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Persuasive argumentation as a cultural practice

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author traces relations between argumentation and cultural practice. The first part focuses on definition of argumentation in the informal logic tradition. In particular, it discusses argument in terms of verbal and social activity involving the use of everyday language. The author claims that there is no argumentation beyond language. The second part explains persuasive argumentation as a form of cultural practice. The persuasive arguments found in "social practice" can be understood as a social activity, analysable within the context of a given cultural system. Author refers to an approach that takes the argumentative expression as a certain type of communicative practice, directed towards respecting, recognising or accepting specific actions. The inclusion of persuasive argumentation in the "circuit of cultural activities" to be studied makes it possible to compare this type of argumentation with other social practices, and to posit a clear historical dimension in the study of argumentation. It also makes it possible to view persuasive argumentation as one of many cultural activities aimed at changing or perpetuating behaviours, attitudes, thinking, *etc*. The third part of the paper concerns the problem of humanistic interpretation of persuasive argumentation. Author attempts to develop this intuition while at the same time demonstrating the problems that arise from this approach. In conclusion, the author tries to analyse argumentation in terms of culture theory and humanistic interpretation.

KEYWORDS

informal logic; argument as social practice; philosophy of culture; Jürgen Habermas; Jerzy Kmita

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DEFINITION OF PERSUASIVE ARGUMENTATION[1]

One of the best known definitions of argumentation sets out to define argumentation as follows:

> Argumentation is a verbal and social activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader, by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Henkemans, 1996: 1–6).

Argumentation, as understood by the authors of the above definition, is a verbal and social activity involving the use of everyday language. Thus, argumentation necessarily implies the use of language. In addition, argumentation stands for a type of social activity. Even if it is not directly active in a specific discourse with at least two participants, it is always formulated with an addressee in mind. The authors of *Fundamentals of argumentation theory* (1996), cited above, also emphasised that formulating and justifying opinions is linked to the rational justification of the thesis advanced for acceptance. Argumentation presupposes a possible rational opponent who is open to well-argued claims.

Moreover, it refers to individual opinion and expresses an individual point of view. The latter is usually stated as a conclusion. It is presupposed that there is a difference of opinion between the parties of the discourse. A thesis justified in the argumentation is, by definition, controversial, while the model the argumentation conforms to is that of a dispute in which those attempting to persuade one another to place themselves in the positions of attacker and defender.

A further feature of argumentation is that the conclusion is usually supported by a constellation of premises while the argument itself if always based on at least one premise. Another feature relates to the relationship between the stated argument and the acceptability of an opinion. The goal of argumentation is to increase the acceptability of an opinion for the audience. Finally, argumentation theory not only describes the structures and practices of argumentation, but also its final outcomes.

Argumentation theorists are interested in ways in which concrete arguments are defended and attacked in practice. The main difference between logicians and argumentation theorists is: "Argumentation theorists study the way in which people take up standpoints and defend these standpoints, whereas logicians tend to concentrate on the way in which conclusions are derived from premises" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Henkemans, 1996: 6).

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[1] The three main goals of argumentation are usually said to include: persuasion, hypothesis testing and the explanation of phenomena (Lambert & Urlich, 1980: 40–43). In this article, argumentation will be considered only in its persuasive aspect. It is worth noting that a proposition is argumentative whenever it can be reduced to the formula: 'X, and therefore Y' or 'Y, since X'.

The following areas of interest are usually distinguished in argumentation theory: formation, analysis and evaluation of argumentative discourse. At the same time, a wider view is maintained, focusing on the circumstances in which a given argument is stated. The problems addressed in argumentation theory deal with the implicit elements of argumentative discourse, argumentative structures and schemes, and the status of fallacy theory.

Specific methods of identifying argumentation include, amongst others, searching for indicator words in the argumentative utterance that allow one to identify and order the conclusion and premises. These indicator words include those indicating that the premises of an argument precede its conclusion (for example: "and therefore", "ergo", "hence, it follows that"), as well as those that indicate that the conclusion precedes the premises ("because", "as", "for", "since"). The study of the implicit elements of argumentative discourse consists, above all, of the identification of hidden premises and conclusions.

