

The Acts and Strategies of Defining

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Summary

Definitions are not simply descriptions of meaning. They are acts that have different purposes and conditions. They can be dialogical tools for altering and sometimes manipulating the hearers' commitments. They can be rhetorical instruments that can lead the interlocutor to a specific decision. The concept of persuasive definition captures the rhetorical dimension of the definitions of specific words, called "emotive". By modifying their meaning or the hierarchy of values that they are associated with, the speaker can redirect the interlocutor's attitudes towards a situation. From a pragmatic perspective, the meaning of a word can be described in different fashions, and be the content of different types of speech acts. Not only can the speaker remind the audience of a shared meaning, or stipulate or advance a new one; he can also perform definitional acts by omitting definitions, or taking them for granted. These silent acts are potentially mischievous, as they can be used to manipulate what the interlocutors are dialogically bound to, altering the burden of proof. The implicit redefinition represents the most powerful tactic for committing the interlocutor to a meaning that he has not agreed upon, nor that can he accept.

Key words: Definition; emotive language; persuasion strategies; speech act; implicit definition

1. Introduction

Aristotle defined the notion of definition (*horismos*) as a discourse, or an expression (*logos*) signifying what a thing is, or rather, its essence (*Topics*, 101b 31; Chiba, 2010) by indicating its genus and its difference. However, he then pointed out that there can be other types of "discourses" (apart from the genus-difference one) that fall under the same branch of inquiry as definitions, as they are aimed at tackling questions of sameness and difference, and they can be referred to as "definitory". Such expressions describe the concept by setting out some of its accidents or properties that can uniquely (absolutely or in a given context) identify the *definiendum*.

In addition to their role as propositions that can establish a true or false (or rather an acceptable or unacceptable) equivalence between definiens and *definiendum*, the definitory expressions have a pragmatic and dialogical dimension. Definitions are moves in a dialogue, aimed at achieving specific dialogical purposes. We can use definitions to inform the interlocutor of what a word means, or to stipulate or impose a new meaning of a term. We can propose a definition and support it with arguments, or we can commit ourselves to use a word with a specific signification. We can also omit definitions, and use words with different, unaccepted or unacceptable meanings. When we define we perform an action. The semantic equivalence that we express is always directed to a pragmatic goal. Defining is always a form of action.

This pragmatic dimension is strictly related with a strategic, or rather argumentative one. Words can be extremely powerful instruments. Terms like "war" or "peace", "security" or "terrorism" can trigger evaluative conclusions, support implicit or explicit decisions, and arouse emotions (Stevenson, 1937). These words are implicit arguments and tacit rhetorical strategies. However, they have a potentially fallacious dimension, essentially connected with their definition, or rather their commonly accepted meaning. When wars become "acts of freedom" (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006: 1) and bombings pacific operations, when dictatorships are named "democracies" and torture is referred to as a civil offense, the boundaries of semantic vagueness and definitional freedom are somehow exceeded, and words are used not to describe reality, but to distort it. The distinction between a reasonable and acceptable use of a word and manipulation lies in the notion of definition and the conditions of defining or redefining.

If the idea of an essential, immutable definition cannot be embraced (Sager, 2000: 217; Walton, 2005: 169–173), the alternative seems to be a relativistic approach (Schiappa, 2003). The impossibility of determining an immutable meaning leads to the impossibility of verifying any definitory discourse, and therefore to the equivalence between any definition. How is it possible to identify when words are used as weapons of deceit? Is it always possible to define any word, anyhow?

The purpose of this paper is to tackle the problem of the conditions of defining from a pragmatic perspective, starting not from the propositional aspect of the definitional *logos*, but from its role as a move in a discourse, as a speech act. If definitional statements cannot be verified, definitional acts can be assessed taking into consideration their conditions and their limits.

2. Definitions as Argumentative Instruments

The first crucial aspect of definitions is the argumentative role of the *definiendum*. Words have the power of affecting our emotions and influencing our decisions. Terms such as *war* or *terrorism* are usually judged negatively, and can be used to arouse negative emotions or elicit negative judgments concerning the state of affairs they are used to refer to. For this reason, the act of naming a fragment of reality can be considered as a form of condensed argument made of two reasoning dimensions: a classification of reality and a value judgment.

