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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

6.1 Main findings

The goal of this study has been to carry out an analysis and evaluation of the way in which politicians maneuver strategically in response to an interviewer's accusation in a political interview that their position is inconsistent with another position they have advanced before. To attain this goal, I have first determined what kinds of responses a politician can provide when he is confronted with a criticism of inconsistency. Next, I have identified the most important preconditions imposed on the argumentative discourse by the requirements of a political interview in which the politician's responses are situated. My analysis has concentrated on what kinds of advantages a politician can gain in a political interview when responding to an accusation of inconsistency by retracting a standpoint that has been advanced earlier and subsequently reformulating this standpoint. In order to be able to evaluate these responses, I have formulated a set of soundness conditions which I applied to a number of concrete cases in judging whether the responses concerned were reasonable.

In order to determine what kinds of responses a politician can give to an accusation of inconsistency, I have examined the communicative and the interactional dimension of these accusations. The communicative purpose of an accusation of inconsistency is to make the addressee understand that he is criticized for allegedly having said something that

is the opposite of what he has said before about the same issue (there is an inconsistency between words) or for having said something that is incompatible with the way in which the addressee has acted (there is an inconsistency between words and actions). The interactional purpose of this form of criticism is to elicit a response that addresses the charge of inconsistency. In an argumentative confrontation in which the protagonist of a standpoint is accused by an antagonist of an inconsistency, the criticism casts doubt on the acceptability of the protagonist's current standpoint. The antagonist points out that the standpoint cannot be maintained because the protagonist has acted in such a way that the opposite standpoint can be ascribed to him.

Because the accusation of inconsistency is a form of criticism that can either be accepted or not, the protagonist of a standpoint can respond to it in two ways: he can maintain his standpoint and defend it, or he can give in to the antagonist's criticism by retracting his standpoint. If he is to give the preferred response, however, the protagonist has only one option: he should accept the charge and thereby admit that the accusation is correct. The accusation of inconsistency is aimed at getting the interlocutor's acceptance that the criticism of inconsistency is justified.

In order to achieve the main goal of this study of making possible a realistic analysis and evaluation of the politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency, I have taken account of how the macro-context of a political interview affects the participants' argumentative moves. I have characterized the political interview as a predominantly argumentative activity type implementing the genre of deliberation in the political domain, the institutional point of which is to preserve a democratic political culture. I have shown that intrinsically linked to the institutional point of this activity type is a process of accountability in which the interviewer holds a politician to account for his words and actions and the politician attempts to give the required account. That is to say that within a democratic political system politicians are held to account by representatives of the media before a listening, reading or television-watching audience.

An accountability process involves by definition that the interviewer asks critical questions and the politician provides justification and clarification by responding. These basic characteristics make clear that a disagreement is assumed to exist between an antagonist (the interviewer) who is specifically oriented towards putting forward objections and criticisms and a protagonist (the politician) who has to deal with these criticisms in his response. The disagreement at the heart of a political interview concerns matters of importance to the public which are associated with, though not limited to, policy making, procedural correctness, ethical standards, the use of public money and the observance of legal rules. Essentially, the disagreement is about whether or not the politician's words and actions with regard to these matters are adequate.

In my characterization of the activity type of a political interview, I identified several important preconditions for argumentation. Due to his role as holder of public office who has to be able to account for his words and actions, the politician has to argue for his standpoint. In practice, this means that he defends himself and the party he represents. Therefore, his answers convey a commitment to a standpoint by means of which he claims that his words and actions are adequate. Whatever the politician says, irrespective of whether it is presented as a clarification or explanation, is in fact a defense of his words and actions and an attempt at not having to admit defeat. In virtue of his role as spokesman for the public, the interviewer questions the politician's words and actions and goes, if he thinks this to be in the public interest, beyond mere doubt by advancing the opposite of the politician's standpoint. He makes a sustained demand for further justification by continuously raising doubts that put the tenability of the politician's standpoint to the test. While the main difference of opinion can be viewed as an attempt at resolving a difference of opinion about the adequacy of the politician's words and actions, sub-discussions may take place when the interviewer does not accept the politician's standpoint. For example, when the politician's standpoint is inconsistent with another standpoint, the interviewer initiates a sub-discussion about the politician's change of position, which he should clarify and justify for the audience at home.