Problems related to argumentative schemes and structure belong to the group of issues linked to the standardisation of arguments. Apart from identifying premises, conclusions and indicator words, the steps involved in standardisation may also include searching for relationships between premises (premises can support a conclusion in separate, joint or composite ways). The results of this effort are represented with an argumentative diagram, which usually serves as a way of writing out complex argumentation, containing an intermediate conclusion and arguments. These attempts at description replace the structure of the Aristotelian syllogism, amongst other things.

Fallacy theory is one of the essential components of argumentation theory. Introduced into the study of argumentation by Aristotle and expounded upon in his *Topics* and *On sophistical refutations*, fallacies have also been treated in contemporary argumentation theory.

ARGUMENTATION AS A FORM OF CULTURAL PRACTICE

I assume that persuasive arguments found in "social practice" can be viewed as a social activity, analysable within the context of a given cultural system.[2] This implies an approach that tends toward describing persuasive arguments as involved in a social balance of symbolical power through which individuals strive to alter their situation.

We can specify persuasive arguments — as I argue below — by considering them within the framework of categories applied to social activity. To a large extent, these categories define ways in which meaningful activities are performed.

[2] One of my assumptions is that the term "culture" can reasonably be applied in the plural. In this particular case, I refer to the cultures of societies that employ persuasive argumentation in order to transmit values. The notion of a cultural system is explained further on.

I attempt to consider argumentation, in the form in which it interests us here (namely as a verbal activity, persuasive in nature, taking the form of an argumentative utterance), within the context of the ideal assumption that states that individuals behave according to their knowledge of the rules governing symbolic activities, while their actions can be interpreted by their reference to those rules. In other words, the argumentation we are concerned with here can be understood as a social activity, a factually occurring communicative act.

From this point of view, regardless of the assumed theory of culture, it is important that the rules in question[3] are actually in use. This means that the members of a given community apply (or have applied) these rules in practice, and that every member of the group can legitimately presume that they are known by their opponents. I am especially interested in cases where acts of understanding, based on such a system of rules, do indeed occur within groups. That is why I consider the theory of culture, and not rhetorical theory, to be the one explaining how persuasive arguments function. This is also why in the following pages I refer to an approach that sees argumentative expression as a certain type of communicative practice, directed towards respecting, recognising or accepting specific actions. In my opinion, this approach allows the problems encountered by scholars to be circumvented with a cultural studies perspective, when reading works by theorists belonging to the informal logic current, especially Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman. It also provides an opportunity to introduce theoretical concepts that are new to the study of argumentation. The inclusion of persuasive argumentation in the "circuit of cultural activities" to be studied also makes it possible to compare this type of argumentation with other social practices, and to posit a clear historical dimension in the study of argumentation. It also makes it possible to view persuasive argumentation as one of many cultural activities aimed at changing or perpetuating behaviours, attitudes, thinking, *etc*. Thanks to this, it also becomes possible to define the limits of the applicability of argumentation in communication more effectively than in the case of "informal logics" and to differentiate argumentation from other persuasive practices. This is crucial when dealing with the use of reasoning in a non-persuasive context or in actions that are persuasive but not argumentative. Moreover, placing persuasive argumentation within the context of interpretation makes it possible to take a critical approach to the cultural content and rules that it is subject to.

Persuasive arguments viewed as cultural actions have their own particular instructions. We can assume that the use of these rules can be indispensable when certain hierarchies of values are accepted by individuals or groups and are related to the strong vitality of shared values. This can be analysed in the case of *sententiae*, referring to Aristotle. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle indicates that a *sen-*

[3] Those models of human conduct which make them a regular object of study.

tentia usually relies on a certain common truth (in reference to human action). It does not pertain to individual facts and makes speech ethical. It is structured in such a way that it makes *sententiae* the premises or conclusions of a syllogism. *Sententiae*, said the Stagirite, should be used by people who can boast of certain practical experiences, practical wisdom (Arystoteles, 1988).

