The study of argumentation as normative pragmatics

FRANS H. VAN EEMEREN

In the past decade, the study of argumentation has developed into a field of study in its own right, with its own scholarly infrastructure of journals, book series and conferences. This evolution is achieved by a joint venture of philosphers, formal and informal logicians, discourse and conversation analysts, communication scholars and representatives of still other disciplines. In my opinion, the time is ripe for integrating the complementary contributions of the various disciplines into a coherent paradigmatic framework in which all relevant aspects of the study of argumentation are systematically taken into account.

Of course, depending on the perspective of argumentative discourse which is taken as a starting-point, different paradigms can be articulated. Basically, Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's new rhetoric, Meyer's problematology, Willard's social epistemics, Blair and Johnson's informal logic, Woods and Walton's post-standard approach to fallacies, Grize's natural logic, Barth and Krabbe's formal dialectics, van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragmadialectics and several other contributions to the study of argumentation already constitute more or less worked-out parts of such a paradigm.

With a view to getting a clearer picture of the rationale of their planning, it would be useful if the protagonists of the various paradigms would specify the research programs they are going to carry out in the nineties. As I see it, in order to be able to deal with the problems involved in creating an all-encompassing paradigmatic framework, a comprehensive research program is required. In this paper, I shall specify five types of research which, in my opinion, are necessary components of any adequate research progam.

Five components of a comprehensive research program

Scholars of argumentation are interested in how argumentative discourse can be used to justify or refute a standpoint in a rational way. Therefore,

argumentative discourse should be studied as a specimen of normal verbal communication and interaction and it should, at the same time, be measured against a certain standard of reasonableness. The need for this convergence of normative idealization and empirical description can, if pragmatics is taken to be the study of language use, be acknowledged by construing the study of argumentation as part of *normative pragmatics*.

A perspective on argumentative discourse is necessary which overcomes both the limitations of the exclusively normative approach exemplified in modern logic and the limitations of the exclusively descriptive approach exemplified in contemporary linguistics. Modern logicians restrict themselves to non-empirical or 'world-independent' regimentation and contemporary linguists, particularly discourse and conversation analysts, are preoccupied with pure and 'unbiased' observation. The study of argumentation, however, cannot be based, unilaterally, on experience, as discourse linguists seem to suggest, nor on mere intellectual construction, as claimed by formal logicians, but these two approaches must be closely interwoven in an integrating research program. Thus, the study of argumentation will serve as a *trait d'union*. Eventually, scholars of argumentation should make it their business to clarify how the gap between normative and descriptive insights can be bridged and make it apparent how the real and the ideal could be reconciled.

The complex problems that are at stake here can only be solved in an adequate way with the help of a comprehensive research program that consists of five components: a philosophical, a theoretical, an analytical, an empirical and a practical component. On the one hand, a philosophical ideal of reasonableness must be developed and, starting from this ideal, a theoretical model for acceptable argumentation. On the other hand, argumentative reality must be investigated empirically and it must be determined where, in practice, problems do occur. Then, the normative and the descriptive dimensions must be linked together by developing analytical instruments that make it possible to view argumentative reality in the light of the favored ideal of reasonableness.

The linkage between the normative and descriptive dimension can only be adequately achieved if the diverse types of research that are needed are carried out consistently. For this, a coherent perspective on argumentative discourse is required. So far, traditionally, the rhetorical and the dialectical approach to argumentation provide the most elaborate examples of such a perspective. Therefore, I shall use them to illustrate my elucidation of the five components of a comprehensive research program in the study of argumentation.

1. *Philosophical research: Argumentation and reasonableness*

On the philosophical level, by taking up the question of what it means for a rational judge to be reasonable, scholars of argumentation, such as Barth, Habermas and Harman, reflect upon the fundamentals of the study of argumentation.

As it happens, the conceptions of reasonableness diverge from the outset, so that quite different outlooks emerge on what is considered to be an acceptable argument. Following Toulmin, we could roughly distinguish between (formal) 'geometrical', 'anthropological' and 'critical' perspectives of reasonableness, underlying logical, rhetorical and dialectical approaches to argumentation respectively. However, a more subtle classification would be preferable.

Rhetoricians favoring an anthropological outlook equate reasonableness with the standards prevailing in a certain community and consider an argument acceptable if it meets with the approval of the audience. Because of this linking of the ideal of reasonableness to particular people at a certain place and time, the rhetorical approach can be characterized as *anthropo-relativistic*.

For dialecticians who maintain a critical outlook, reasonableness is not solely determined by the norm of intersubjective agreement but also by the 'external' norm that this agreement should be reached in a valid manner. As they regard all argumentation as part of a critical discussion between two parties who are trying to resolve a difference of opinion, the main criterion for reasonableness is then whether an argumentative procedure is instrumental in achieving this goal; an argument is acceptable if it fits in with such a procedure. Because of this linking of the ideal of reasonableness to the methodic conduct of a critical discussion, the dialectical approach can be characterized as *critical-rationalist*.

