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Bart Garssen

University of Amsterdam

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Commentary on Michael Hoppmann's "On the objectivity of Norms of Argumentation"

BART GARSSSEN

*Department of Speech Communication, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric
University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 134 Amsterdam
The Netherlands
b.j.garssen@uva.nl*

Hoppmann's research project about conflicting norms in discussion is a promising contribution to the study of argumentative norms. As Hoppmann indicates, there are several interesting links with the pragma-dialectical research programme. I agree with the author that regarding the code of conduct as level 1 rules is not reflecting the most dominant quality of the pragma-dialectical system. The rules in the first place are problem valid and that makes them constitutive for a critical discussion. Hoppmann is right when he claims that the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion can be considered level 1, 2 and 3 norms at the same time. The practical choice to considering them as level 1 norms makes it possible to compare them on the same level as rules for politeness.

The relationship between rules for critical discussion and politeness rules has been a constant issue if not a problem for the design of our experiments conducted in the project *Conceptions of Reasonableness*. In this project Van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels (2009) studied judgments of ordinary arguers of fallacious and non-fallacious discussion moves. The main question was whether the judgements are in line with the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion. As Hoppmann pointed out, this would especially be a matter of norms in quadrant III which involves discussion moves that are both unreasonable and impolite. A constant worry about the internal validity of the design concerned a very plausible nuisance variable: the impoliteness of fallacious moves can be seen as an alternative explanation of the results. This especially counts for fallacies that are not only unreasonable from a purely argumentative point of view but also are also very face threatening, like *ad hominem* attacks and *ad baculum* threats.

For our current pragma-dialectical research project entitled 'Hidden fallaciousness' the relation between unreasonable and polite moves (quadrant IV) is also important. In everyday argumentative practice, discussants manoeuvre strategically, attempting to hide and mask clearly unreasonable moves by presenting these moves in such a way that they mimic reasonable argumentative moves. In this research project we try to find out what type of strategic manoeuvring is involved in giving fallacious argumentative moves a more reasonable appearance. Politeness can be a factor in this type of strategic manoeuvring. We found, for instance, that a polite formulation of an *ad baculum* threat as a helpful advice is generally seen as less unreasonable than straightforward formulations of the same *ad baculum* threat.

I would like to make two suggestions for further research on conflicting norms in argumentation. First, in his endeavour to trace possible conflicts, Hoppmann starts from the list of 10 rules from the code of conduct. When contrasting the two different normative systems it does not become clear how exactly Hoppmann traces conflicts between them. For this reason it would be interesting to start from a list of the dialectically relevant moves that are put forward in each of the four stages and that are in accordance with the rules for critical discussion. The starting point

in this procedure is not the rule but the type of move that is permissible in the stage at hand. This endeavour is made easier by following the dialectical profile for each of the stages.

A second suggestion for further research has to do with the context in which a possible conflict of rules occurs. Hoppmann wonders whether it is possible to explicitly address a conflict between imperatives of politeness and reasonableness in a practical conversation. He concludes that these expressions seem to make little contribution to either politeness *or* reasonableness. I wonder however whether explicit reference to possible conflicts are just, as Hoppmann calls them, stylistic devices. Expressions like “Allow me to illustrate this,” “Forgive me for saying so” and “I don’t want to sound rude, and forgive me if I do, but I in my mind you fail to make your point” are conventional but they are also functional as signs that the speaker is aware of the fact that he is about to make contribution the discussion that poses a face threat to his interlocutor. In that respect they are helpful in promoting a discussion that is not frustrated by unnecessary communicative obstacles. The impact of possible face threatening reasonable moves seems to be influenced by a number of factors. The cultural background is one, but the macro context in which the argumentative exchange takes place seems to be even more important. In this respect it would be interesting to see how the impact of violation of politeness rules is conditioned by the activity type at hand. The explicit and implicit institutional conventions that are characteristic of a certain activity type not only constrain the strategic manoeuvring in an activity type but also the rules for politeness. Because in some activity types confrontation is a necessary and inherent part of the exchange it is hardly a source of face threat. In a legal setting for instance the division of roles is such that an attorney would not be offended at all when the accuser expresses doubt about his assertions. All that is necessary are conventionalized expressions that are recognizable by all parties concerned. This may be different in a more informal discussion between strangers. In short I think it is worthwhile to study the impact of conflict and the explicit expressions addressing these conflicts, especially when the macro context is involved.

References

- Eemeren, F. H. van, Garssen, B., & Meuffels, B. (2009). *Fallacies and Judgments of Reasonableness: Empirical Research Concerning the Pragma-Dialectical Discussion Rules*. Dordrecht: Springer.