From this brief description of *sententiae*, we can infer not only their argumentative structure, but also their rules of use. The age of the user of the *sententiae* is also a relevant factor insofar as these rules are concerned. Since *sententiae* should be used by older people, it becomes evident that speakers with more experience will be more persuasive. This example also indicates that there can be many rules for using *sententiae*.

Sophisms (fallacies), as a part of argumentation theory and other rhetorical theories, can also be examined from the angle of interpretative rules. It would seem that the perspective hitherto assumed by studies of argumentation (within the framework of argumentation theory) entails a problem related to the definition of the role played by fallacies in argumentative practice. In the approach I present, sophisms can be treated as schemes of linguistic social activity present in some communities, which can, in argumentative practice, be viewed as distinctive procedures of persuasive linguistic action. The question remains, however, of whether the historic catalogue of arguments can be treated as an element of social practice within the framework of a specific historical and cultural setting. It seems that there is good reason to assume that the emergence (and use) of certain argumentative constructs is specific to certain times and places, based on the beliefs shared by the members of a given community as well as their access to knowledge of persuasive techniques. One example is the *ad hominem* argument: it was known in Antiquity and was reintroduced in the writings of John Locke thanks to its reference to the modern notion of the subject and a view of interhuman relations based on a social contract (Hamblin, 1970). Another interesting example is the "argument from authority", found in the writings of Aristotle, and subsequently presented in medieval texts (Walton, 1997: 43–44).[4]

Below, I will try to advance the thesis that persuasive argument can be viewed as a definite act — a social activity, an act of speech, whose purpose is to influence (beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, *etc*.). I believe the persuasive argument may be viewed not only as a definite act — *e.g.*, a social action, an act of speech — whose aim is to persuade, influence beliefs, behaviour, attitude, *etc*., but also as a phenomenon which is subject to the rules and patterns of culture. In this type of approach, the whole historical and theoretical background of the rhetorical tradition is only of interest to me insofar as this tradition can be made relative to

[4] Described by Aristotle as an instance of dialectical reasoning, in William of Sherwood (the thirteenth-century *Introductiones in Logicam*) it becomes a measure of erudition and conclusiveness. As an example, we may take the argument: Aristotle did not mention more than four principles, therefore there are only four principles.

the subject's knowledge, or treated as an element of a humanistic interpretation (Ławniczak, 1975; Ławniczak, 1983).

Such an approach involves consideration of a broader perspective. Namely, I assume that persuasive argumentation (as a defined action, a series or sum of actions defined by space and time) can be described as a cultural practice serving to perpetuate or to alter the acceptability of specific socially-functioning values. I also assume that through its products (persuasive arguments, which I understand as intellectual creations), persuasive argumentation, as a social practice, symbolically fulfils a certain function (it increases the probability of respecting, accepting, and recognising the cultural values of which it is the bearer).[5]

I try to describe persuasive argumentation by focusing on its "actual" use within social practice. I am particularly interested in how individuals justify their decisions and opinions. At the same time, I try to distance myself from *ex cathedra* postulates that would impose stiff norms for argumentation practice on communities. From my point of view, types of claims and the dispute over the "internal criteria of argumentation" are treated as attempts to impose axiological strictures on arguers. Subjecting an argumentative utterance to interpretation allows one to examine argumentation mainly within the context of achieving an intended result. The point of view assumed here belongs to the polemic we find in the first volume of the *Theory of communicative action* (Habermas, 1999: 62–69). In the dispute presented therein, I am much more inclined to lean towards the "external" approach to argumentation, preferred by Wolfgang Klein. I am particularly interested in two aspects of his theory, although I only agree with the first. This component is illustrated by the following two citations:

> The Toulmin Model is in a certain respect closer to real argumentation than the formal approaches he criticises, but it is a model of *correct* argumentation. Toulmin never conducted any empirical research on how people actually argue. This is also true of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, although of all the philosophical approaches they come closest to real argumentation. However, the *auditoire universel*, one of the central concepts, is certainly not a group of living people, for instance the current population of the Earth; it is a certain instance that it is otherwise difficult to define [...] I am not concerned with what rational, reasonable or correct argumentation is, but with how people — in all their foolishness — actually argue (Klein, 1980: 9–10).

