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Autor:	Andone, Corina
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CORINA ANDONE*

CONFRONTATIONAL STRATEGIC MANOEUVRING IN A POLITICAL INTERVIEW: A PRAGMA- DIALECTICAL ANALYSIS OF A RESPONSE TO AN ACCUSATION OF INCONSISTENCY

The paper provides a pragma-dialectical analysis of an instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in a political interview. First, the institutional conventions that characterize a political interview are described by providing an account of the contextually determined institutional constraints that affect confrontational strategic manoeuvring. Second, an analysis of a specific instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring is provided in which a politician responds to an accusation of inconsistency put forward by an interviewer.

Keywords: confrontational strategic manoeuvring, political interview, retraction of a standpoint.

* University of Amsterdam, c.andone@uva.nl

1. Introduction

A political interview is an activity type in which an accountability relationship is established between an interviewer, as a representative of the citizens, and a politician who holds public office. In the accountability procedure that unfolds between the interviewer and the politician, argumentation plays a vital role in realizing the goal of holding a politician to account. In addition to a demand for information, the interviewer demands a justification so that the politician must provide arguments justifying his acts.

Van Eemeren (to be published) remarks that “as soon as argumentation plays an important part in a communicative activity type, as when the activity type is inherently or essentially argumentative, and even when it is predominantly argumentative, it is worthwhile to study the strategic manoeuvring.” According to van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2002), strategic manoeuvring refers to the attempt an arguer makes to achieve the final goal of resolving a difference of opinion by critically testing the standpoint advanced – a dialectical goal – and to be effective at the same time – a rhetorical goal.

In this paper I study strategic manoeuvring by focusing on a pragma-dialectical analysis of confrontational strategic manoeuvring that takes place in a political interview. To this end, I first describe the institutional conventions that characterize a political interview. Then, I concentrate on the analysis of a specific case of confrontational strategic manoeuvring in a political interview in which a politician retracts his standpoint in response to an interviewer’s accusation of inconsistency.

2. Institutional Conventions in a Political Interview

The pragma-dialectical theoretical model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004) is the point of departure for describing the institutional conventions that characterize a political interview from an argumentative perspective. Following van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2005), four empirical counterparts of the four stages of a critical discussion are identified in a political interview. These are the initial situation, the starting points, the argumentative means and the out-

come.¹ Since I concentrate on the analysis of strategic manoeuvring in a political interview carried out in the confrontation stage, the description of a set of conventions that characterize the initial situation and the starting points are particularly relevant.² Such conventions constitute a set of rules according to which a political interview takes place. Some of them – explicitly accepted by the participants – are codified rules established by organizations that regulate the broadcasting activity, such as the Office of Communication in Great Britain which sets principles that regulate the practice of broadcasters. In this paper, all references to codified rules concern general working principles applicable to the public and commercial broadcasters in the United Kingdom in general and more specifically to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Other rules followed by the participants are implicit and may concern, to give just one example, how the discussion in a political interview is terminated.

The *initial situation* in the argumentative activity type of a political interview brings to light a difference of opinion between an interviewer and a politician that may concern decisions, plans or actions of the politician that have consequences for the general public. The disagreement emerges through a question-answer exchange performed for an intended audience constituted by the general public who is listening to or watching the political interview. The issues discussed in such exchanges are debatable matters of “newsworthy character” (Clayman & Heritage 2002: 61), determined solely by the interviewer. The Broadcasting Code issued by the Office of Communication³

¹ For an elaborate discussion of a political interview as an argumentative activity type, see Andone (to be published).

² Just as in a critical discussion where the parties share already in the confrontation stage the starting points that are established in the opening stage, in the initial situation of a political interview the participants have knowledge of the points of departure of the activity type in which they participate. For example, the participants in a political interview adopt in the initial situation the discussion format based on questions and answers.