Stevenson first underlined this twofold aspect of the use of a word when he investigated the terms that he called “ethical” or emotive. He noted that some words, such as “peace” or “war”, are not simply used to describe reality, namely to modify the cognitive reaction of the interlocutor. They have also the power of directing the interlocutors’ attitudes and suggesting a course of action. For this reason, they evoke a different kind of reaction, emotive in nature. As Stevenson put it (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 1937: 23; Stevenson, 1938a: 334–335; Stevenson, 1938b: 49–50), to lead the hearer towards a decision by affecting his system of interests (Stevenson, 1944: 210). Stevenson distinguished these two types of correlation between the use of a word (a stimulus) and its possible psychological effects on the addressee (the cognitive and the emotive reaction) by labeling them as “descriptive meaning” and “emotive meaning” (Stevenson, 1944: 54). Because of this twofold dimension, the redefinition of ethical words becomes an instrument of persuasion, a tool for redirecting preferences and emotions (Stevenson, 1944: 210):

Ethical definitions involve a wedding of descriptive and emotive meaning, and accordingly have a frequent use in redirecting and intensifying attitudes. To choose a definition is to plead a cause, so long as the word defined is strongly emotive.

The two crucial strategies for “redirecting and intensifying” attitudes are the persuasive definition and the quasi-definition. Quasi-definitions consist in the modification of the emotive meaning of a word without altering the descriptive one. The speaker can quasi-define a word by qualifying the *definiendum* (or rather describing its referent) without setting forth what actually the term means. The definitions provided by the famous Devil’s dictionary mostly consist in this tactic. For instance, we can consider the following account of “peace” (Bierce, 2000: 179):

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

Here, the speaker is not describing the meaning of “peace”, but how a peaceful period of time *should* be considered. The outcome is that a concept usually evaluated positively is turned into one bound to the negative idea of deception.

The other tactic of redefinition of ethical words is called persuasive definition. The emotive meaning, namely the evaluative component associated with a concept, is left unaltered while the descriptive meaning, which determines its extension, is modified. In this fashion, imprisonment can become “true freedom” (Huxley, 1955: 122), and massacres “pacification” (Orwell, 1946). Persuasive definitions can change or distort the meaning while keeping the original evaluations that the use of a word evokes. A famous example is the following redefinition of “peace”, or rather, “true peace” (Barack Obama, *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address Oslo*, Norway December 10, 2009):

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. Peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please; choose their own leaders or assemble without fear. 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.

While retaining its original positive emotive meaning, “peace” is not referring anymore to absence of conflict, but also to specific war operations. However, how can these two dimensions be described? How is it possible to analyze these two different types of meaning? A possible answer can be found in examining them from a reasoning perspective.

3. Arguments in Words

The relationship between descriptive and emotive meaning and the role of definition in redirecting attitudes can be analyzed from an argumentative perspective. The concept of meaning can be accounted for as a form of reasoning that proceeds from a definition to a classification of an entity, or from values and properties to a value judgment. The emotive and the descriptive meaning can be seen as two different steps of reasoning, aimed at attributing to objects, individuals or state of affairs a name or an evaluation.

3.1. Describing Reality

Descriptive meaning was investigated by Stevenson in terms of effects on the hearer. The cognitive effect, or rather the information that the interlocutor can obtain from the use of a word, can be explained in terms of reasoning, and in particular through the process of attributing a predicate to a subject. The most generic form of reasoning describing this mechanism is an abstract structure of argument combining the semantic relation of “classification” (Crothers, 1979; Hobbs, 1979: 68; Hobbs, 1985) with the logical rule of defeasible *modus ponens* (Walton, 1996: 54):

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

The generic semantic relation needs to be specified by taking into consideration some of the ancient maxims related to the topics of definition (Stump, 1989; Green-Pedersen, 1984). The passage from the predicate stated in the antecedent to the one attributed in the consequent needs to be grounded on a definitional semantic relation (Walton and Macagno, 2008), which

concerns any issue of identity and difference between two predicates (Aristotle, *Topics* 102a, 5–9). This type of argument can be represented as follows (Walton and Macagno, 2010: 39):

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

As pointed out by Aristotle, the concept of definitional discourse includes different types of equivalences, of which the strongest and most famous is the definition by genus and difference. However, the same concept can be defined using other definitory statements. For instance, “peace” can be defined by its absolute or relative properties (“the state of well-being that is characterized by trust, compassion, and justice”), by parts (“the union of hot peace and cold peace”), or by its cause (“a pattern of cooperation and integration between major human groups”). There are also other types of definition that are not used to explain the meaning of the concept defined, but especially to communicate a judgment on it, such as the definition by metaphor (“peace is a gentle breeze”).

Argument from classification and the different types of definitions that can be used for different purposes can provide an explanation from an argumentative perspective to the phenomenon of descriptive meaning. The other dimension of meaning, the emotive one, can be accounted for by considering another form of classification, not aimed at naming reality, but rather at evaluating it. This pattern of reasoning proceeds from a different type of classificatory principles: values.

