

# On answering accusations in controversies

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## ON ANSWERING ACCUSATIONS IN CONTROVERSIES

Accusations are a very frequent type of speech act both in everyday life and in formal controversies, and answering accusations is a sophisticated type of linguistic practice well worth analysing from a pragmatic point of view. In my paper I shall first describe some basic properties of accusations and characteristic types of reactions to accusations, i. e. denying the alleged fact, making excuses, and giving justifications. I then go on to describe some fundamental functions of accusations in controversies. Using the basic patterns of accusations and reactions to accusations as an object of comparison, I then analyse some relevant exchanges from historical controversies (16th to 18th century), among them famous polemical interactions like the Hobbes-Bramhall controversy, but also less well-known debates from the fields of medicine and theology. The present paper is both a contribution to the theory of controversy and to the pragmatic history of controversies.

*Keywords:* historical pragmatics, theory of controversy, *ad hominem* moves, dynamics of controversy

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## 1. Introduction

Accusations belong to a complex family of critical moves in dialogue which includes speech acts like reproaching, blaming, complaining, criticizing, objecting, and insulting. In everyday life, accusations serve a number of purposes: e.g. we use them to discipline our children and to teach them the norms we consider important, we use them to assert our authority or to show our moral superiority, we use them to score points in our everyday disputes, and sometimes we just use them to find out what made a person do such a stupid thing. In the framework of the pragmatic study of controversy, accusations derive their interest from a number of remarkable properties and functions. I shall just mention four:

1. Accusations are often *opening moves* in controversies, and by their typical character they sometimes determine the structure of the whole controversy.
2. In other cases accusations mark the point of transition from quiet discussion to sharp polemics. They also serve to change the topic or to shift the burden of proof. Therefore, accusations are important factors in the *dynamics of controversies*.
3. From a dialectical point of view accusations are typically *ad hominem* moves. So the analysis of accusations and answers to accusations contributes to the study of *ad hominem* moves, which, as we know, are not necessarily fallacies (Walton 1998).
4. In the process of uttering and answering accusations, questions of *fact* and questions of *norm* or of *principle* are closely interrelated. So focussing on accusations might help to broaden our views concerning typical topics of controversies.

In my present paper I shall concentrate on three topics:

1. I shall first describe some of the *basic properties of accusations* and relate them to certain types of reactions to accusations. My assumption is that accusations and answers to accusations form a tightly-knit pattern of speech act sequence which opens up characteristic developments of dialogue.
2. I shall then present some observations on the *functions of accusations in controversies*.

3. And finally, I shall summarize *two small case studies* of accusations and answers to accusations in 17th century controversies.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Accusations and reactions to accusations

I shall begin by laying out the internal structure of accusations and some basic types of reactions which correspond to this structure.

When making a typical accusation, a speaker A will *assert* that the hearer B has done some action X and A will be *committed* (at least) to the two assumptions

- (1) that this action was bad, i.e. that it violated some norm or principle of action, and
- (2) that B was responsible for his action.

There are also cases where the focus of the speech act is on *stating* that the action was *bad* - that the agent should not have done the respective act - against a background of assumptions that he did in fact do it and that he was responsible for his action. This kind of move we usually call *blaming* or *criticizing* (Fillmore 1971), a move closely related to what I call *accusing* in the present paper.

As an example of a typical everyday accusation I shall use the case where A accuses B of having smoked a cigarette. If A accuses B of having smoked a cigarette,

- she will assert that B smoked a cigarette,
- she will be committed to the assumption that having smoked that cigarette is a bad thing for B to have done - for whatever reason,
- and she will also be committed to the assumption that B could have done otherwise, that he was not forced to smoke the cigarette.

According to this simple model, an accusation raises three questions:

- (i) the question whether a certain action was in fact performed,
- (ii) the question whether this action was bad,
- (iii) the question whether the person accused was responsible for his action.