³ The current Broadcasting Code was issued in October 2008 by the Office of Communication and contains a set of principles, meanings and rules and in two cases – Section Seven: Fairness and Section Eight: Privacy – a set of practices to be followed by broadcasters in the United Kingdom. As specified in the Code (2008: 5), “the principles are there to help readers understand the standards objectives and to apply the rules. Broadcasters must ensure that they comply with the rules as set out in the Code. The meanings help explain what the Office of Communication intends by some of the words and phrases used in the Code.”

stipulates in Section Five – regarding Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions – the meaning of “matters of political [...] controversy and matters relating to current public policy.” In Section 5.3 the following specification is made:

Matters of political [...] controversy are political [...] issues on which politicians [...] and/or media are in debate. Matters relating to current public policy need not be the subject of debate but relate to a policy under discussion or already decided by a local, regional or national government or by bodies mandated by those public bodies to make policy on their behalf, for example non-governmental organizations, relevant European institutions, etc.⁴

The dispute that is the result of the disagreement between the interviewer and the politician can be more or less complex. In the simplest case, the interviewer asks questions through which he doubts the acceptability of standpoints previously put forward by the politician or asks the politician to advance standpoints which he then puts to the test for the purpose of holding him to account. The disagreement constitutes in such a case a non-mixed dispute. When the interviewer does not simply cast doubt on the standpoint expressed by the interviewer, but expresses also an attitude with regard to a decision or stance of the politician, the dispute can be characterized as mixed. Another mixed case occurs when the interviewer expresses an attitude in relation to an issue to which the politician responds by advancing doubt accompanied by the expression of an opposite standpoint.

It is often suggested that a mixed dispute cannot arise in a political interview. Clayman & Heritage (2002: 98) are of the opinion that due to their restriction to acts of asking questions, interviewers “cannot [...] express opinions, or argue with, debate, or criticize the interviewees’ positions.” They stipulate that “the interviewers should (i) avoid the asser-

⁴ In addition, Section 5.11 of the Broadcasting Code distinguishes the category of matters of major political controversy and major matters relating to public policy, which it defines as follows: “These will vary according to events but are generally matters of political [...] controversy or matters of current public policy which are of national, and often international, importance, or are of similar significance within a smaller broadcast area.”

tion of opinions on their own behalf and (ii) refrain from direct or overt affiliation with (or disaffiliation from) the expressed statements of the interviewees" (ibid.: 126).

In their view, the interviewer should maintain "a neutralistic stance" towards the politicians to remain within the boundaries of impartiality. However, codified rules applicable in the United Kingdom suggest otherwise. Section Five of the Broadcasting Code makes clear that in the expression "due impartiality" "due" is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality." Section 5.9 mentions that the word "impartiality" refers to "not favoring one side over another" and "due" means "adequate to the subject and nature of the programme." The expression "due impartiality" refers to allowing for a variety of views to be made known without giving more prominence to one view over another. Section 5.9 specifies that "presenters and reporters [...], and chairs of discussion programmes may express their own views on matters of political [...] controversy or matters relating to current public policy."⁵

Closely connected with the principle of due impartiality is the fact that more often than not the interviewer criticizes the politician's standpoint and expresses an opposite standpoint by acting as the devil's advocate. Section 5.9 of the Broadcasting Code states that alternative viewpoints should be made known to give impartiality its due.⁶ In order to live up to this requirement, the interviewer expresses an opposite standpoint often attributed to a third party asserting or implying a negative evaluation of the politician's performance.

The *starting points* in a political interview are arrangements that govern the discussion between the interviewer and the politician. They are procedural rules that regulate, for instance, the manner of termination of the discussion, the discussion format and the discussion roles.

⁵ However, Rule 5.9 makes clear that "presenters must not use the advantage of regular appearances to promote their views in a way that compromises the requirement of due impartiality." In addition, section 5.10 conditions the expression of a personal view to be "clearly signaled to the audience at the outset."

⁶ As an example, Sections 6.3 to 6.4 illustrate how the principle of due impartiality should be maintained during an election period, when "appropriate coverage" should be given to all parties to secure a balance of views.