[5] In this context, we can treat persuasive argumentation functionally. In this article, I focus largely on its subjective aspects, while my remarks regarding the functional nature of this type of argumentation are general, expressing what are only certain intuitions, rather than specific solutions. One might immediately say that a functional approach to argumentative practice presupposes it to be a type of "meta-practice" (next to language practice), encompassing many areas of symbolic culture. But contrary to language, it is a "meta-practice" founded on socially-functioning rules of communication. This is partly the result of assuming the rationality of the arguing subject — more of which later.

> In argumentation, one tries to transpose what is doubtful for the collective (*kollektiv*) into something that is collectively binding by means of what is [already] collectively binding (*das kollektiv Geltende*) (Klein, 1980: 19).

I fully share the idea of this "external" approach to argumentation, largely because it allows the argumentative utterance to be made into a reproducible object of cultural study. There is a preference within this type of approach to use the tools of argumentation to interpret persuasive actions within a specific spatio-temporal context, and to "release" persuasive argumentation from its practical and communicative (Schnädelbach, 2001), and therefore current, context.[6] The emphasis is therefore shifted from the "subjective" creation of a persuasive argument to the reconstruction of empirically-used argumentations. This approach can indeed be applied, through the responsible use of the methods and means developed within the framework of i n f o r m a l l o g i c. In my opinion, this perspective provides many interesting solutions, allowing both to draw a boundary between the practice of persuasive argumentation and other practices, especially the persuasive ones, as well as between rationality and persuasion. From this point of view, it is the culture of a society, rather than the theoretical structures imposed on argumentation, that defines the limits of applying argumentative techniques for persuasive purposes.

However, at this point, it is worth mentioning the differences separating the views of Klein from those that can be found in this article.

> I believe that a systematic analysis of real argument — as any empirical analysis — makes it possible to extract relatively fixed regularities, according to which people exchange arguments: to extract precisely the logic of argument. Moreover, I also believe that this notion encompasses much of what is usually understood by "the rationality of argument" (Klein, 1980: 50).

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[6] To explain more fully it is worth to refer to a division proposed by Anna Pałubicka (2013). While discussing "the grammar of European culture" the author distinguishes between two attitudes which characterize the Euro-Atlantic cultural sphere. The first is the attitude of people who are more involved, who realize the values, desires, needs and beliefs. The second is related to the attitude of observation and distance, both in relation to the world and to themselves. The attitude of involvement is characterised by speech understood in the perspective of action. The focus on survival and a realistic attitude to the content of belief is a characteristic element of the involved attitude. In contrast, the attitude of the observer is associated with the perception of language understood as a system (an organized system of signs, specific rules of grammar, syntax and semantics). It expresses the third-person perspective of the researcher observing the action of the involved attitude (realized in a first-person perspective). It is used to identify the structures of a supra-individual, cultural nature. The method of reflection on the arguments which was proposed earlier would be associated with the perspective of the observer, not from practical-communicative involvement.

The cultural scholar seeks a description of the argumentative procedure that would account for a distinctive "logic of argumentation" and allow to determine the criteria for "rational argument" within a specific community. In this sense, the logic of argumentation is equivalent to the logic of the culture of the arguers, and it is difficult to speak of any, even relative, regularity in argumentative practice.[7]

My view is rather that internal standards of argumentation are part of the cultural principles regulating the exchange of arguments within a group. They are relative to it, and generated or inherited by it. Within the framework of the study of argumentation, I propose to study the arguments actually occurring and functioning, and empirically exploring the functioning rules that individuals and groups apply in argumentative practice. At the same time, I realise that this is only one of the possible approaches that have come to be accepted in argumentation theory, while its successful application makes it necessary to find a theoretical solution to the problem of "conscious games" with regard to the interpretative rules used by individuals creating persuasive arguments.