3.2. Argumentation from Values

According to Stevenson, emotive meaning is the propensity of a word to encourage actions. However, this type of “meaning” is connected with a specific form of reasoning that is based on propositions forming the grounds of our value judgments. This relationship emerges when it is attacked through the use of quasi-definitions. Using a quasi-definition, the speaker can undermine the implicit and automatic association between a concept and its evaluation. He needs to provide an argument rejecting the grounds of a shared value judgment; for this reason, he describes the referent appealing to values contrary to the ones commonly associated with such a concept. For instance, we can consider the following quasi-definition taken from Casanova’s *Fuga dai Piombi*. The speaker, Mr. Soradaci, tries to convince his interlocutor (Casanova) that being a sneak is an honorable behavior (Casanova, 1911: 112)²⁸:

I have always despised the prejudice that attaches to the name “spy” a hateful meaning: this name sounds bad only to the ears of who hates the Government. A sneak is just a friend of the good of the State, the plague of the crooks, the faithful servant of his Prince.

This quasi-definition underscores a fundamental dimension of the “emotive” meaning of a word, its relationship with the shared values, which are attacked as “prejudices”. This account given by the spy shows how the emotive meaning can be modified by describing the referent based on a different hierarchy of values. The value of trust is not denied, but simply placed in a hierarchy where the highest worth is given to the State.

²⁸ “Ho sempre disprezzato il pregiudizio che conferisce un odioso significato al nome di spia: questo nome non suona male che alle orecchie di chi non ama il Governo: uno spione non è altro che un amico del bene dello stato, il flagello dei delinquenti, il fedel suddito del suo Principe.”

The relationship between the use of a word, its meaning and the 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. Values can be thought of as the reasons for classifying something as desirable or not, and, therefore, for judging the action aimed at achieving it as worthy or not. By describing an entity or a state of affairs as valuable, namely indicating the values that can be used to assess it, the speaker can provide the interlocutor with a reason to act in a specific fashion. 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 and Macagno, 2008: 321):

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

For instance, the action of spying, or the quality of being a “sneak” can be classified as contemptible or hateful based on the classifying principle (value) that can be expressed as follows: “Who betrays the trust of another is a bad (contemptible...) person.” On the contrary, Soradaci rejects such a principle and advances a different hierarchy of values: supporting the good of the State is the supreme good; therefore, whoever betrays another for the good of the State is a good person.

This type of reasoning is grounded on a judgment, which becomes a reason to carry out a specific action. Values represent the different ways and principles that are used to establish what is good or bad. In its turn, the moral judgment becomes a reason to act. 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*, 1113a15), as “everything aims at the good” (*Topics*, 116a 18). For instance, an “act of war” is usually regarded as negative, and naming an operation as such can become a reason for criticizing it. On the other hand, an “act of peace”, or a humanitarian intervention leads to an opposite judgment, and suggests a different course of action. Similarly, in the case above, a “sneak” is not only despised, but cannot be trusted. Despite Soradaci’s strenuous defence of the spies, Casanova cannot ignore his previous hierarchy of values, and for this reason he cannot trust him. On the contrary, he lies to him all the time.

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). The grounds can be provided by the simple positivity or negativity of a course of action, or the presumption of continuity of a person’s negative or positive behavior (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1951). Depending on whether the speaker is assessing a specific course of action or considering a goal, the type of reasoning can have different forms. The first and simpler form of argument is the argument from consequences (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 brought about.

For instance, if a sneak usually betrays friends, trusting a sneak can probably lead to betrayal. Since betrayal is a negative outcome, a sneak should not be trusted. Similarly, the classification of an operation as humanitarian or an act of peace underscores its peaceful consequences, suggesting to the interlocutor to support it.

The other form of reasoning, called practical reasoning, is more complex, as it proceeds from a value to the means that can possibly 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.

This argument is frequently used to justify a potentially objectionable decision by highlighting a hierarchy of values. For instance, war is despicable, but when it is the only means to free people from a dictatorship it can be seen as positive. Similarly, lying is contemptible, but if it is the only way to avoid betrayal, it becomes a justified course of action.