In the case of political interviews broadcast in the United Kingdom and more specifically by the BBC, the Broadcasting Code issued by the Office of Communication and the Agreement⁷ set a number of rules that are argumentatively relevant. In addition to the principles of due impartiality and undue representation of views established by Section 5 in the Broadcasting Code and Section 44 of the Agreement, Rule 8.1 in the Broadcasting Code restricts the content of matters discussed to those that are not an infringement of privacy, unless warranted. “Warranted” content of the matters discussed refers to the case in which “the public interest outweighs the right to privacy,” such as matters that concern public health or safety. Moreover, the Royal Charter⁸ stipulates in Article 23, paragraph (c) that the interviewer formulate questions that “carefully and appropriately assess the views of licence fee payers.”⁹ Likewise, editorial guidelines that regulate the content of programmes on politics and public policy¹⁰ specify that in political interviews “[...] arrangements must not prevent the programme asking questions that our audiences would reasonably expect to hear.”

Not only do the requirements set by these documents motivate the need for the interviewer to act as the devil’s advocate, but they also indicate that the question-answer exchanges in a political interview gain institutional significance only if the participants in the discussion are oriented towards an audience. In a political interview, it is pointless to hold the politician to account if there is no mutual commitment to do so for the benefit of the audience.

⁷ The full title is “An Agreement Between Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation.” The document currently in force dates from July, 2006 and covers the BBC’s regulatory obligations. It is accompanied by an Amendment dated December 4, 2003.

⁸ The full title of the current Royal Charter is “the Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation” and dates from September 19, 2006.

⁹ According to article 57 of the Royal Charter, a licence fee payer “is not to be taken literally but includes [...] any [...] person in the UK who watches, listens to or uses any BBC service, or may do so or wish to do so in the future.”

¹⁰ Such programmes concern political broadcasts, ministerial broadcasts, reports in national and international elections, reports on opinion polls, online voting, surveys, broadcasting of Parliament. The editorial guidelines of these programmes are outlined under the strict advice of the Chief Adviser Politics.

As explained earlier, a number of implicit rules operate moreover in a political interview. Such rules limit the discussion format to an exchange in which the interviewer asks questions – or more precisely, as Heritage & Roth (1995) explain, carries out the task of questioning the politician – and the politician provides answers, albeit that he can ask rhetorical questions and questions for clarification. In addition to regulating the discussion format, implicit rules make clear that questions and answers must conform to generally accepted values, such as democratic principles, respect for each other or telling the truth. The manner of termination of the discussion is also determined by the implicit rules of a political interview which stipulate that the discussion is brought to a close by the interviewer in view of time limits and his own judgment about whether the politician has provided an account as was expected from him.

The assumption of the discussion roles is implicitly regulated in view of the type of difference of opinion in which participants are involved. In the case of a non-mixed difference of opinion, the politician is the protagonist of a standpoint that suggests a positive evaluation of his actions or decisions, since he is usually expected to defend himself. The interviewer is the antagonist who casts doubt on the acceptability of the standpoints put forward by the politician. In a mixed dispute, the participants are the protagonists of their standpoints and the antagonists of the standpoints of the other participant. When expressing a standpoint, the politician must defend it, once challenged to do so by the interviewer, by justifying or refuting the opinion expressed in the standpoint. As he is expected to provide an account of his actions or decisions, the politician must in principle argue his case until he has provided such an account.¹¹

The obligation to defend his standpoint holds also for the interviewer once challenged by the politician. Clayman & Heritage (2002: 140) suggest that such a challenge arises in two situations. In one situation, the politician may challenge the interviewer to defend his standpoint when he disagrees with or denies the statements with which the interviewer

¹¹ Evading to provide an account counts in a political interview as an evasive answer. More often than not, when an evasive answer is provided, the interviewer initiates a sub-discussion in which he holds the politician to account for evading to provide a justification as was expected from him.

prefaces his questions, for instance, because such remarks offer “contentious statements of opinion rather than merely relevant background information.” In another situation, the politician may challenge the interviewer to defend himself when he attacks his conduct or the broadcasting organization which the interviewer represents.¹² Due to time constraints, the interviewer, unlike the politician, must argue his case as briefly as possible in order to allow the politician enough time to offer an extensive account. Section 7.11 of the Broadcasting Code concerning fairness illustrates this observation by stipulating that “if a programme alleges wrongdoing or incompetence or makes other significant allegations, those concerned should normally be given an appropriate and timely opportunity to respond.”