2. *Theoretical research: Models for dealing with argumentation*

On the theoretical level, scholars of argumentation, such as Naess, Perelman and Toulmin, give shape to their ideals of reasonableness by presenting a particular model of what is involved in acting reasonably in argumentative discourse.

An ideal model aims at providing an adequate grasp on argumentative discourse by specifying, in accordance with a certain philosphical conception of reasonableness, which modes of arguing are acceptable to a rational judge. In such a model, terms like 'acceptable', 'unacceptable', 'justification' and 'refutation', which refer to crucial properties and relations of a theory of argumentation, are given a specific meaning.

Thus, if things work out well, a theoretical framework is created which, in dealing with argumentative discourse, can fulfil a heuristic analytical as well as a critical function.

In a rhetorical ideal model, the argumentation techniques are listed which are thought to be effective in view of the knowledge and beliefs of a certain audience. Because the acceptability ·of argumentation is thus linked to the specific epistemic background of an audience, this appoach can be called *epistemo-rhetorical.*

As dialecticians regard every argument to be part of a critical discussion, whether explicit or implicit, their ideal model provides rules that specify which moves, in the various stages of such a discussion, can contribute to resolving the differences of opinion. If this methodical verbal exchange is seen, pragmatically, as an interaction of speech acts, this approach can be called *pragma-dialectical.*

Though the consequences of violating the rules of the model may vary in their seriousness, every violation is a potential threat to the successful conclusion of the discussion. In the rhetorical perspective, these violations are misappraisals of the audience which result in defects in the persuasion process. In the dialectical perspective, they are incorrect moves in a critical discussion which correspond roughly with the kind of defects traditionally referred to as 'fallacies'.

3.   *Analytical research: Reconstructing argumentative discourse*

Whether a rhetorical model is used in which argumentation is viewed as a means of gaining approval, or a dialectical model in which argumentation is a means of resolving a dispute, in both cases argumentative discourse has to undergo some analytic interpretation before insights provided in the theoretial model can be brought to bear in practical situations. In their analytic research, scholars of argumentation, such as van Eemeren and Grootendorst, sytematically try to link, in a similar fashion as Freudian analysts, the exterior appearance of practice with their ideal model.

On the analytical level, the central question is how argumentative discourse can be reconstructed in such a way that all those, and only those, aspects are highlighted which are relevant in view of the ideal model which is chosen as a starting point. Such a normative reconstruction aims at a calculated merger of the ideal and the real that satisfies both the normative requirements exemplified in the ideal model and the descriptive data of empirical reality.

Especially when dealing with complex argumentative discourse, a normative reconstruction can have great advantages in terms of discernment and surveyability. If the reconstruction takes place within the

framework of a philosphically motivated ideal model, then the well-considered operations of deletion, permutation, addition and substitution carried out in the analysis make the things the analyst is looking for more clearly visible. First of all, however, it must be established to what extent, in a certain speech event, the discourse can be regarded as argumentative.

In a rhetorical analysis, by reconstructing argumentative discourse as an attempt to win an audience over to a standpoint, an attempt is made to provide insight into the aspects of the discourse which have an effect on the audience. Because of its emphasis on the effectivity of argumentative patterns with respect to the people who have to be persuaded, a rhetorical reconstruction can be characterized as *audience-oriented*.

In a dialectical analysis, by reconstructing argumentative discourse as an attempt to counter doubt regarding the acceptability of a standpoint, an attempt is made to provide insight into the aspects of the discourse which are relevant to the resolution of the dispute. Because of its emphasis on the function of argumentation in bringing differences of opinion to an adequate conclusion, a dialectical reconstruction can be characterized as *resolution-oriented*.

4. *Empirical research: Describing argumentative practice*

In order to be able to determine whether a particular normative reconstruction motivated by a theoretical model is indeed justified, one needs to have an insight into the particulars of argumentative practice. This kind of insight is to be gained from empirical research.

On the empirical level, scholars of argumentation, such as the Benoits, Nisbett, Jackson and Jacobs, attempt to describe the actual processes of producing, identifying and evaluating argumentative discourse and the factors which influence their outcome. This empirical research may vary from pencil and paper tests and other quantitative measuring of skills in identifying argumentation to qualitative studies of patterns in interactional argument. As the research focuses on that which is relevant in light of a certain analytic perspective, such descriptions concentrate on aspects of the argumentative discourse that are of consequence to the intended normative reconstruction.

In a rhetorical perspective, the emphasis is on the effectivity of a variety of argumentative patterns with different kinds of audiences. It is being examined which stylistic and other phenomena, in a certain context, contribute to changing people's minds. The interest of the empirical research then centers around *persuasion*.

In a dialectical perspective, the emphasis is on the ways in which

various argumentative moves contribute to resolving a difference of opinion. It is being examined which linguistic or non-linguistic factors play a part in the process of accepting or rejecting a point of view in a rational way. Then, the interest of the empirical research centers around *convincing*.