4. The Acts of Defining

Redefinitions can be extremely powerful and sometimes dangerous instruments. By modifying the definition of a word, the speaker can alter the interlocutor's perception and evaluation of reality. He can distort reality and the appraisal thereof. However, definitions and redefinitions are extremely common moves, often necessary for clarifying new or obscure concepts or highlighting some of their dimensions. The crucial problem lies in the identification of a criterion for distinguishing deceitful definitional moves from the non-fallacious or simply persuasive ones. As noticed above, not only are there several definitions for the same *definiendum*, but there are also different ways of defining the same concept. In order to analyze the boundaries of definitions and redefinitions, it is necessary to shift from a propositional to a pragmatic level. Definitions can be fallacious or acceptable because they are acts, moves in a discourse. Definitions can have different purposes: they can be instruments for informing, imposing a meaning, or advancing a viewpoint. Accordingly, they are subject to different pragmatic conditions.

4.1. Definitions as reminders

In his *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address*, Obama needed to argue in favor of an extremely complex position: the president of a state engaged in different wars all over the world should be considered as the clearest champion of peace. In order to support this claim, at the beginning of his speech he underscores a fundamental principle that his audience should be acquainted with: wars can be justified. For this purpose, he reminds his audience of the concept and meaning of "just war" (Barack Obama, *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address* Oslo, Norway December 10, 2009):

Definition as a piece of information or a reminder: "peace"

The concept of a "just war" emerged, suggesting that war is justified only when it meets certain preconditions: if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional, and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence. [...]What I do know is that meeting these challenges will require the same vision, hard work, and persistence of those men and women who acted so boldly decades ago. And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace.

Obama is not advancing a new claim, but bringing to light a commitment that is or should be shared by his interlocutors. Definitions of basic cultural concepts need to be known by a community of speakers. By underscoring the ancient origin of “just war”, Obama is making sure that its definition is part of the audience’s common ground. In this fashion, he reinforces the hearer’s commitment to such a concept, or rather he undermines the objectionability thereof. He reminds and informs the audience that the idea that wars (and in particular the ones waged or fought by the United States) can be justified cannot be considered as controversial. We can represent the structure of this act of defining as follows (Searle and Vanderveken, 2005: 129):

Table 1
Defining for Reminding—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker’s commitments	Hearer’s commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Informing (Hearer; Commitment to <i>p</i>).	<i>p</i> represents a state of affairs / judgment / decision.	<i>S</i> has grounds supporting that <i>H</i> is/should be committed to / knows <i>p</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>H</i> is / should be committed to <i>p</i>. • <i>H</i> knows / should know <i>p</i>. 	<i>S</i> is committed to <i>H</i> ’s <i>Comm. to p</i> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge <i>Comm. to p</i>. • Reject (<i>Comm. to p</i>) based on reasons.
<i>Just war is a war that is justified when some preconditions are met.</i>	Meaning of “just war.”	People are presumed to know what is generally shared. Authorities in the past defined it.			The interlocutors cannot ignore the definition. The interlocutors need to accept it or show that it is not shared.

By reminding the audience of a definition, the speaker can take advantage of the presumption that the definition is, or should be, already part of the interlocutors’ commitments. The burden of proof is shifted onto the hearers, who need to show that such a definition cannot be considered as part of the common ground.

4.2. Definitions as Standpoints

Definitions can be used to advance a new meaning for a concept, or simply propose the existence of a new or more specific one. In this case, the speaker is not presuming that the meaning described is shared. On the contrary, he acknowledges that it is not part of the interlocutors’ common ground, and for this reason he accepts the burden of proving it, or supporting it with arguments. A clear example can be found in the same *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address* mentioned above. Obama splits the notion of peace into two concepts, a “true peace”, amounting to a status characterized by the “inherent rights and dignity of every individual” and a “false” one, which corresponds only to the commonly shared definition of “absence of visible conflict”. In order to support his standpoint, Obama underscores that only the first one can be lasting (Barack Obama, *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Address* Oslo, Norway December 10, 2009):

Definition as a standpoint: “peace”

For peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. Only a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting. [...]

This type of move can be described as a kind of a speech act of assertion, which commits the speaker to defending it if requested to do so (Houtlosser, 2001: 32). This condition can be shown in the following dialectical profile, pointing out its different components and requirements.

Table 2
Definitions as Standpoints—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker's commitments	Hearer's commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Advancing as a standpoint (<i>p</i>).	<i>p</i> represents a judgment / proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> believes that <i>H</i> does not (already, at face value, completely) accept <i>p</i>. • <i>S</i> believes that he can justify <i>p</i> for <i>H</i> with the help of arguments. 	<i>H</i> is not committed to <i>p</i> (already, at face value, completely).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> is committed to <i>p</i>. • <i>S</i> is committed to defend <i>p</i>. • <i>S</i> is committed to the fact <i>p</i> may be not accepted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept (<i>p</i>). • Question (<i>p</i>). • Reject (<i>p</i>). • Advance (<i>non-p</i>).
<i>peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. [...]</i> <i>true peace is based upon the inherent rights and dignity.</i>	Definition of "peace".	(Obama takes for granted that the shared definition of peace is "absence of visible conflict.")	(<i>H</i> is committed to the definition of peace as "absence of visible conflict.")	Obama supports the definition with an argument (<i>it is the only peace that is truly lasting</i>).	

