificatory, or definitional, principle for the attribution of the quality in the second sentence (Kempson 1975: 109-110). In this specific case, the fact, event or quality need to instantiate a definition, or definitional principle, of “to be a case of hostilities”. We can represent the structure of the presuppositions as follows:

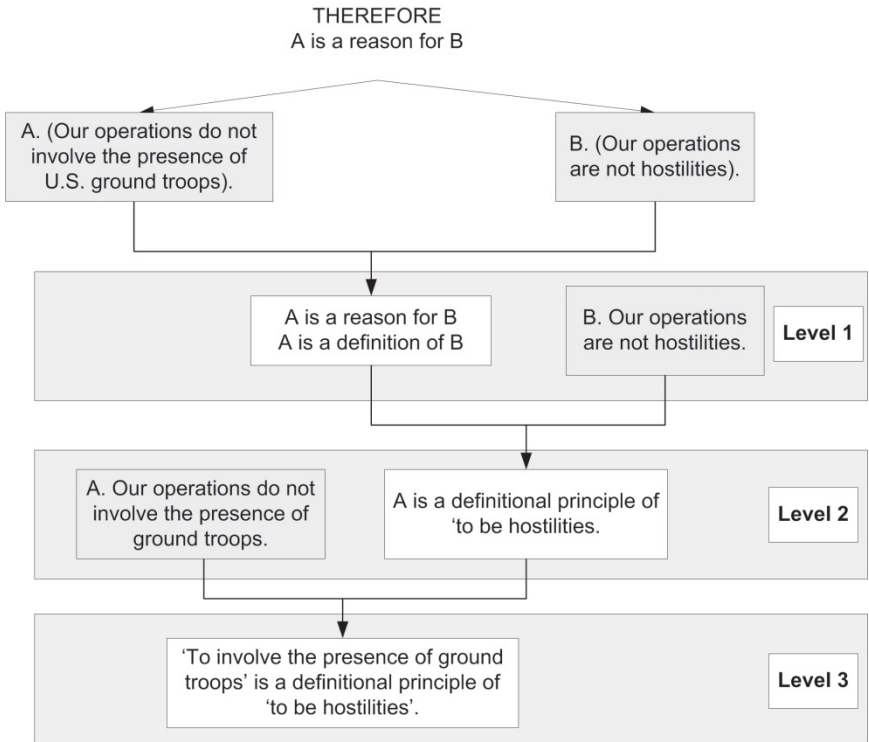


Figure 2. Presuppositions of “therefore”

The abstract relation of coherence (Asher & Lascarides 2003, chap. 7) is further specified according to the three levels of reasoning performed by the addressee for reconstructing (or rather justifying, see Kamp 2001) the presupposition. From the meaning of the connector and the information of sequence B (level 1), a first specification of the discourse relation is drawn (A is a definition of “to be hostilities”). The combination of this first conclusion with A (level 2) leads to the final reconstruction, which indicates the actual relation between the two sequences (“to involve the presence of ground troops” is a definitional principle of “hostilities”).

## 5. The act of presupposing

As seen above, from a linguistic perspective the presuppositions of connectives are requirements for the coherence of a text or discourse. The use of such requirements leads us to the other crucial perspective, the pragmatic one.

### 5.1 *Presupposition as an implicit act*

From the accounts of pragmatic presupposition mentioned at 4.1 above, two crucial elements emerge: 1. Presupposition can be considered as a decision to treat a proposition as shared; 2. Presuppositions are crucially related to the speaker and hearer's beliefs and knowledge (Schwartz 1977: 248). The definition of a linguistic phenomenon in terms of beliefs or assumptions risks confounding the phenomenon with its accidental effects or possible explanations. How can a speaker believe or assume that a proposition is shared by the hearer? How would it be possible to presuppose propositions that are known not to be shared, without the sentence being infelicitous? A possible explanation consists in analyzing the pragmatic presuppositions as an act consisting in treating a proposition as shared, and investigating its conditions and essential requirements.