*Answers to accusations* typically address these three questions. Defendant B might react to A's accusation by making one of the following three

<sup>1</sup> The observations on historical controversies presented in this paper are based on studies performed within the framework of a project on "Controversies in the République des Lettres (1600-1800)" which is being conducted at the Universities of Tel Aviv (Israel) and Gießen (Germany) and which was supported by the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development from 1999 to 2001. Concerning the background in historical pragmatics, cf. Fritz (1995).

moves - plus one special move, which I shall mention subsequently:

- (i) B might *deny* the fact, that he smoked a cigarette,
- (ii) B might *justify* his action by claiming that there is really no reason why he should not have smoked.
- (iii) B might give an *excuse* by claiming that he was in fact not responsible or at least not fully responsible for his action.

As I said, there is a remarkable additional type of move, i. e.

- (iv) B might apologize for having smoked. (I am so sorry, I shall not do it again. I am really ashamed of myself.)

Apologizing is quite a sophisticated move. With this move one tends to lose some points in the accusation-game, but it may be the only way to get out of a bad spot in a particular argument and to recover one's position in the wider framework of communication. (Children realize the usefulness of apologies very quickly, once they have learned this move.) Although apologies would deserve a study of their own, I shall say no more about this kind of move. In fact, they are very rare in the controversies we studied. This, I think, is an interesting fact in its own right.

A more detailed analysis would also have to consider further standard moves like asking for proof, doubting that the accuser is entitled to make a certain accusation or making counter-accusations.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Accusations in controversies

#### 3.1. *On functions of accusations in controversies*

After this short survey of the basic structure of accusation dialogues, I shall now turn to the role of accusations in controversies. A possible starting-point for the study of accusations in controversies is the question whether accusations are destructive or productive moves. As is normal in such cases, the answer to this question must be: It depends. In some cases, accusations may have destructive effects, because as potentially face-threatening acts they might jeopardize the continuation of communication altogether. In some cases accusations distract attention from the central business at hand, for example when the participants get side-tracked by an accusation pertaining to a minor point in the debate. In other cases, however, accusations lead directly to the core of the controver-

<sup>2</sup> Fritz and Hundsnurscher (1975) describe basic moves in dialogues centering around accusations. Very subtle observations on forms of excuses and justifications can be found in Austin's classic paper "A plea for excuses" (Austin 1970).

sy by challenging the defendant and forcing him to present his cause in full strength. As accusations rest on (sometimes hidden) assumptions concerning the validity and applicability of certain norms or principles, accusations may lead to important discussions of norms and principles. And, of course, in some cases accusations are amusing, at least to the supporters of the accuser and to parts of the audience, and in these cases they make debates more lively and attractive to the audience. So, although accusations are at times somewhat doubtful moves, they make an excellent topic for dialogue analysis in general and for the study of controversies in particular, chiefly due to the fact that they are such multifunctional moves.

### 3.2. *Accusations as opening moves in controversies*

Accusations are quite frequently used as opening moves in controversies. In this paragraph I shall mention three typical examples. The first example is a battery of accusations with which in 1585 Lucas Osiander, a Protestant theologian, launched his attack on the Jesuits and thereby sparked off a long-drawn-out controversy. This whole controversy is dominated by accusations, reactions to accusations and counter-accusations. In Dascal's classification of types of controversies it is a typical case of a dispute (Dascal 1998; 2001). Osiander's main charge was that the Jesuits intended to destroy Protestantism by force. One of the most intriguing aspects of this particular accusation is that to prove the *intention* to do something bad is something quite different from proving the fact that someone has already performed a certain act. So the question of proof (and lack of proof) looms large in this dispute. The total battery of accusations was taken up in a pamphlet by the Jesuit author Christoph Rosenbusch in 1586, who organized the body of accusations into four main points and answered them point by point. This organization into points determines the topic structure of the ensuing controversy which lasted from 1585 to 1589 and in the course of which nine longish pamphlets were produced.<sup>3</sup>