Usually, the outcome of a political interview does not become clear immediately. After all, it is the public as the primary addressee that determines the outcome of the discussion. Eventually, they do so by deciding in the voting box whether or not a politician's words and actions are up to the desired standard of adequacy. The interviewer sometimes re-opens a discussion on an issue that has been discussed already to scrutinize the politician's words and actions to the highest possible degree.

An accusation of inconsistency, whether it points at an inconsistency that is clear to everyone or simply alleged without being accurate, can have damaging consequences for the politician. In the cases in which the accusation is clearly justified, the politician can only respond to the charge by accepting the accusation as correct and retracting one of the inconsistent standpoints. However, by simply retracting his standpoint the politician shows that he cannot provide the account for his performance expected of him as a holder of public office. In order to defend himself, and the political party which he represents, a politician often tries to find a potentially effective compensating adjustment. My analysis of interviews with British politicians has revealed that a suitable adjustment enabling the politician to continue the discussion is to reformulate one of the standpoints at issue. This way of responding is an attempt at maneuvering strategically by defining the difference of opinion clearly but doing so in such a way that the chances of winning the discussion increase. The politician's maneuvering is constrained by the institutional preconditions for argumentation in a political interview.

After analyzing in detail three argumentative exchanges in which a politician is accused of being inconsistent, I distinguished three patterns in the confrontational strategic maneuvering a politician resorts to when he has no other choice than to accept a charge of inconsistency. The first pattern amounts to reformulating the original standpoint in conditional terms: in the reformulated standpoint the politician's support is dependent on certain conditions being fulfilled. The second pattern of strategic maneuvering consists in the politician reformulating the original standpoint by portraying the interviewer's interpretation that there is an inconsistency as a misunderstanding that requires clarification. The third pattern amounts to reformulating the original standpoint in such a way that the politician can claim that the original standpoint concerned something different than what the current standpoint pertains to. By making use of one of these three patterns of strategic maneuvering, a politician lives up to the institutional requirement of giving an account of his words and actions, takes away the inconsistency of which he is accused and repairs the potentially damaging image of being someone who cannot be trusted.

In my analysis of the politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency, I have shown that these moves are part of a dialectical procedure. In carrying out this procedure, the politician is viewed as being interested in balancing the dialectical goal of defining the difference of opinion clearly with the rhetorical goal of doing so in his own favor. However, the balance between satisfying the dialectical goal and at the same time pursuing the rhetorical goal is not in all cases obtained. The desire to be rhetorically effective may override the concern to remain dialectically reasonable. In that case, the maneuvering can be said to have derailed into fallaciousness.

In order to gain insight into the reasonableness of the politician's maneuvering, I have carried out an evaluation that concentrated on judging the dialectical soundness of the politician's strategic maneuvering. I have assessed whether the sequence of moves made in retracting a standpoint and afterwards reformulating this standpoint contributes to a reasonable resolution of the difference of opinion that is at stake in a political interview. To this end, I have formulated and applied three soundness conditions that should be fulfilled if a politician is to reasonably retract a standpoint that is afterwards reformulated.

The first soundness condition (condition of openness) ensures that a protagonist whose standpoint is declared inconsistent with another standpoint that he has advanced and who responds by retracting a standpoint and reformulating this standpoint, leaves open all dialectically possible continuations of the discussion. That is to say that the antagonist should not be prevented from maintaining his criticism or raising new criticism if he wants to do so. Violating this condition gives rise to fallacies involving attacks on the antagonist aimed at excluding him from the discussion (such as *ad hominem* attacks and *ad baculum* attacks).

The second soundness condition (condition of relevance) requires that the protagonist resolve the inconsistency with which he is charged by retracting a standpoint altogether. This condition has been formulated to ensure that the politician's response is a relevant reaction of acceptance of the accusation of inconsistency. In addition, the retraction of the standpoint advanced previously which is no longer found acceptable should concern indeed the standpoint that is claimed to be retracted. This condition is not fulfilled when the protagonist does not retract the earlier standpoint altogether, thus making it harder to be questioned with regard to it. Another possible violation of the condition of relevance occurs when a protagonist who has not retracted his standpoint altogether refuses to respond to criticism regarding his original standpoint on the ground that he is no longer committed to the standpoint for which he is challenged.

The third soundness condition (condition of clarity) requires the phrasing of strategic maneuvering concerned to be as clear as is required for a proper understanding. The protagonist should make it understood that the inconsistency has been resolved and that the antagonist may continue the discussion in any possible way. Violating this condition amounts to not ensuring the required clarity. This is usually done to camouflage that other soundness conditions have not been fulfilled.