Ducrot pointed out the strict relationship between a speech act and its conditions. He noticed that the performance of a speech act amounts to implicitly performing a hidden, or rather implicit, act: presupposing (Ducrot 1968: 87). For instance, by asserting that, "We are freeing the people of Afghanistan from need" the speaker is deploying a dialogical world in which people in Afghanistan are in need and need is a form of burden. Only in such a world his statement is felicitous. On Ducrot's view, by presupposing the speaker modifies the dialogical situation, and set the boundaries of the interlocutor's future actions (Ducrot 1972)<sup>2</sup>, or rather the conditions for the

2 On Ducrot's view, the communicative game resembles a chess game, in which the possibilities are set by means of presuppositions: "dans ce combat simulé –qui substitue aux possibilités réelles, dues à la force, les possibilités morales dues aux conventions- les règles permettent aux joueurs de se contraindre mutuellement à certaines actions, et de s'en interdire certaines autres" (Ducrot 1968: 83, 1972: 27).



continuation of the future dialogue game (Ducrot 1991: 91). Not accepting a presupposition amounts to ending the dialogue, something like knocking over the chessboard.

This perspective takes into account solely the structure of the dialogue move, and not its possibility. A speech act of the kind “Bob’s brother is feeling bad today” would fail to fulfil the purpose of informing the hearer if the latter knows that Bob is an only child, or if he does not know Bob at all. In order to account for the effect of a move, and therefore its possibility conditions and fallacious uses, it is necessary to take into consideration the relationship between the speaker and the hearer’s knowledge. This relation can be examined starting from a case studied by Ducrot (1966: 42). He considered an imaginary conversation between the enemies of Cesar or Napoleon during the Roman consulate or the French Republic. In this conversation, they talk about “the magnificence, or the richness or the wisdom of the King”. In this case the speakers presuppose false or unshared propositions (“Cesar – or Napoleon – is a king”). However, their assertions, far from being void, might have caused them serious troubles for their meaning. This case illustrates a crucial problem of presuppositions, the possibility of treating as shared an unshared proposition, relying on the hearer’s capacity of reconstructing, or rather “accommodating” it (Lewis 1979; Von Stechow 2008). From the analysis of the limits of such a process of reconstruction it is possible to understand the conditions characterizing the speech act of presupposition.

## *5.2 The limits of presupposing*

Presuppositions, on Ducrot’s view, need to be accepted in order for the dialogue to be possible. However, at the same time presuppositions need to be known by the interlocutor. From a pragmatic perspective, the possibility of presupposing information not shared, or not known to be shared, needs to be accounted for. On Lewis’ perspective (Lewis 1979), the hearer reconstructs the presupposed and not shared propositions in order to avoid communicative failure (Von Stechow 2008); in other words, he accommodates the missing and necessary information (Lewis 1979: 340):

If at time  $t$  something is said that requires presupposition  $P$  to be acceptable and if  $P$  is not presupposed just before  $t$ , then – *ceteris paribus* and within certain limits – presupposition  $P$  comes into existence at  $t$ .

The crucial problem of this view is to determine how a presupposition can come into existence and be added to the shared propositions. On Soames' view, accommodation is possible when no objections are raised, namely the interlocutor has already accepted the proposition (it is part of the common ground) or it is not conflicting with it (Soames 1982: 486):

Utterance Presupposition An utterance  $U$  presupposes  $P$  (at  $t$ ) iff one can reasonably infer from  $U$  that the speaker  $S$  accepts  $P$  and regards it as uncontroversial, either because

- a.  $S$  thinks that it is already part of the conversational context at  $t$ , or because
- b.  $S$  thinks that the audience is prepared to add it, without objection, to the context against which  $U$  is evaluated.

Soames explains the phenomenon of accommodation in terms of the speaker's beliefs regarding the interlocutor's common knowledge. However, how is it possible to evaluate a belief? Is presupposition dependent on personal beliefs?

