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# Commentary on Wales

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**In Response To:** Denise Wales's [Theoretic bondage: Coalescent argumentation and higher-order goals](#)

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In her paper, *Theoretic Bondage: Argumentation Analysis and Higher-Order Goals*, Wales addresses the adequacy of the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation for the analysis of argumentation from the perspective of a critical-emancipatory view employed by cultural theorists. She discusses the pragma-dialectical ideal of argument and the method of reconstruction which arises from this ideal. She addresses the pragma-dialectical ideal by concentrating on the idea of the 'ideal arguer', as presupposed in a pragma-dialectical approach. And she addresses the pragma-dialectical method of reconstruction by concentrating on the operation of 'addition' which adds certain elements which are left implicit in the original discourse but which are required for an evaluation of the argumentation. She illustrates her contentions with a pragma-dialectical analysis as performed in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs (1993).

She concludes with the critique that the pragma-dialectical ideal of argument, and the method of reconstruction which arises from this ideal, invite questions regarding the underlying assumptions of this model. She views the pragma-dialectical model as the product of specialized thought, embodying the perspective of the same historically dominant social group - male, white, and privileged - which has been the primary generator of Western philosophy for centuries. By incorporating unreflectively this select perspective when formulating a normative model, she argues, assumptions which implicitly exclude and devalue non-dominant perspectives may become part of the pragma-dialectical model unintentionally. She proposes Gilbert's model of argumentation presented in *Coalescent Argumentation* (1997) as an alternative model which shows promise in terms of critical-emancipatory concerns.

Wales' paper offers an interesting confrontation of a critical-emancipatory perspective on the analysis of argumentation with a pragma-dialectical perspective. In my comments on the paper, I will address some questions with respect to Wales' discussion and on the basis of these questions I will try to suggest some further lines for research.

One important question which arises is whether the two suggested methods of analysis are 'compatible' in the sense that they aim at attaining similar goals in highlighting certain relevant aspects of the discourse in the analysis, and can therefore be integrated in some way. On the basis of Wales' paper, I have my doubts with respect to this point, and I will, of course, present my arguments for my doubts.

As a starting point for her critique, Wales takes it that the pragma-dialectical approach of argumentation is a representative of a Critical-Logical model of argument, and is therefore inherently masculine-biased, upholding dominant, male forms of reasoning and masculine values, and excludes the reasoning and values of women. It would therefore exclude elements such as emotions, attachment, and contextual particularity. Apart from the fact that I am a woman working in the pragma-dialectical tradition, which could contradict this contention in some parts, according to me, in its present form, this contention is too imprecise and unclear. In terms of Arne Naess, the contention needs specification and precization, and must furthermore be supported by arguments.

In order to be able to compare the two forms of analysis, the aim of both approaches needs to be clarified. Wales does not specify the aims of a critical-emancipatory analysis. What I can guess from her paper is that it has something to do with the identification of aspects of dominance and power in communication. At first sight, this aim seems to differ from the aims of a pragma-dialectical analysis which is to identify the points of difference of opinion, the (explicit and implicit) arguments put forward in advance of the various standpoints and the relations between the arguments and the standpoints. Such an analysis forms the basis of an evaluation of the argumentation from the internal perspective of the starting points and evaluation criteria of the participants.

The difference between the critical-emancipatory analysis and the pragma-dialectical analysis and evaluation seems to be that the critical-emancipatory method is a method in which what occurs in the discourse is criticized from an *external* perspective, whereas in the pragma-dialectical method the discourse is criticized from an *internal* perspective.

As an illustration of her critique, Wales takes the analysis of 'The Case of Fred' as performed in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs (1993). In her critique, she criticizes the way in which unexpressed arguments are reconstructed. According to her, reconstructing a bridging argument in the form of a generalized assertion is not adequate: 'the appeal to abstract universal principles may not be the way actual arguers reason, and it may not be the "best" way to reason'. She says: 'By excluding particularized discourse from argument reconstruction, P-D analysts may be excluding the expressions of non-dominant groups, and, however unintentionally, favoring an elite discourse at the expense of all others'.

According to her, the claim of the reconstructed premise to unambiguous universality appears innocuous. According to her, the reconstructed premise is a principle that is a 'historically and culturally contingent' proposition. She asks herself 'whose values, principles, and world-views are being presented as "reasonable", and "resolution oriented" in constructing Fred's unspoken argument?

What Wales does in her critique of the reconstruction is that she mixes up the reconstruction of what someone can be held accountable for on the basis of what he or she has said explicitly (on the basis of the normal rules of communication) and the universal acceptability of a reconstructed premise. In reconstructing a missing premise, in a pragma-dialectical approach, the analyst tries to find the pragmatic optimum, the assertion someone is committed to on the basis of the verbal context, of what has been said explicitly. In doing this, the analyst tries to formulate a general assertion which links the explicit argument to the standpoint. In formulating the premise, the analyst does not assess the quality of the premise, whether it is universally acceptable or not. So, Wales' conclusion that certain values and principles are presented as 'reasonable' or 'resolution oriented' according to a pragma-dialectical reconstruction is not adequate. A pragma-dialectical reconstruction is value-free as to the quality of the content of the reconstructed utterances.

As a final point I would like to address Wales' critique of the 'ideal arguer' as a disinterested person. The prerequisites of a rational arguer do not concern psychological states which represent what people really think or believe. They are prerequisites for the behaviour of people participating in rational verbal interaction and relate to the commitments of these people.

One of the basic principles of a discussion according to the pragma-dialectical rules is that every position may be criticized and can be the subject of discussion. There are no sacrosanct views and there is no presumption for the status quo (See Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies* 1992, p. 107-115). Therefore, Wales' remark that 'positions that challenge both the status quo and dominant moral assumptions, may be seen as less defensible on analysis because they cannot be defended on grounds that the analyst can recognize, dependent as the analyst is on his or her own intellectual resources and cultural "perspective, cannot be upheld."

To conclude, I would like to give the following suggestions for further research:

- Explicitization and comparison of goals of both forms of analysis.
  - Correction of various forms of critique on the pragma-dialectical approach (see the points above)
  - Alternative reconstruction of the 'Fred' text on the basis of a coalescent approach of argumentation.
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