In his discourse, Obama encourages his audience to replace the definition they are committed to with the new one. He provides reasons to believe that the ordinary account of peace is not sufficient, and proposes a different view whose positivity he highlights by marking it as the "true" one.

4.3. Definitions as Commitments

As seen above, the definition-reminder represents a previous or presumptive commitment of the interlocutor, while a definition advanced as a standpoint presupposes that such an account of meaning is, or can be, not shared. Definitions can be also used to bind the speaker to a commitment, playing the role of a commissive, a type of promise that he makes to his interlocutor. A clear example can be found in Obama's Inaugural Address (*In a Dark Valley: Barack Obama's Inaugural Address*), where the U.S. President does not explain nor propose a new meaning, but commits himself to a specific use of a crucial term²⁹:

Definition as a commitment: "We-ness"

²⁹ *Prelude to an Inaugural*. (Retrieved from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/KA15Aa02.html on 26 August 2012).

We—and in this presidency, when I use that word, I will mean you and me, not the royal "we" to which American presidents have become far too attached—we can, I think, hope to accomplish much, but only if we're honest with ourselves.

Obama uses the definition of the pronoun “we” to commit himself to using it with a specific, strategic meaning. He distinguishes two uses, corresponding to two classes of people: the *pluralis maiestatis*, used by his predecessors, and the ordinary meaning, which he commits himself to. The definition constitutes a promise of refusing the “royal we”, and mirrors and shows a political attitude where the people become an active part of the President’s decisions and choices. The definition becomes a metaphor of his political behavior, to which he commits. This act of defining can be represented as follows:

Table 3
Defining for Committing—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker’s commitments	Hearer’s commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Committing to (<i>p</i>).	<i>p</i> represents a future course of action (<i>A</i>).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> is not committed to <i>p</i>. • <i>S</i> normally should not be committed to <i>p</i>. 	<i>H</i> knows that <i>S</i> is not committed to <i>p</i> .	• <i>S</i> is committed to <i>p</i> .	• <i>H</i> knows that <i>S</i> is committed to <i>p</i> .
<i>when I use that word [“we”], I will mean you and me, not the royal “we”.</i>	Future use of the pronoun “we”.	Usually presidents use the pronoun “we” as a <i>pluralis maiestatis</i> .	The audience expects the pronoun to be used as a <i>pluralis maiestatis</i> .	Obama shall use the pronoun meaning “you and me”.	The audience will interpret the pronoun as meaning “you and me”.

The committing definition inserts the obligation to use a word with a certain meaning into the speaker’s commitment store, not affecting the interlocutor’s one. This type of definition is extremely strategic, as it imposes a language use commitment onto the speaker, but at the same time binds the interlocutor to a specific interpretation of the word. Without imposing the meaning of a term, the speaker imposes how it shall be interpreted in his discourse.

4.4. Stipulative Definitions

Definitions can be used for imposing a new meaning. The speaker can stipulate (Robinson, 1950: 59; Leonard, 1967: 286; see also Viskil, 1995) what a word means, so that a commitment is inserted into the speaker’s and the hearer’s commitment stores. He is binding the interlocutor to a specific word use. In order to perform this act, the definer needs to have the authority to do so. For instance, this definitional move is characteristic of lawmakers, as they have the authority of deciding what the words in the laws mean. Stipulative definitions can be used to alter the meaning of a commonly shared word, so that the implications of the old use are associated with new referents (Schiappa, 1998: 31). For instance, the concept of “homeland security” was first introduced and defined in 2002 to refer to measures against terroristic attacks. However, in 2007 and 2010 it was redefined to ensure that the same exceptional measures were used also to prevent other types of threats. In order to deal with some emergencies, among which was the hurricane Katrina, proposals for a definitional change were advanced to include “*man-made and natural hazards*” (see Bellavita, 2008),

until in 2011 a new definition was stipulated (*Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report*, February 2010: 13)³⁰:

Imposing a redefinition “homeland security”

Homeland security is meant to connote a concerted, shared effort to ensure a homeland that is safe, secure, and resilient against terrorism and other hazards where American interests, aspirations, and way of life can thrive.