A possible answer is suggested by Stalnaker (1998). He explains the relationship between speaker's and hearer's knowledge in the process of accommodation as a *presumption* of the speaker that the presupposed information is *available* to his or her audience (Stalnaker 1998: 8). The speaker acts holding the conclusion of his or her presumptive reasoning as true until contrary evidence is provided. For instance we can consider the following variants of the statement made by Obama before the Congress and analysed in figure 2 above:

- A. Our intervention cannot be considered as hostilities. We have not used weapons or the military.
- B. Our intervention is not a *çatışma*. They have not intervened.
- C. Our intervention cannot be considered as hostilities. It is fast and well done.
- D. Our intervention cannot be considered as hostilities. It does not involve cooking of potatoes.

These four cases differ for different reasons. In (A), the speaker grounds his presupposition on the fact that people (and congressmen) usually know what "hostilities" are, and that "using weapons or the military" is a possible

criterion for classifying actions as hostilities. In (B), however, it is impossible to reconstruct and accept the presupposition, as an essential requirement clearly fails for two reasons. The speaker cannot presume that North American congressmen know the meaning of a Turkish word, “*çatışma*”. Moreover, since no information has been provided on the entity to which “they” refers. Such presuppositions (the definition of “*çatışma*” and the referent of “they”) cannot be accommodated, cannot be reconstructed, as they are not “rhetorically bound to the context” (Asher & Lascarides 1998: 277), nor they are related to propositions presumed to be known. In this case, the process of reconstruction shown in figure 2 can fail at level 1 or 2, as the speaker may not understand the meaning of the sequences connected and therefore retrieve their relationship, or he can understand their relationship but cannot reconstruct the definitory statement. Reconstruction is not the only process which needs to be considered for analysing presuppositions, as (B) does not represent the only case in which the speech act is infelicitous because of presuppositional failure. In (C) and (D) the hearer can understand the nature of the proposition taken for granted (a definitory statement) and connect it with his or her background knowledge. However, in (C) the hearer cannot accept that the property of “being nice and well done” is a definition of an action (hostilities). In this case, the process of presupposition reconstruction represented in figure 2 above fails at level 2. In (D), the presupposition can be reconstructed and its nature of definitory statement accepted. However, no congressmen and presumably no English speaker can accept that “cooking of potatoes” is a definition of “hostilities”. The conclusion of the process of reconstruction outlined in figure 2 above cannot be accepted and fails at level 3. The *possibility* of presupposing needs therefore to be distinguished from the *acceptability* of a proposition taken for granted. By distinguishing the two dimensions of accommodation it is possible to distinguish between four different cases:

- i) the presupposition can be reconstructed and accepted as a background assumption (case A);
- ii) the presupposition cannot be reconstructed (case B);
- iii) the presupposition can be reconstructed but its function (nature, structure) cannot be accepted (case C);
- iv) the presupposition can be reconstructed but its content cannot be accepted (case D).

These possibilities allow us to outline the possible felicity conditions of the implicit speech act of presupposing, building on Austin's and Searle and Vanderveken's accounts of speech act conditions (Austin 1962: 14-15, Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 13-19, Holdgraves 2008: 13):

<i>Essential Condition:</i>	Speaker ( <i>S</i> ) sets the presupposed proposition ( <i>pp</i> ) as a condition of the felicity of his speech act ( <i>SA</i> ); if Hearer ( <i>H</i> ) does not accept <i>pp</i> , <i>SA</i> will be void.
<i>Propositional Condition:</i>	<i>pp</i> is a proposition that can be reconstructed by <i>H</i> .
<i>Preparatory Condition:</i>	<i>S</i> can presume that <i>H</i> can reconstruct and accept <i>pp</i> .
<i>Sincerity Condition:</i>	<i>S</i> believes that <i>pp</i> ; <i>S</i> believes that <i>H</i> can reconstruct and know or accept <i>pp</i> .

Table 6. Felicity conditions for the speech act of presupposing.