5.   Practical research: Improving argumentative reality

Argumentative competence is a gradual disposition, the mastery of which is relative to specific goals and can only be measured by standards relating to these goals. If one aims for the improvement of argumentative practice, by way of education or otherwise, argumentation should, therefore, be studied in its diverse institutionalized and non-institutionalized contexts, ranging from the formal context of law in an address to the court to the informal context of an ordinary conversation at home.

Irrespective of whether they are inspired by a critical-rationalist or an anthropological-relativist philosophy, that is, irrespective of whether the gaining of approval or the resolution of a dispute is considered to be the principal aim of argumentation, these argumentative methods must be designed to bring about practical effects which can be helpful in achieving the specific goals of a particular mode of oral or written argumentative discourse.

On the practical level, scholars of argumentation, such as Fisher, Govier and Scriven, try to put their philosophical, theoretical, analytical and empirical insight to good use in developing methods for improving argumentative practice in which the diversity of practices is systematically taken into account. They examine how one can methodically increase people's argumentative skills and abilities in the production of argumentative discourse as well as in its analysis and evaluation.

In a rhetorical approach, this amounts, first and foremost, to giving them ready-made directions. By sampling shining examples and enforcing imitative training, an attempt is made to teach people how to argue successfully. Because of its tendency to aim for providing cut-and-dried drills for handling argumentative discourse, the rhetorical approach of the practical component of the argumentation research can be characterized as *prescription-minded*.

In a dialectical approach, an attempt is made to improve argumentative practice by furthering a discussion-minded attitude and promoting insight into the procedural prerequisites of resolving conflicts and an adequate awareness of the obstacles. Dialecticians aim for better understanding of the problems involved in producing, analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse by treating them as active discussion partners who can

respond critically to material which fits in with their existing knowledge. Because of its emphasis on stimulating independent thinking about argumentative discourse, the dialectical approach of the practical component can be characterized as *reflection-minded.*

A futuristic view: interdisciplinarity and mutual coordination

As it is the calculated fusion of normative modelling and empirical description which is the major and distinguishing task of scholars of argumentation, they should develop theoretical paradigms in which these two dimensions are adequately linked. In order to be able to do this, they need comprehensive research programs of inter-related research projects on the philosophical, the theoretical, the analytical, the empirical and the practical level. These types of research represent the five components that are indispensable in a fully-fledged research program that makes it possible to present a well-considered, distinct and consistent paradigm.

Ideally, this calls for a genuinely interdisciplinary approach in which all the activities are geared to one another. In practice, however, such interdisciplinarity may not be initially feasible. As long as the general perspective is closely observed, multidisciplinary contributions from the various constitutive disciplines can also be useful. Of course, even isolated studies which have nothing to do with any general perspective, can sometimes be made to fit in. It goes without saying that specializing in one particular type of research not only remains perfectly legitimate, but in many cases also to be recommended. The only prerequisite is that the research concerned is not isolated and purely *ad hoc*, but can be construed as being an integral part of a more-encompassing research program.

In my opinion, in the nineties we need not so much the further institutionalization of separate groups in separate camps as we need the formulation of encompassing research program which can, as it were, serve as an organizing principle that orders and combines. In developing such programs, scholars of argumentation should try to make themselves understood by as many interested fellow-scholars as possible and they should not make matters more complicated than necessary. All kinds of provincialism must be avoided by encouraging international communication and interaction between scholars of argumentation and multidisciplinary co-ordination, if not interdisciplinary co-operation.

It will be necessary to cross borders — not only geographical language borders but also, and not in the least, institutional borders of departments and disciplines. If scholars of argumentation suceed in doing this, and if they do so within the context of a well-defined research program, then it

will be clear what progress can be made on the various levels of research in subjects such diverse as argument schemes, argumentation structures, conversational argument and fallacies.

Frans H. van Eemeren (born 1946) is professor of Speech Communication at the University of Amsterdam, where he also obtained a doctorate in linguistics. His research is in the general area of descriptive and normative pragmatics and has concentrated on argumentation theory. Together with R. Grootendorst, J. Anthony Blair and Charles A. Willard, he organized in 1986 the first International Conference on Argumentation at the University of Amsterdam and founded the International Society for the Study of Argumentation (ISSA). He is co-editor of the international journal *Argumentation*.

Since 1989 he is Fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (Wassenaar) and coordinator of a Nucleus Group 'Fallacies as Violations of Rules for Argumentative Discourse'.

Together with Rob Grootendorst, he has published several books and articles in Dutch, English, French and German. His main publications in English are *Speech acts in argumentative discussions* (Dordrecht 1984: Foris), *Handbook of argumentation theory* (with Tjark Kruiger; Dordrecht 1987: Foris), *Argumentation: Across the lines of discipline*, *Argumentation: Perspectives and approaches* and *Argumentation: Analysis and practices* (co-edited with J. Anthony Blair and Charles A. Willard; Dordrecht 1987: Foris). *Reconstructing conversational argument* (with S. Jacobs and S. Jackson; Foris. In press).