The implications of the old concept were kept (if something threatens homeland security, exceptional measures shall be taken), but the category of threats to homeland security was enlarged to include also cyber-terrorism. In this fashion, a prompt response to new types of dangers was guaranteed. We can represent the speech act of imposing a definition as follows:

Table 4
Stipulative Definitions—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker’s commitments	Hearer’s commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Imposing (declaring) (<i>p</i>).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>p</i> represents a state of affairs (SoA). • The SoA represented by <i>p</i> is not an actual or past one. • The SoA can be the case. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> knows that <i>H</i> is not committed to <i>p</i>. • <i>S</i> holds the authority to impose a new state of affairs. 	<i>H</i> is not committed to <i>p</i> .	• <i>S</i> is committed to <i>p</i> .	• <i>H</i> is committed to <i>p</i> .
<i>Homeland security is a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur.</i>	Definition of “homeland security”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Office of Homeland Security and the President have the authority to define. • The definition of “homeland security” is new. 	(<i>H</i> is committed to a previous definition of “homeland security”).	The Office of Homeland Security shall deal with environmental problems.	The offices and responsible for the environmental disasters shall refer to the Office of Homeland Security.

The act of stipulating a new definition can be carried out in order to introduce ambiguities. For instance, the concept of security triggers specific inferences because of its old military meaning. The redefinition creates a coexistence of meanings, so that the conclusions usually supported by the old one are also drawn when the newly defined word is used.

5. The Acts of Non-Defining

Usually actions are associated with the “state or process of doing something.” As seen above, verbal actions are performed in order to bring about specific conversational effects. However, the agent can cause intentionally some effects also by failing to perform a specific activity.

³⁰ www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/qhsr_report.pdf (Retrieved on August 27, 2012).

For instance, the so called “code of silence” results in criminals being not prosecuted. In law, omissions are defined in terms of the duties to act, as breaches of an affirmative duty to perform the omitted actions (Glanville, 1983: 148–149; Fusco, 2008: 86). However, outside the codified domain of law the concept of omission can become more complex to define. Omission can be regarded as an act of a kind where the agent decides not to perform an action that was sufficient for the occurrence of a specific consequence at a later time (Aqvist, 1974; Chisholm, 1976; Walton, 1980: 317). In this sense, an omission is characterized by a deliberate decision to leave open the possibility of the occurrence of a specific state of affairs. For instance, the omission to report a crime does not prevent the authorities from being informed of prosecuting it. However, such a non-action leaves this possibility open by a deliberate choice.

Definitions can represent the propositional content of two different types of non-acts: the act of omitting a definition and the act of taking it for granted. While in the first case the speaker fails to provide a needed definition, in the second case he uses a word with a specific meaning, but omits the act of putting it forward. By deciding not to advance or to impose the definition he is using, he takes it for granted, performing a specific tacit act.

5.1. Omitted Definitions

Definitions set out the conditions for the classification of a concept. The crucial importance of a definition emerges especially in the case in which it is lacking. The speaker may decide not to define a concept, so that he is not committed to any specific account of its meaning. For instance, with the amendment 1034 to the US Code, a new meaning of “armed conflict” was stipulated, in which the boundaries of this concept set out by the Geneva Conventions (Article 1 of Additional Protocol II—Geneva Convention 1949) were extended to include also operations against terrorists and the supporters thereof. However, this amendment mentions two concepts whose meaning cannot be the same as the ordinary one (emphasis added):

Omitted definitions: “Belligerents” and “Hostilities”

(4) the President's authority pursuant to the Authorization for Use of Military Force (Public Law 107–40; 50 U.S.C. 1541 note) includes the authority to detain *belligerents*, including persons described in paragraph (3), until the termination of *hostilities*.

In this definition the words “belligerent” and “hostilities” are not defined, even though their meaning cannot correspond to the ordinary one after the extended definition of “armed conflict”. In 2009 “hostilities” was first defined as “any conflict subject to the laws of war.” (10 U.S.C. § 948a 9). However, in the aforementioned stipulative redefinition of “armed conflict” the idea of “hostilities” could not be governed by the laws of war, as armed conflicts against terrorists cannot fall within the definition that is shared all over the world. Similarly, “belligerents” cannot be simply limited to soldiers, as the new category of “war” encompasses also terrorism and non-ordinary conflicts. The legislators omitted to define such terms, and the result was that a classificatory freedom was introduced, which could allow the extension of security measures, such as interrogation and detention, also to suspected terrorists³¹.