This speech act has a direction of fit from World (of the Hearer) to Words (of the Speaker), and its goal is to set the propositions that the hearer needs to accept for the dialogue to continue. The possibility of reconstructing the presupposition is indicated as a propositional condition: *H* needs to be able to draw *pp* from the linguistic and pragmatic elements provided. The acceptability of the presupposition is governed by both the preparatory and the sincerity condition. The sincerity condition expresses the conditions that the tradition on pragmatic presupposition considered as essential, while the preparatory condition, framed as a presumption, is aimed at bridging the gap between the speaker's and hearer's mind from an epistemic and argumentative perspective, without resorting to the psychological notion of belief.

This treatment of presupposition as a kind of implicit speech act can explain also the particular types of moves in which the speaker takes for granted a proposition known to be false or unknown by the hearer, such as the cases of Napoleon and Caesar mentioned above. Here the speaker can presume and believes that the hearer can reconstruct the presupposition "Caesar (or Napoleon) is a king", but at the same time he presumes and believes that he cannot know or accept it, as it is false. Ducrot described this phenomenon as a form of connotation, in which the utterance becomes a sign aimed at communicating the conditions of its use (Ducrot 1968: 44). In a speech act perspective, this particular use of presupposition can be regarded as an indirect speech act, where the act setting out the conditions of a move needs to be interpreted as a type of assertive (Hickey 1993: 107).

## 6. Presuppositions as presumptive reasoning

The most important aspect of the speech act of presupposition is the preparatory condition, stating that the speaker can presume that the hearer can reconstruct and accept (or in a stronger sense, know) the proposition to be presupposed. This condition sets out the grounds of the *reasonableness* of speaker's presupposition, and tries to provide a possible answer to the following crucial question: Why and how can a speaker presuppose a proposition? The concepts of speaker's "belief" or "thinking" mentioned in the theories on pragmatic presupposition ascribe the phenomenon of presupposition to internal cognitive processes. However, such explanations cannot provide criteria for distinguishing between reasonable uses of presupposition from absurd or manipulative ones. If we examine presupposition in terms of presumptive reasoning, we can analyze its reasonableness by assessing the reasons supporting its fundamental requirement, the fact that the presupposed proposition *can* be shared. This concept (partially hinted at by Strawson, see Strawson 1971: 58-59, Kempson 1975: 166-167), shifts the traditional psychological explanation onto an epistemic level.

### 6.1 Presumptive reasoning

Presuppositions can be conceived as the conclusion of presumptive reasoning. The speaker cannot know the other's mind, but only advance a tentative and defeasible conclusion based on a form of reasoning in lack of evidence (Rescher 1977: 1). He or she draws specific conclusions on the other's mind based on general principles such as "Speakers belonging to a specific speech community usually know the meaning of the most important words of the language used therein". In other words, he is only presuming such knowledge.

Presumptions cannot *prove* a conclusion; they rather intervene when it is *not possible* to demonstrate a conclusion (Blackstone 1769: 371). This type of reasoning is rebuttable and defeasible (Hart 1961: 10), as its characteristic consists in supporting a conclusion until contrary evidence is produced. However, its inherent defeasibility has a fundamental effect on the dialogical

setting, the shifting of the burden of producing evidence (or proving a proposition) onto the other party. For instance, the fundamental legal presumption is the innocence of the defendant. This does not mean that the defendant is innocent, but simply that he is considered as such until he is proved guilty (beyond a specific standard of proof). The other party, the prosecution (or in civil cases the plaintiff) has to provide evidence to rebut this presumptive conclusion.

The legal framework provides a general idea of the structure of this reasoning in everyday argumentation. Presumptions work to move the dialogue further when knowledge is lacking. Their role is to shift the burden of proof onto the other party, who can reject the proposition only by providing contrary arguments or positive facts leading to a contrary conclusion. If not rebutted, the speaker can consider it as tentatively proved, and move the dialogue further. Rescher outlined the structure of this type of inference as follows (Rescher 2006: 33):

RULE	$P$ (the proposition representing the presumption) obtains whenever the condition $C$ obtains unless and until the standard default proviso $D$ (to the effect that countervailing evidence is at hand) obtains.
FACT	Condition $C$ obtains.
EXCEPTION	Proviso $D$ does not obtain.
CONCLUSION:	$P$ obtains.