In the activity type of a political interview, just like in other kinds of argumentative discourse, participants maneuver strategically in accordance with the preconditions imposed by the institutional conventions such as those outlined above. The arguers’ manoeuvring is in principle constrained by the institutional conventions that regulate the discussion, but the institutional conventions may also create special opportunities for manoeuvring that open up the space for being effective. Although not to the same extent, the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring – topical choice, audience adaptation and presentational devices – are affected by the institutional conventions in these two senses. By way of an example, in the next section I illustrate how the three aspects of an instance of confrontational strategic manoeuvring carried out by a politician in a political interview are affected by the institutional characteristics and how the politician exploits the constraints imposed on him to his advantage. The analysis gives a justified account of the strategic function of a politician’s response in answer to an interviewer’s accusation of inconsistency.

3. An Analysis of Confrontational Strategic Manoeuvring

The example is an exchange from a political interview broadcast on the *Politics Show* on November 12, 2006 between the BBC interviewer, Jon

¹² When the interviewer has to argue in favor of his standpoint, usually he abandons questioning in order to defend himself.

Sopel, and William Hague, former British Shadow Foreign Secretary and Conservative Party leader.¹³ In accordance with the convention in a political interview to discuss matters of importance and relevance for the general public, Jon Sopel initiates a discussion on a topic of high interest for the British audience: the Conservatives' support for the British government on the matter of combating terrorism. The interviewer suggests that one of the issues about which the Conservatives are expected to support the government is the introduction of biometric identity cards. In connection with this issue, Jon Sopel faces William Hague with an accusation of inconsistency: while two years before the Conservatives were of the opinion that biometric identity cards should be introduced, at the time of the interview the Conservatives believe the opposite.

Jon Sopel: And Labor say the big thing that you could do to help would be to support identity cards. It's fair to say that this is an issue that your party has rather flip flopped on isn't it.

William Hague: Well it's... I think it's become clearer over time where we stand on this, let's put it that way, because we've got the government adopting an identity card scheme, but one that is so bureaucratic and involves a vast data base and this is the government of serial catastrophes when it comes to data bases as we all know, costing now, according to the London School of Economics, up to twenty billion pounds and we said that if some of that money was spent instead on an effective border police and strengthened surveillance of terrorist suspects, and strengthening special branch and things like that, we'd actually get a lot further... (interjection)... having identity cards.

Jon Sopel: Isn't that a detail of the legislation. I mean you supported identity cards back in December 2004, less than two years ago.

William Hague: We supported, I and Michael Howard supported the principle of those. Subject to how the details were worked out. The details are not impressive and the grasp of detail and the ability to control the costs of the current government is so terrible, that it's not a scheme that we can support.

¹³ The fragment is written as transcribed on the BBC website. For my purpose, a transcription that guarantees readability is sufficient, while prosodic phenomena are irrelevant.

In line with the characterization of the activity type of a political interview the question-answer exchange between Jon Sopel and William Hague can be viewed as a discussion in which an accountability procedure unfolds. In his first question, Jon Sopel implies that *the Conservatives have acted inconsistently on the issue of biometric identity cards* when he says that *this is an issue that your party has rather flip flopped on isn't it*. Knowing that the interviewer's question is not a request for information, but a way of holding William Hague to account and that the interviewer does so by implying a negative evaluation of the politician, it is fair to interpret this question as an argument in support of the standpoint that *the Conservatives' political stance on the issue of biometric identity cards is unclear*. In his second question, Jon Sopel justifies the accusation. As he expects that William Hague will not accept a negative evaluation, Jon Sopel introduces a fact which supports the accusation when he says *You supported identity cards in December 2004, less than two years ago*. The provision of the second argument in support of the first argument turns the first argument that the Conservatives are inconsistent into a sub-standpoint.¹⁴ The wider context in which the discussion about biometric identity cards takes place, outlined in the beginning of this section, legitimizes the reconstruction of another unexpressed standpoint. Knowing that the discussion about biometric identity cards is part of a discussion about the Conservatives' support for the government, it is possible to identify the main standpoint which is being defended by the interviewer according to which *The Conservatives do not give enough support to the government*.