Applying the above reflections to a broader context, we could compare the assumptions necessary for an understanding of persuasive argumentation (which is the focus of the next few pages), with those formulated with regard to argumentation in the first volume of *The theory of communicative action*, where Jürgen Habermas defines the logic of argumentation as that which "refers not to deductive connections between semantic units (*i.e.*, propositions), but to non-deductive relations between the pragmatic units (speech acts), of which arguments are composed" (Habermas, 1999: 55). He consequently differentiates three reasons to use argumentation: as a process, as a procedure, or as a logical product.[8] Argumentation as a process presupposes a communicative framework, which is necessary for a symmetrical exchange of arguments. The nature of this exchange is idealised: for the sake of the inherent value of seeking truth, we renounce all forms of pressure and repression within it. Argumentation as a procedure concentrates on communicative interaction and specifies the positions from which arguments can be exchanged. Meanwhile, argumentation directed toward its products, attempts to provide the arguer with accurate and convincing tools for formulating an utterance (Habermas, 1999: 58–60).

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[7] The issue of a detailed consideration of the topic of the argumentation standards' relativization to culture requires a more serious discussion than is possible within the framework of this article. It would be useful to compare and contrast the position referred to in the article with the polemical approaches, *e.g.* by Wittgenstein or Davidson. However, in this paper I aim to develop the arguments for the thesis that the rule of effective persuasion requires a reference to the culture arguing subjects. Culture, understood as a set of values in a given social group.

[8] Through a certain analogy to the Aristotelian canon, we might say that rhetoric studies argumentation as a process and dialectic defines argumentative procedures, while logic is concerned with studying the products of argumentation.

One can certainly argue against this view of argumentation. First, in the approach that I favour, I try to plead in support of not examining the logic of argumentation in terms of non-deductive relations between speech acts, but of submitting persuasive arguments, understood as speech acts, to an interpretative procedure related to the contents and rules to which a given argumentative utterance (especially insofar as the premises and rules employed in that argumentation are concerned) is subject to. Second, I propose to always refer a given communicative interaction to the real communicative situation in which it took place, as well as the discourse it served. Third, instead of concentrating on idealised conditions of symmetry, I believe it is worthwhile to place the emphasis on reconstructing the previously mentioned patterns of use regulating argumentative practice. Fourth, I suggest that the moment in which an argumentative utterance is created, allowing one to describe informal arguments (argumentative utterances), be taken into account every time. In my opinion, such an approach requires abstaining from defining standards that allow a "pressure-free" use of argumentation. Such standards (*e.g.* ethical ones), as long as they existed in a given argumentative situation, should be described within cultural studies.

THE ARGUMENTATIVE UTTERANCE AS AN OBJECT OF HUMANISTIC INTERPRETATION

The cultural understanding of persuasive argumentation requires, first and foremost, the development of a justification for the claim that an argumentative utterance can be treated as an action that is subject to humanistic interpretation. In the subsequent part of this article, I attempt to develop this intuition, at the same time demonstrating the problems that arise from this approach.

The humanistic interpretation is a type of subjective-rational explanation. The result of applying this procedure is to answer the question: "Why did X perform a given act?" The answer to the question asked in these terms, in the humanistic interpretation, involves providing a description of an assumption of rationality, i.e. a description of X's knowledge, which allows one to distinguish the actions performed by X and their result. The utterance in question also includes a description of the subject's hierarchy of values while performing the action, and we assume that the result of the action in question constitutes a preferred outcome (Kmita, 1973: 23).[9]

[9] The assumption of rationality adopted within this interpretation has an idealised nature. An act of rationalisation is performed as part of the procedure in question. In our case, this means that rationality is taken as a methodological assumption. This approach does not presume that subjects are substantially rational. However, it is assumed that interpreting human actions requires an assumption of rationality.

We should add that in this case, we are dealing with an action that is executed (and has meaning) only when an individual — a receiver — capable of recognising it as such, can be found within its reach, or when the finding of such an individual seems probable to the sender. In this sense, only actions capable of being interpreted remain within the purview of humanistic interpretation.[10] The key feature of actions capable of being interpreted, or the products of these actions, is the fact that they possess certain rules of execution that can generally be expressed as norms.[11] Actions conforming to cultural rules include communicative rules, *e.g.*, language or customs.