Evaluating the politician's strategic maneuvering in the context of a political interview by applying the three soundness conditions has shown that more often than not the politician resorts to subtle rhetorically motivated abuses in order to persuade the interviewer and the audience at home of the acceptability of his words and actions. In a political interview, a politician is by definition criticized for his words and actions and cannot avoid responding to such criticism. But the politician is not interested only in giving an account, he will also want to build a positive image of himself as someone who can be trusted by the audience at home. Therefore, the politician often resorts to subtle means of preventing the interviewer from continuing a harsh line of inquiry, especially in cases in which his opinions are claimed to be inconsistent. I have argued that judging the (un)reasonableness of moves should be based on an assessment of each case on its own merits.

6.2 Implications for further research

In this study, I have dealt in detail with a politician's retracting a standpoint and reformulating this standpoint in response to an accusation of inconsistency in a political interview. The responses are reactions to a common form of criticism in which an interviewer points out that the politician cannot maintain a standpoint because it is

inconsistent with a standpoint advanced earlier. My account of the politician's responses has concentrated on identifying their potentially strategic function and evaluating whether the moves concerned are reasonable or not.

For the purpose of analyzing and evaluating a politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency, I have used and further developed pragma-dialectical tools which enabled me to go beyond merely describing the responses at issue. I have identified certain typical patterns of the politician's responses and explained when the responses can be seen as reasonable or unreasonable in a political interview. Achieving this has been made possible by using the concepts of strategic maneuvering and argumentative activity types. The concept of strategic maneuvering has been particularly useful to understand that a politician's moves are always attempts made in a dialectical procedure at balancing dialectical concerns for remaining reasonable with rhetorical concerns for winning the discussion. A politician's moves have been analyzed as potentially effective by taking into account that he makes particular topical choices, adapts himself to the audience in a certain way and presents his moves in such a way that he reaches a favorable dialectical outcome of the discussion. In the confrontation stage in which the responses at issue are situated, defining the difference of opinion in such a way as to remain engaged in the discussion is the favored outcome.

The concept of argumentative activity types has been helpful to identify the preconditions which the requirements of a political interview impose on the politician's responses. By recognizing that argumentation is central to a political interview, I was able to analyze the moves concerned by doing justice to the institutional aim of a political interview of carrying out an accountability procedure. A politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency have been examined as an attempt at giving an account of his words or actions with a view to convincing the interviewer and ultimately the public at home that he is up to standard. The concept of activity types has also been helpful to evaluate the moves concerned from a perspective which did justice to the institutional concerns of the arguers in a political interview.

My research complements previous studies of politicians' responses in a political interview. Scholars taking a discourse analytic perspective in particular have described the form, structure and function of the responses politicians give in a political interview when they are asked confrontational questions. But the traditional textual analysis has not yet developed a systematic methodology for analyzing questions and answers in a political interview and has not shown interest in evaluating their quality. This can be partly explained by the fact that discourse analysis scholars have ignored almost completely the argumentative nature of the exchanges taking place in a political interview. In the rare cases in which argumentation has been recognized (Wilson 1990, Fetzer 2007), the authors have merely pointed at the presence of argumentation. Some discourse analysts have

stressed the role of reasonable argumentation in a political interview, all the same they have not described, analyzed and evaluated the argumentative discourse that takes place in light of a theoretically motivated standard. Nor have they explained why questions in which accusations are launched are preferred by the interviewers, although they have been recognized as a common argumentative technique (Clayman and Heritage 2002), and why responding is so difficult for the politicians.

By a combination of a dialectical and a pragmatic approach, I have in the first place succeeded in identifying a finite number of responses a politician can give to an interviewer's accusation of inconsistency in an argumentative confrontation. Dialectically, I have characterized accusations pointing at an inconsistency between standpoints as expressions of critical doubt that occur in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. Pragmatically, I have defined such accusations of inconsistency as illocutionary acts that are performed to bring about perlocutionary effects that consist in answering the charge. Of the two possible answers to the charge, accepting or not accepting the criticism, getting the accusation accepted by retracting one of the inconsistent standpoints is the preferred response.