By means of an accusation advanced in what can be reconstructed as the confrontation stage of a critical discussion, Jon Sopel, acting as the antagonist, attributes to William Hague, acting as the protagonist, a commitment to two inconsistent standpoints. The interviewer implies that William Hague is committed both to the standpoint that

¹⁴ By convention, in a political interview an interviewer is not expected to provide an account, but this does not imply that he does not advance arguments in support of his standpoints. An interviewer argues in favor of his standpoint immediately after advancing a standpoint because, since his standpoint implies a negative evaluation of the politician, he anticipates non-acceptance from the politician.

Biometric identity cards should be introduced and to the standpoint that *Biometric identity cards should not be introduced* incurred on a different occasion.¹⁵

William Hague's reply to the accusation which attributes to him the two inconsistent standpoints is, as could be expected from the characterization of the activity type of a political interview, an attempt at rejecting the accusation and providing a positive account. This characteristic, together with knowledge of the larger context in which the discussion about biometric identity cards takes place, allows the analyst to reconstruct an unexpressed standpoint that challenges and refutes the main standpoint advanced by the interviewer. This unexpressed standpoint can be formulated as *The Conservatives give enough support to the government*. In support of this standpoint, William Hague implicitly argues that *The Conservatives' political stance on the introduction of biometric identity cards is not unclear* by supporting this argument by another argument which suggests that *The Conservatives have not acted inconsistently about biometric identity cards* when he says that *it's become clearer over time where we should stand on this*. In an attempt at providing a positive account, the politician implies that *The Conservatives have not supported the details, but they have supported the principle of introducing biometric identity cards* and *There was good reason not to support the details*. Three cumulatively coordinative arguments are advanced to argue that there was good reason for the Conservatives not to support the details. The first argument suggests that *The details are not impressive* for which the politician argues that *The details were not worked out satisfactorily*, because *The card scheme is bureaucratic, It involves a vast database and This is the government of serial catastrophes regarding databases*. The second argument Hague advances to justify having good reasons for not supporting the details suggests that *The grasp of detail is not impressive*. The third argument according to which *The costs are terrible* is supported by the evidence that *The scheme costs two billion pounds*.

¹⁵ Because the two standpoints concern the same issue of the introduction of biometric identity cards and the participants maintain their roles with respect to this issue on both occasions, it is possible to reconstruct the two standpoints as part of the same critical discussion.

William Hague's response in the sub-discussion with Jon Sopel gives a particular interpretation of the standpoint attributed by the accusation of inconsistency according to which he can maintain that the Conservatives think that biometric identity cards should be introduced. By providing a new interpretation, the politician shows that there is a difference between supporting the details of the introduction of biometric identity cards and the principle of the measure of introducing biometric identity cards and that the acceptance of the principle is conditional upon the details being worked out well.

By making this distinction, as van Rees (2009) explains, the politician employs the argumentative technique of dissociation through which support for the details of introducing biometric identity cards is distinguished from support for the principle. By introducing the distinction between the details and the principle in this way, the politician distances himself from his initial standpoint by retracting it. Instead of putting an immediate end to the discussion, the politician retracts his standpoint and replaces it with the maintainable standpoint that *The Conservatives have not supported the details, but they have supported the principle*, for which he can provide argumentation. Because the Conservatives supported the principle of introducing biometric identity cards only conditionally – depending on the details – and the condition that the details should be worked out well has not been met, William Hague can argue that the Conservatives have been consistent. In this way, William Hague remedies the inconsistency with which he is charged by justifying why there were good reasons not to support the details. Such reasons concern putting the idea of the introduction of biometric identity cards into practice.