In this article, I am interested only in arguments, or more precisely argumentative utterances, formulated for the purpose of persuasion and constructed with the intention of producing change (within the aforementioned contexts) (Lambert & Urlich, 1980).[12] These will always be arguments uttered in a given historical and cultural situation, and which are subject to practical evaluation. They are fully subject to standardisation procedures (*i.e.*, that is informal arguments), as long as they occurred within a real communicative space. I treat argumentative utterances as developing argumentation by bringing certain compositional and rhetorical components into it.

An argumentative utterance is a means of presenting a persuasive argument. It can be distinguished by its contextual characteristics, structural features, a perceptible relationship between the statements contained in it, basic knowledge of the arguer's intent or what they find controversial, *etc.* It seems that the notion of the argumentative utterance as the basic unit subject to interpretation should be treated with some flexibility, i.e. we should define such an utterance depending on the needs and conditions of a given communicative situation.[13] It is worth noting that both the argument aimed at persuasion and the argumentative utterance interest me as certain goal-oriented structures that are subject to interpretation.

Two assumptions seem to be of key importance to the domain of cultural studies. Firstly, that employing a persuasive argument requires respecting the rule for providing a justification (as a premise) for the claim put forward. Sec-

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[10] What this implies for the cultural study of persuasion is that for its interpretation, it is necessary to assume that those employing persuasion are competent in the use of its rules. This does not mean that effective persuasion requires the persuaded subject be conscious in this respect. What is more, the persuasive act often blurs the persuasive intention it carries, and the rules according to which it functions. This "blurring" should form part of the cultural description.

[11] The appropriate formula might be: "an action having such and such a meaning should be performed in such and such a way" (Kmita, 1973: 28).

[12] Next to persuasion, as I already indicated, such purposes may include testing hypotheses or explaining phenomena.

[13] The broadest definition of an argumentative utterance can be found in (Szymanek, 2008: 37–45).

ondly, that interpreting a persuasive argument requires skills relating to the use of its rules (for example, the conscious use of the structure of the *argumentum ad personam*).

Three indicators of persuasion, such as influence, communication, and intention, allow one to treat the persuasive argument as the object of a humanistic interpretation. Such a solution allows to treat persuasion as one of the goals of cultural activity. I assume that the meaning, or purpose, of argumentation as an activity is persuasion, understood as effecting a change in beliefs, attitudes or behaviours. A humanistic interpretation of the persuasive layer, by definition attributing a particular meaning to any given activity (Kmita, 1973), either attributes a given persuasive aim to a given action or will consist in the attribution of such an aim as an explanation. It is worth emphasizing that the situations in which a subject consciously and deliberately uses the social rules of reception would be of particular interest for interpretation. It seems that not only argumentation bears traces of this, but also other communication practices, in which knowledge of the perception of social rules of reception needed to disseminate a given content, or consolidate the social position of individuals, is used.

In order to interpret something, I have to recognise an action as being subject to a rule (assuming that someone else has also recognised it as such). In order to convince someone, I have to know that someone has recognised this action, and consciously apply knowledge of the rules they used. On the other hand, when learning how to apply this, I begin to learn how to influence a situation. Finally, when I learn to apply the rules for my own purposes, it is important for me to maintain control over the recognition of the "correct" intention by the receiver.

In conclusion, an argumentative utterance as the outcome of a rational act of argumentation can be called the product of a cultural act. Moreover, I consider the argumentative utterance as a cultural act. I perceive it at once as a sign, a verbal form of subjective action, geared towards change (influence), and subject to the rules of cultural interpretation.[14] As a cultural act, such an utterance has a meaning that is subordinated to persuasion due to cultural rules. An argumentative utterance is a cultural object that we can recognise by virtue of the cultural rules it is governed by, and submit to a procedure of interpretation.

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[14] The subject of interpretation can be planned or performed argumentative utterances.

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