The second example is taken from another well-known theological controversy in the late 17th century, where members of the Protestant orthodox side in Germany accused the so-called Pietists of introducing unacceptable innovations of dogma and religious practice. This was a

<sup>3</sup> Gloning (1999) provides a detailed analysis of the pragmatic form of this controversy. Glüer (2000) analyses characteristic moves and strategies in this controversy from the point of view of classical rhetoric.



very serious charge, in fact, it amounted to the accusation of heresy (Gierl 1997). Again the basic accusations determined the structure of the whole controversy, which evolved around two questions: Did the Pietists actually do the things they were accused of? And was their distinctive religious practice really heretical? So this controversy exhibits in very clear form aspects of the basic structure of accusation-dialogues described in paragraph 2. One particular strand of this highly complex controversy was analysed in one of the case studies summarized in the next paragraph of this paper (also Fritz and Glüer 2001).

My third example is a controversy between Janus Abrahamus à Gehema and Melchior Friedrich Geuder, two medical men, in the years 1688 and 1689 (also Gloning and Lüsing 2002). In the opening pamphlet of this controversy, Gehema, a representative of the “modern” school of medicine, accuses his traditionalist opponents of hurting and even murdering their patients by using traditional methods of medical therapy like bloodletting, purgation, and the administering of various types of medical potions. This general accusation, which is already present in the title of his pamphlet (“Grausame Medizinische Mord-Mittel”, i.e. “Cruel murderous forms of medical treatment”), is specified for the individual medical treatments I mentioned. In the case of bloodletting, Gehema accused the traditionalists of weakening the patient’s body, against all reason, by this kind of treatment, so that the body could neither cope with the illness by natural means nor could it absorb the prescribed medication (cf. Gehema 1688, 28). This was a scientifically-based accusation which Geuder had to deal with by trying to show that Gehema’s scientific theories on blood circulation were not sound (cf. Geuder 1689: 29). Thus the accusation lead to an interesting confrontation of medical views. But Gehema also used a second type of accusation quite early on in his pamphlet with the intention of weakening the general position of his opponents. One could call these accusations “moral” accusations, and they are of a distinctly *ad hominem* nature, e.g. the accusation that the traditionalists continued with their received medical methods out of mere habit and intellectual laziness, that they slavishly followed the ways of their authorities (e.g. Galen), that they did so against their better judgement, and, finally, that they only had in mind their own profit, not the patients’ welfare. Slurs like these called for a different type of reaction, and so Geuder countered these accusations by changing to the meta-level of the dispute, reflecting in general terms on essential principles of polite and reasonable conduct in controversy - e.g. that one should treat realia and not personalia -, and emphasizing the point that men of learn-

ing should give a good example to their readers (Geuder 1689: A 4). In addition, the fact that Gehema had, in Geuder's view, violated such principles, provided Geuder with an excuse for directing counter-accusations at his opponent. So we see Geuder using a double strategy, dispassionately drawing attention to relevant communication principles on the one hand and resorting to counter-accusations on the other.

### 3.3. *Accusations and the dynamics of controversies*

As I already mentioned, accusations not only function as opening moves, but they also contribute to the dynamics of controversies in the middle of the proceedings, e.g. when they cause a shift of topic or a change of tone within an ongoing controversy. As space prevents a detailed analysis of such a development within a controversy, I shall only briefly mention an example of this kind of function of accusations. Such an example is the case of Salomo Semler, a professor of theology, who, in the controversy on the Biblical canon (1772), reacted to various reviews of a book of his on the history and status of the Biblical canon. In his answer to a fairly friendly review in a Hamburg journal, Semler dealt in quite a relaxed fashion with various objections against his position. As soon as there was, however, the slightest hint of an accusation that his position might be heretical, his tone of reaction changed completely. He insinuated that the reviewer, who was obviously no theological specialist, had not properly understood him and went on to give a very long and serious explanation of why even the faintest suspicion of heresy was completely out of place (Semler 1772: 583; Glüer and Fritz 2002: 104).