Table 7. Structure of presumptive reasoning

The *Rule* of presumption links the acceptability of a proposition  $P$  (for instance, the defendant is innocent) to a condition  $C$  (for instance, he denies the crime he is charged with) until a specific default proviso  $D$  obtains (for instance, he is found guilty beyond reasonable doubt). If he denies the charge and is not found guilty beyond reasonable doubt, he is to be found innocent. This type of reasoning can be applied to the analysis of the conditions of presuppositions to assess when and whether the speaker can reasonably take a proposition for granted. This pattern of reasoning outlines the structure of the reasoning underlying his “belief” or “thinking” that the interlocutor accepts or knows the presupposed proposition.

## 6.2 Presumptions and redefinitions

The structure of presumptive reasoning mentioned above can be applied to the cases of redefinition cited, and in particular the persuasive definitions of “hostilities” and “peace”. In the first case, Obama took advantage of the absence of an explicit definition in the War Powers Resolution. However, the absence of an explicit definition does not amount to the absence of a shared one and, therefore, it cannot result in the acceptability of *any* definition. We can reconstruct Obama’s reasoning as follows:

Common knowledge	The accepted meaning of ‘hostilities’ is «overt act of warfare».
RULE	<i>The congressmen should know (be committed to) the meaning of “hostilities” (P) whenever such a word is used with its commonly accepted meaning, or when the speaker redefined it supporting it by reasons (C) (unless the interlocutor does not master the language, belongs to a different culture or community, etc.). (D)</i>
FACT	The commonly accepted definition of ‘hostilities’ is «overt act of warfare». (C)
EXCEPTION	It is not the case that the audience does not know the language or belongs to a different community of speaker (or culture). (non-D)
CONCLUSION:	<i>The audience should know that ‘hostilities’ means «presence of land troops and sustained fighting». (P)</i>

Table 8. Reconstruction of Obama’s redefinition of ‘hostilities’.

In this case, the crucial problem was not the absence of a definition of “hostilities”, but its contrary, the presupposition made by Obama of its existence and sharedness. Obama takes for granted not only that a specific definition exists, but also that such a definition conflicting with the common knowledge is accepted by everybody.<sup>3</sup> The mischievous nature of the move lies in presenting as accepted a proposition incompatible with the accepted one, shifting the burden of disproving it onto the addressees.

The effect of a presumption of meaning is much greater when a concept is “essentially contested” (Gallie 1956). Concepts such as “art”, “freedom”, “peace” or “democracy” are vague and controversial, and admit of borderline cases that cannot be clearly classified. For these reasons, there can be

3 See the commonly accepted definition of ‘hostilities’ at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hostilities> (last retrieved on 3 December 2012).

different definitions for the same concept. “Peace” belongs to this category of controversial and contested concepts. However, usually all definitions (etymological, by description, by qualitative parts) share one fundamental generic feature, absence of conflict. If we analyze Obama’s redefinition of “peace” in his Nobel Prize address, we can notice that presupposes a redefinition by means of a twofold move. First, he introduces a difference of the commonly accepted genus “absence of visible conflict”, stating that it shall “be based on inherent rights and dignity [...] economic security and opportunity”. Then, he implicitly replaces the genus, without providing any reason, claiming that “true peace is *not just freedom from fear*, but freedom from want”. He presupposes that the second sequence replaces the accepted meaning; however, the very definition he is arguing against presupposes a new genus for peace, “freedom”, instead of “absence of conflict”. The underlying presumptive reasoning proceeds as follows:

Common knowledge	The accepted meaning of ‘peace’ is «absence of conflict».
RULE	<i>The interlocutor should know (be committed to) the meaning of ‘peace’ (P) whenever such a word is used with its commonly accepted meaning, or when the speaker redefined it supporting it by reasons (C) (unless the interlocutor does not master the language, belongs to a different culture or community, etc.). (D)</i>
FACT	The commonly accepted definition of ‘peace’ is «absence of conflict»; the contextually accepted one is its partial redefinition by the speaker: «absence of conflict based rights and opportunities (based on freedom from want)...». (C)
EXCEPTION	It is not the case that the audience does not know the language or belongs to a different community of speaker (or culture). (non-D)
CONCLUSION:	<i>The audience should know that ‘peace’ means ‘a kind of freedom.’ (P).</i>

Table 9. Reconstruction of Obama’s redefinition of ‘peace’.