As mentioned above, omissions are deliberate non-actions, where the agent decides not to provide what is requested or needed in order to achieve a specific effect. The definition that is deliberately not mentioned is known not to be shared, and the effects of such an omission are known by the (non-) speaker. One of the clearest cases of this relationship between omission and its effects is the lack of the definition of “torture” in the Russian and

³¹ See for instance the proposal of introducing the “enemy belligerent act in *Enemy Belligerent Interrogation, Detention, and Prosecution Act of 2010*. (Retrieved from <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/s3081> on August 24, 2012)

Armenian Criminal Codes. The Russian and Armenian governments were requested to define such a crucial term in order to curb the violence denounced by Amnesty International and other international Authorities (CAT/C/34/Add.15, 15 October 2001, art. 1 (4), p. 3; CAT/C/SR.246, 1996; EUR 54/02/00, April 2000, par. 2). Such governments knew the effects of the absence of a definition, which allowed them to avoid prosecuting crimes of torture by categorizing them as “violations of professional discipline.”³² Moreover, they had any power to comply with the request of the United Nations. The structure of the act of omitting a definition can be understood from the cases mentioned above and represented as in table 5.

The omission of the definition of “torture” clearly differs from the non-definition of “hostility” and “belligerent”. In the first case the speaker’s commitment to the speech act of defining (or refusing to do it) results from an explicit act (request). In other cases, the commitment can derive from an institutional (legal) or a communicative rule, “avoid ambiguity.” In both cases, the speaker is aware of the requirement (or expectation) and deliberately refuses to comply with it, knowing its effects. The omission of a definition leads to a specific effect: the possibility of implicitly redefining the *definiendum*, or rather using it

Table 5
Omitted Definitions—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker’s commitments	Hearer’s commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Omitting (a speech act - <i>Fp</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fp</i> represents a dialogical move. • <i>Fp</i> can be performed by <i>S</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> has the commitment to perform <i>Fp</i> (<i>CFp</i>). • <i>CFp</i> results from an institutional or social obligation. • <i>S</i> knows that <i>non-Fp</i> causes effect <i>E</i>. • <i>S</i> knows that <i>Fp</i> is necessary to avoid <i>E</i>. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>S</i> is not committed to <i>Fp</i>. • <i>S</i> is not committed to <i>refuse(Fp)</i>. • <i>S</i> is not committed to <i>E</i>. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>H</i>’s dialogical situation has been altered (<i>E</i>).
Omission of the definition of “torture”.	Russian (Armenian) governments had the power to define “torture”.	Russia and Armenia were requested to define “torture” and blamed for not doing it.		Russia (Armenia) are not committed to a specific meaning of “torture”.	The category of “torture” can be applied arbitrarily.

with new unshared meanings. This latter move can be considered as a distinct act of a kind, the act of implicitly defining.

5.2. Implicit definitions

The omissions of definitions are strategic moves as they do not prevent vagueness or ambiguity; on the contrary, they can introduce them. The absence of a definition leaves open the possibility of defining or redefining a concept. More importantly, the lack of an explicit

³² *Torture in Russia: "This man-made hell"*. AI Index: EUR 46/04/97. Amnesty International April 1997 (pp. 28–29). (Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR46/004/1997/en> on 21 September 2011)

description of a word meaning allows the speaker to stipulate it implicitly. The speaker can take advantage of a controversial concept, not explicitly defined, and use it with a new, unshared definition. In this fashion he simply takes its definition for granted; and treats it as it were already part of the community's common knowledge.

One of the most famous cases is the implicit redefinition of "hostility" used by Obama to classify the American intervention in Libya. In order to avoid requesting the Congress' authorization to continue the hostilities (*War Powers Resolution*, sec. 5b, Public Law 93-148), the President needed to exclude the bombings in Libya from the boundaries of the concept of "hostilities." He took advantage of the absence of its definition in the War Powers Resolution Act (*US Code* 1541). The vagueness of the boundaries of "hostilities" allowed Obama to redefine it to exclude the American strikes in Libya. He did not advance or impose any new meaning. He simply used the term claiming that it could only refer to ground troop intervention, sustained fighting and exchanges of fire. He presupposed a tacit definition from which airstrikes were excluded, let alone when carried out by unmanned aircraft (*Obama Administration letter to Congress justifying Libya engagement*, June 15, 2011: 25)³³:

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.

Here Obama is not performing any explicit act of defining, nor is he rejecting or attacking the shared one. He is just taking such definition for granted (Macagno 2012). He presupposes that "hostility" means only "active fighting by ground troops", contrary to any accepted definition of the term under the US laws or military dictionaries.