However, accusations of inconsistency are not exclusively made to point at an inconsistency between standpoints in the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. Such accusations can also be a way of indicating that a presumably shared starting point that has been agreed upon in the opening stage is inconsistent with another starting point in the discussion (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2008, van Eemeren 2010). The accusation might also be an attempt at making the protagonist of a standpoint retract one of the arguments (or sub-standpoints) advanced in the argumentation stage because of its alleged inconsistency with a standpoint accepted in the opening stage. Further research could be carried out to investigate accusations of inconsistency and responses to these charges in other stages of the critical testing procedure. The core dialectical profiles (van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck Henkemans 2007a) can constitute the starting points for representing all possible argumentative moves and deciding which kinds of critical moves the accusations and their responses could realize. This approach can make clear in which way this form of criticism is realized in the different stages of a critical discussion, for what purpose, and what kinds of responses it elicits. Eventually, this enterprise could lead to a complete typology of the kinds of moves an accusation of inconsistency can instantiate and the possibilities these moves offer for maneuvering in response to them. If such an endeavor proves feasible, all strategic functions an accusation of inconsistency may have and all responses to it could be established for all discussion stages. In this way, the various forms of strategic maneuvering with this type of move would be fully investigated and could be taken as examples for researching other forms of criticism and responses to them.

My characterization of the macro-context of a political interview as an argumentative activity type has emphasized that central to this activity type is an accountability process in which the interviewer holds the politician to account and the politician is expected to give an account. Following on from this characteristic, my analysis of the politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency has been carried out by taking into account that each argumentative move is advanced with a view to satisfying the concern for accountability. Every move of the interviewer has been examined as a request for clarifying and justifying the politician's words and actions. The politician's responses have been reconstructed in all cases as arguments in support of a positive evaluation of his words and actions.

One can argue, however, that viewing political interviews as an activity type in which only asking for and giving an account are central is insufficient for a proper understanding of the strategic maneuvering that goes on. After all, an accountability procedure includes clearly also an informational dimension (Curtin 2007). Recognizing and providing information are certainly essential preconditions for carrying out an accountability process. But it is only by studying the strategic maneuvering in a political interview that this other goal of informing is recognized as another factor that has significant influence on the shape of the participants' contributions. I suggested in my analyses that an interviewer's accusation of inconsistency often also involves a request for clarifying information and that the politician's response sometimes provides such a clarification.

The politician could exploit the informative and the argumentative aspects of the communicative activity type of a political interview by giving the appearance of being engaged in fulfilling the vital need to give an account while he limits himself in fact strategically to just offering an explanation or providing information in order to escape from having to give a justification. Or the politician may make it seem as if the account he gives requires no further justification by presenting it as information so that a weak defense does not come to light. This study could be extended by methodically investigating how the interest in satisfying the informational requirement is exploited for purposes of winning the discussion. Unlike previous studies taking a discourse analytic perspective, in which information-giving has been considered to be the main aim pursued in a political interview, providing information by the politician should be analyzed as part of an argumentative discussion in which giving an account is the main institutional concern of the participants. In this way, an analysis can be given that does justice both to the informational dimension and the accountability dimension of a political interview.

I have identified three patterns of strategic maneuvering as typical of a politician retracting a standpoint and reformulating it to remain engaged in the discussion. In all these patterns, the inconsistency is to a certain extent acknowledged and afterwards

removed, and the politician will potentially convince the audience of the acceptability of his words and actions. Yet, it seems necessary to carry out further empirical research in which more concrete cases should be analyzed to provide more support to the general account of the strategic function of the responses at issue. Research could be conducted to investigate whether other patterns of strategic maneuvering can be distinguished or whether indeed the identified patterns are typical of all responses to an accusation of inconsistency that cannot be easily refuted.

In my study I propose that the reasonableness of the politician's responses to an accusation of inconsistency by retracting a standpoint and afterwards reformulating this standpoint be evaluated by applying three soundness conditions. Making use of these three conditions enabled me to judge the soundness of the politician's sequence of moves by assessing whether the critical dialectical procedure is hindered or not. I checked whether the politician prevents the interviewer from maintaining his criticism or advancing new criticism, whether the inconsistency is indeed resolved and whether the moves made are clear enough for the purpose of the exchange. I have shown that in all cases in which any of these conditions has not been fulfilled, the rhetorical concerns for winning the discussion have taken the upper hand over the dialectical concerns for remaining reasonable. A line for further research is to investigate whether the moves deemed (un)reasonable by applying the soundness conditions I formulated are perceived in the same way by ordinary arguers. In order to ensure that the conditions for evaluating the dialectical soundness of the responses at issue are intersubjectively valid, further experimental research is to be carried out to investigate whether the standards for judging the soundness of the politician's responses of ordinary arguers echo the pragma-dialectical standards.