## 4. Two case studies

### 4.1. *Case Study No. 1: Accusations in the controversy between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop Bramhall on the problem of free will (1654 - 1658)*

One of the focal points of this controversy was a disagreement on conceptual and linguistic matters. On various occasions Hobbes accused Bramhall of committing category mistakes like applying the predicate *free* to the will, which, according to Hobbes, could only be applied to human agents in this context. Hobbes also accused Bramhall of talking nonsense by using scholastic terms like *deficient cause* or *sensitive will*.

This type of accusation raises the question whether Hobbes assumed Bramhall to use these problematic expressions mistakenly but *bona fide* or



to use them on purpose as a kind of unfair tactical ploy. Both versions were potentially damaging to Bramhall's position, because, according to the first version, Bramhall was not intelligent enough to realize the mistake, and according to the second version, Bramhall was considered intellectually insincere, which was probably an even graver accusation for a bishop to face. In some places Hobbes clearly suggested the latter, e.g. when he wrote "So that it is not without cause men use improper language, when they mean to keep their errors from being detected" (Hobbes 1656: 313).

As Bramhall's reactions show, this kind of accusation was obviously difficult to deal with. A possible reaction could have been to explicate relevant parts of the whole system of terminology Bramhall used. But this would have been a Herculean task, not easily performed within the confines of a pamphlet. And even if Bramhall had attempted such an elucidation, the problem would have arisen anew with each individual term taken up for clarification. In practice, Bramhall's repertoire of reactions to this type of move was quite limited, and one feels that at this point the controversy reached a fundamental impasse. Basically, Bramhall had three types of answer at his disposal:

- (i) He *criticized* Hobbes for not being well-read in scholastic philosophy, so that he did not understand what Bramhall meant.
- (ii) He made the *counter-accusation* that some of Hobbes's words did not make sense either.
- (iii) And finally, he *complained* about this move, e.g. when he wrote: "And here he (i.e. Hobbes) falls into another invective against distinctions and scholastical expressions" (quoted by Hobbes in Hobbes 1656, 257).

To the very end, the controversy was plagued by conceptual disagreements of this kind, and both Hobbes's accusations and Bramhall's helpless reactions are clear indicators of this impasse.

#### *4.2. Case study No. 2: Accusations in the late phase of the Pietist controversy (Francke vs Mayer 1707)*

As a second case study I chose a section of the controversy between the Orthodox Protestants and the so-called Pietists around 1700, which I already mentioned.

In 1707 a representative of the Orthodox party, Johann Friedrich Mayer, Professor of Theology at the University of Greifswald accused August Hermann Francke, one of the leading Pietist theologians, Professor of Theology at the University of Halle, of spreading mortal poi-

son to the souls of Protestant Christians by editing a translation of a book by an Italian mystic, Saint Catharine of Genoa, and by recommending other mystic tracts in his introduction to the book. At first sight this looks like a rather strange and insignificant charge. On closer inspection, however, one realizes that this accusation is quite dangerous and has far-reaching ramifications. What makes it so explosive is that, according to Mayer, the book edited by Francke was full of religious fanaticism and extravagant religious emotions and that it denied the central protestant tenet that man is saved by faith alone (*sola fide* in Latin). In addition to that, the book had the fundamental defect of being a text from the dark popish pre-reformation days. Mentioning this book gave Mayer the opportunity to focus on some of the basic charges against Pietism, which, if proven, would make Francke a heretic.