The conclusion of the presumptive reasoning does not follow from the premises. In fact, it actually contradicts them. Obama redefines an essentially controversial concept and shifts the burden of proof onto the audience. By presuming the acceptability of his definition, he leads a possible opponent to disprove it by providing a more accepted alternative, which cannot be easily done.

The analysis of presupposition as presumptive meaning shows the boundaries of implicit redefinition (or rather persuasive definition) in terms



of reasonableness of the presumptive reasoning on which their implicit dimension is based. Moreover, the description of presuppositions as presumptions underscores another crucial effect of implicit redefinitions, the dialectical effect of shifting the burden of proof. Following Walton and Krabbe's dialectical models (1995), we can represent a verbal exchange as an alteration of the agents' commitment store, which contains all the statements that the participant has conceded or accepted during the course of the dialogue. In a dialogue not all the commitments are explicit. The interlocutors can interact because they share the definitions of the words used, the rules of the dialogue, procedures and encyclopedic knowledge regarding the place where they are. Some of these "dark-side" commitments (Walton & Krabbe 1995: 11) are the outcome of previous dialogues, and represent the propositions that the interlocutors have accepted or stated. In a dialogue, presuppositions are implicit activations of dark side commitments (see Corblin 2002): they refer to propositions already accepted by the parties to move the commitments further. Presupposing unshared propositions is a twofold dialectical strategy. On the one hand, presuppositions are commitments: presupposing an unshared proposition means committing the hearer to a view that he or she never accepted, and that has to be denied in order to be deleted from the commitment store. On the other hand, presuppositions are the conclusions of implicit presumptive reasoning, and therefore their denial needs to be supported by an argument that rebuts the presumption.

## 7. Conclusion

Implicit redefinitions can be crucial and dangerous instruments of persuasion and manipulation. Stevenson underscored how they can be used to redirect emotions and affect judgments and decisions. By modifying the meaning of a word that triggers positive or negative judgments, the speaker can influence the hearer's perception and evaluation of a state of affairs, and alter his course of action. However, on the one hand redefinitions are not inherently deceptive or fallacious; on the contrary, since they are often necessary. On the other hand, since there are no unique, immutable and universally shared definitions, the risks of definitional relativism and complete freedom of

redefining and manipulating concepts seem inevitable. In this paper the problem of redefinition is investigated from an argumentative and pragmatic perspective.

Redefinitions are analyzed as condensed arguments advanced by explicit and implicit speech acts. Like any other viewpoint or premise in an argument, it needs to be open to criticism if not shared. Implicit redefinitions can be considered as strategies to take a controversial proposition for granted, treating a definition that cannot be agreed upon as shared. Presupposition has been investigated as a form of speech act grounded on the fundamental conditions that the presupposed proposition needs to be *possibly reconstructed* by and *acceptable* to the hearer. However, how is it possible to know the other's mind? How is it possible to know that the interlocutor can retrieve and accept a proposition?

The possible answer suggested in this paper is grounded on the idea of assessing presuppositions taking into consideration the reasonableness of the presumptive reasoning on which they are based. By presupposing, the speaker acts on a reasonable and justified guess on the interlocutor's knowledge. The reasonableness of his act depends on reasoning in lack of evidence, based on what is commonly considered to be the case. Interpreting presuppositions as forms of presumptions, we can draw a line between reasonable and mischievous uses of implicit definitions. There is nothing wrong in taking for granted a definition presumably accepted. However, the act of presupposing a redefinition, namely a description of the meaning of a concept that is *known* to be *non-shared*, amounts to ground the discourse move on a pragmatic contradiction. A new and unshared definition is presented and treated as commonly accepted. This move shifts the burden of proof onto the hearer, who needs to rebut a viewpoint that has never been supported by arguments.

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