Through his implicit act, Obama imposes a new meaning without being committed to any stipulation or any definitional standpoint. His tacit act binds the speaker and the audience to a specific commitment, i.e., that "hostility" meant *only* "active fighting by ground troops". Searle and Vanderveken provided a generic rule from indirect speech acts that can be used to describe this kind of implicit speech act performed through the use of the presupposed definition for classifying the bombings in Libya (Searle and Vanderveken, 2005: 130). On their view, the assertion of a classification ($F_i(p_i)$) commits the speaker to its sincerity conditions, namely that he believes the "hostility" has the proposed meaning. However, the assertion is possible only if another act is performed ($F(p)$), consisting in the stipulation of a new meaning of such a concept. The classification commits the speaker to the illocutionary point of an implicit act, imposing that "hostility only means active fighting by ground troops". We can represent the commitment structure of this implicit act as follows:

³³ Retrieved from <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/204673/united-states-activities-in-libya-6-15-11.pdf> on 25 August 2012.

Table 6
Implicit Definitions—Dialectical Profile

Move	Content conditions	Speaker's commitments	Hearer's commitments	Effects on the speaker	Effects on the hearer
Performing (Fp) implicitly by performing F_1p_1 .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fp represents a dialogical move. • Fp can be performed by S. • The performance of Fp is a condition of the performance of F_1p_1. 	(depend on the nature of F_1p_1).	(depend on the nature of F_1p_1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • S is committed to F_1p_1. • S is not committed to the performance of Fp. • S is committed to p. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitments resulting from F_1p_1. • Commitments resulting from Fp.
<i>The war in Libya is not hostility (F_1p_1), as it does not involve sustained fighting by ground forces (F_2p_2).</i>	Obama is committed to the sincerity conditions and illocutionary point of "Hostility means active fighting by ground forces".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • S believes that H does not (already, at face value, completely) accept p_1. • S believes that he can justify p_1 for H with the help of p_2 and p. • S believes that H accepts (knows) p and p_2. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H is not committed to p_1 (already, at face value, completely). • H is committed to p_2 and p. 	Obama needs to support p_1 if requested.	H needs to attack/challenge/question p_1 or accept it.

Obama performs this move to commit himself and the interlocutors to the redefinition of "hostility". In this case, Obama could not have stipulated explicitly such a definition, as he has not the authority to do so, nor could he have advanced it, as the nature of his act of defending a standpoint requires the previous acceptance of the definition.

Obama's move is extremely powerful from a dialogical perspective. He is inserting into the interlocutors' commitment store a proposition that they could not possibly have shared (and we know this because Obama stipulated the new meaning). Moreover, contrary to the act of advancing a definition, he did not have the burden of proof here. The dialogical outcome of his move is to shift the burden of proof. The interlocutors become committed to a proposition they never accepted, and they carry the burden of rejecting this commitment. They need to prove that the definition is not part of their common ground. In this case, the Members of Congress had to prove that the definition was not the accepted one, which became extremely difficult, as there is not a legal definition of the concept in the act. Obama, instead of advancing arguments to support an extremely controversial point of view, played the defensive role, consisting in assessing the acceptability of the rebuttals. The implicit redefinition changes the dialogical roles of the participants to the discussion, shifting onto the other party the burden of disproving a controversial (and unacceptable, in this case) meaning.

6. Conclusion

Definitions are not simply descriptions of meaning. They are not only equivalences between a word and a phrase. They are rhetorical instruments that can lead the interlocutor to a specific decision. They are acts that have different purposes and conditions. They are dialogical tools for altering and manipulating the hearers' commitments. The concept of persuasive definition

underscores the rhetorical dimension of the definitions of specific words, called “emotive”. By modifying their meaning or the values that they are associated with, the speaker can redirect the interlocutor’s attitudes towards a situation. A war can become an act of peace, and thus it can be justified and praised; a felony can be presented as an act of loyalty, and thus it can be positively regarded. The meaning of a word can be described in different fashions, and be the content of different types of speech acts. The speaker can use a definition to stipulate a new meaning, or remind the audience of the shared one. However, he can perform definitional acts also by omitting definitions, or taking them for granted. These silent acts are the most dangerous and potentially mischievous ones, as they can be used to manipulate what the interlocutors are dialogically bound to, altering the burden of proof. The implicit redefinition represents the most powerful tactic for committing the interlocutor to a meaning that he has not agreed upon, nor that he can accept. The speaker thereby eludes the burden of proving an otherwise unacceptable proposition and shifts the burden of disproving it onto the interlocutor.

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