Francke realized the dangerous character of this accusation straight away and took it very seriously, deciding to answer it painstakingly in its various aspects. In a pamphlet with the title “Gründliche und Gewissenhafte Verantwortung gegen Hn D. Johann Friedrich Mayers [...] harte und unwahrhaffte Beschuldigungen” (i.e. “A thorough and conscientious justification, answering Prof. Mayer’s hard and untruthful accusations”), written in the same year 1707, Francke devoted 50 paragraphs to his answer. The main types of moves Francke used in his answer were: denying the imputed facts, denying the validity of certain presupposed principles, and making counter-accusations.

As for the first type of move, denying the facts, Francke obviously couldn’t deny that he edited the book, but he could deny that in editing the book he had become guilty of soul-poisoning. It is remarkable that his first attempt at fighting this charge should consist in a logical criticism of Mayer’s attack. Francke opened his defence by trying to ‘nail’ a fallacy. He claimed that Mayer’s conclusion that Francke revealed himself to be a religious fanatic by editing this book was fallacious, as this conclusion rested on the unacceptable assumption that the editor of a book is committed to (all) the ideas presented in this book. (I think those of us who have edited books will sympathize with Francke.)

As a backing to this line of defence, Francke reminded his opponent that other pre-reformation religious books had been edited by Protestants without anybody complaining. To prove this, he presented a long reference list of such texts, including Luther’s edition of a book by the German mystic Tauler. Of course, referring to the authority of Luther was a favourite move on both sides of this particular debate.

After exposing this fallacy, Francke could have rested satisfied of having answered the accusation. In fact, he mentioned this possibility. And maybe a 21st century author would have left it at that. But these were not the rules of the game around 1700. Refutations had to be *thorough*, so Francke had to take up all the other aspects of this accusation and process them point by point.

His second line of defence consisted in trying to prove that the book did in fact not diminish the importance of faith for the justification of Christians in favour of justification by good works. By quoting passages from the book he tried to prove that Mayer's accusation was groundless and that he had maliciously misinterpreted the book. This again, is a very frequent type of counter-accusation.

In a later passage, Francke dealt with two minor sub-accusations. The first was that it was wrong to present persons as examples of a holy life who had experienced forms of religious ecstasy (Francke 1707: 305). And the second was that Francke had presented Catholic persons as examples of a Christian life. In both cases Francke reacted by denying the principle which his opponent had presupposed: In the first case he denied the principle that one should not refer to persons who had experienced religious ecstasy and backed his denial by reminding Mayer that in the New Testament there were several examples of apostles experiencing religious ecstasy. In the second case he denied the validity of the principle that one should not present Catholics as positive examples, and he backed *this* denial by mentioning that Mayer himself had on various occasions favourably referred to Catholic saints in his own books (Francke 1707: 310).

What was characteristic about Francke's general style of answer is that he always combined his defensive moves with detailed descriptions of his own position. So the accusations of his opponent gave Francke an excellent opportunity to clarify his position, and therefore Francke's answers to the seemingly feeble accusations of Mayer formed a well-presented statement of Francke's own views. Accordingly, if we had to answer the question whether Mayer's accusations were a productive element in this controversy, we would probably answer in the affirmative. It is true that Francke did certainly not think so when he had to write his answer. But we, as lookers-on, can see things differently.

## 5. Conclusion

I think these two brief sketches show that analysing the context and functions of accusations is a worthwhile subject in the study of controversies.

Concluding my paper, I should like to mention one more type of accusation which I only dealt with in passing and which I discussed in more detail in other papers, i.e. accusations concerning the way controversies are or should be conducted, e.g. accusations of fallacious reasoning, of lack of thoroughness, of unfairness, of impoliteness etc. (Fritz 2001; Fritz and Glüer 2002; Glüer and Fritz 2002). Accusations of this kind and the respective reactions form an important source of information about the implicit “theories of controversy” of the participants. Studying such accusations is therefore a useful contribution to what Hamblin called the “theory of charges, objections or points of order”, which he considered a first essential for his programme of formal dialectics (Hamblin 1970: 303), and to the study of historical theories of controversy.

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