Van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2009) point out that by engaging in a certain way of strategic manoeuvring, an arguer attempts to realize a possible outcome of the discussion effectively. In the case at hand, William Hague's manoeuvring by retracting a standpoint advanced on an earlier occasion is an attempt he undertakes to achieve an advantageous outcome in a mixed difference of opinion. In order to do so, Jon Sopel takes a route in which he can maintain his newly advanced standpoint against the interviewer's doubt. This route gives him room to provide a positive account of the Conservatives which he represents in the interview. Strictly speaking, retracting a standpoint and replacing it with a modified stand-

point counts as starting a new confrontation which can be considered as part of a new critical discussion. In the case under study, however, this new discussion is not completely independent of the original discussion, but a continuation of it. In line with the distinctions made by van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans (2007: 21–24) regarding different types of differences of opinion, advancing the new standpoint turns the discussion between Jon Sopel and William Hague into a qualitatively multiple mixed difference of opinion. In this discussion, an advantageous outcome can be attributed to William Hague because the interviewer no longer questions him on the issue of biometric identity cards.

The achievement of the outcome which allows William Hague to give a positive account of the Conservatives' decision results from making opportune choices from the topical potential, from the different ways to adapt to the addressee and from the range of possible presentational devices. William Hague's choice from the *topical potential* helps him to define the issue of disagreement favorable to him. Although the choice of issue rests with the interviewer, the politician turns this constraint into an opportunity by introducing a distinction between the details and the practice of introducing identity cards. The definition of the issue of discussion in terms of two aspects is definitely the most advantageous for the politician given the institutional obligations and interests. He responds to the institutional obligation to provide an account on the issue introduced by the interviewer and he acts in line with the institutional interests by defending the Conservatives' political stance. Trying to define the issue of disagreement in a different way would be less favorable to William Hague. As the institutional conventions constrain him to give an answer on the topic selected by the interviewer, an obvious topical shift would expose him to being held to account for it. William Hague would have to justify not only the issue of inconsistency, but also the change the topic.

The choice of the *presentational device* of dissociation is strategic, because the commitment to introduce biometric identity cards in practice is removed and the inconsistency is resolved. Dissociation achieves the minimal effect of creating the impression that the retraction is acceptable and the optimal effect of no longer being held to account for an earlier standpoint which is allegedly inconsistent with the current standpoint.

In other words, the way in which the retraction is formulated makes it hard for the interviewer to maintain his criticism. Should William Hague make the choice to formulate his response in a different way, he would not be able fulfill the institutional interest of providing a positive account.

Finally, William Hague chooses a certain manner of *addressee adaptation*. The strategic function of this choice can be identified by taking into account an institutional precondition set by the activity type of a political interview: the politician is constrained to respond to the interviewer's question while addressing the varied audience that is watching or listening to the interview. By making a distinction between the details and the principle of introducing biometric identity cards, William Hague orients himself to the audience's interests by showing that the details, to the costs of which the audience contributes, are important.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the institutional conventions of a political interview impose preconditions on the arguers' confrontational strategic manoeuvring. The institutional characteristics may constrain the strategic manoeuvring by limiting the possible choices from the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring. For example, the politician's responses to the interviewer's questions must constitute an account of his decisions or actions. In addition, the institutional characteristics may open up opportunities for obtaining advantages in the discussion by turning the constraints into possibilities for arguing in one's favor. For instance, the analytic account of William Hague's retraction of a standpoint in response to Jon Sopel's accusation of inconsistency spells out three such possibilities. One of the opportune possibilities is to redefine the issue of the difference of opinion, despite the fact that the choice of issue in a political interview is determined by the interviewer. Giving a new interpretation that is expressed in an amended standpoint, the politician is no longer obliged to leave the discussion as the retraction of the standpoint requires him to do. This brings with it another advantage: the politician removes the inconsistency of which he is accused. Finally, a third advantage consists in the fact that the politician gives a positive account of the Conservatives' decision. While the interviewer expresses his criticism of

the Conservatives for being inconsistent, William Hague shows that the Conservatives have a better alternative against the government's proposal. Indirectly, the politician portrays the government as incapable of realizing that the practice of introducing biometric identity cards is different from the simple idea of having biometric identity cards, thereby turning the interviewer's criticism into a compliment for the Conservatives and a criticism of the government.

The endeavor to analyze confrontational strategic manoeuvring in this paper focuses on the institutional constraints imposed on the response to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview. A complete analysis is yet necessary to shed more light on the strategic function of the argumentative move at issue that indicates how dialectical tasks are achieved while being rhetorically effective.

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