Argumentative reinterpretation

PIERRE-YVES RACCAH

CNRS - UMR7270.
France
pyr@linguistes.fr

ABSTRACT: a careful observation of human languages leads to question the idea that any utterance that plays a role in argumentation necessarily *has* an argumentative orientation. This paper presents these questioning observations, explains how they challenge this idea, and suggests some hints for a position in agreement with these observations. Two groups of facts are examined: one concerns the status of [B] in [A, therefore B]; the other group concerns segments containing a prosodic break.

KEYWORDS: argumentative orientation, argumentative reinterpretation, markers of reinterpretation, prosodic break, status of utterances, utterances formulating orientations.

1. INTRODUCTION

It seemed unquestionable that any utterance which plays a role in argumentation necessarily has an argumentative orientation (AO). However, a more careful observation of human languages leads to question this idea. The purpose of this paper is to present the corresponding observations, explain how they challenge this idea, and suggest some ideas for a position more in agreement with these observations.

The first group of facts that question this idea concerns the meaning that should be attributed to statements of type $[A, \text{therefore } B]_S$ in situations S in which they are understood as formulating a reasoning that leads from A to B. In general, it is usual to consider that in statements of this type, B is a formulation of the conclusion aimed at by a statement of A in S.

It is at this point that the problem I signal arises: if the first member of $[A, \text{therefore } B]_S$, $[A]_S$ is clearly an utterance, is its second member [B] also an utterance? If this were the case, $[B]_S$ should have an AO, but since B is just the AO formulation of a (different) utterance, it is not clear which AO $[B]_S$ itself could have. What status can we grant $[B]_S$?

The second group of facts concerns segments of speech containing a prosodic break: according to a recent description of the semantic effects of the prosodic break, it imposes an *argumentative reinterpretation*: when the segment preceding the break has the status of *formulating an AO*, after the break, the same segment acquires the new argumentative status of *being oriented towards another AO*.

Thus, an utterance with an argumentative role would not necessarily *have* an AO but could also *be the formulation* of an AO; human languages would have indicators (like prosodic breaks) of reinterpretation from one of these two functions to the other.

This paper examines the methodological, theoretical and descriptive consequences of such a suggestion.

2. STARTING POINTS

When speaking, we use abstract units of some language and utter them in a perceptible string. When hearers understand such a string, they build (subjective) *utterance meanings* using the (public, conventional) *sentence meaning* of the language units and their (private, subjective) perception of the situation. Those two kinds of contributions to the understanding can be seen as the use of a tool (*sentence meaning*) in order to work a kind of material (perception of the situation) for shaping an *utterance meaning*, or, like described in Harder (1990), as a set of *instructions* in order to build utterance meaning. *Diagram 1* gives a pictorial representation of this idea:
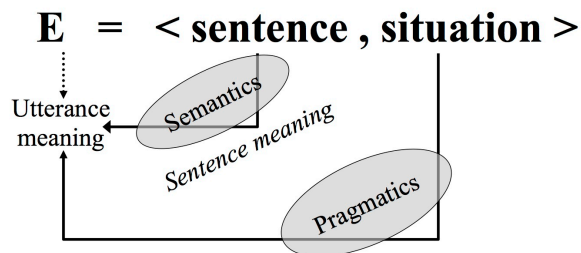
$$E = < \text{sentence}, \text{situation} >$$

Utterance meaning

Semantics

Sentence meaning

Pragmatics

Diagram 1: the characterization of an utterance

With that representation in mind, we can now proceed to examining the facts that challenge the assimilation of *having a role in argumentation* with *having an argumentative orientation*, when speaking of an utterance.

2.1. *Autonomy of argumentative links with respect to denotation*

It is now firmly established that human languages allow presenting, in a situation S, an utterance $[A]_s$ as an argument in favour of a conclusion C independently from what $[A]_s$ refers to in S. The following example, chosen for its apparent striking absurdity, illustrates that point:

(E1) Max wears a beard; therefore this leaf is red
(E2) Max wears a beard; however this leaf is red

The fact that it is rather difficult to find a situation in which either (E1) or (E2) can be uttered without provoking a feeling of absurdity does not make *using these examples* absurd: on the contrary, this fact emphasizes the generality of our point, for, what produces the feeling of absurdity is that, in (E1) (respectively in E2)), the first segment is presented as an argument *in favour of* (respectively *against*) the second segment, in spite of the absence of conceivable referential relation between the two segments. That clearly proves our point: presenting $[A]_s$ as an argument in favour of C *is* independent of what $[A]_s$ refers to in S… Sometimes it looks absurd, sometimes not, but that is another question. What will be useful to remember is that:

(a) *The argumentative value of an utterance*
    does not rely on its informational value

2.2. *Not all utterances have argumentative orientations, but…*

It is also generally accepted that not all utterances are arguments. For instance, an utterance of the Spanish sentence

(E3) S*on las cinco* ("it's 5 o'clock")

can be used as an answer to the question

(E4) *¿qué hora es?* ("what time is it?"):

in that use, (E3) is not an argument *and has no argumentative orientation*.

However, in other situations, utterances of (E3) *are* arguments and *do* possess an argumentative orientation. This is the case, for instance, when an utterance of (E3) is proffered in order to urge someone to hurry up, or, on the contrary, in order to relieve stress on someone who believed it was later than 5 o'clock: in these situations, utterances of (E3) *are* arguments.

More generally, for any sentence of any language, one can find a situation in which an utterance of that sentence in that situation is an argument for some conclusion. So that:

> (b) *Any sentence, whatsoever, can be uttered in a situation in which the resulting utterance has an argumentative orientation in that situation*

It follows from (a) and (b) that, since an utterance can be considered to be totally determined by the pair <sentence,situation>, a pair <sentence,argumentative_orientation> is sufficient to characterize those utterances which are arguments. However, in spite of the apparently formal character of that statement, it is ambiguous: section 3 shows in what this ambiguity consists.

3. UTTERANCES *ORIENTED TOWARDS* vs. *FORMULATING* CONCLUSIONS

As was pointed out in the introduction, an utterance may play a role in the argumentative value of statement that contains it, without having an argumentative orientation: we saw the general case of statements of type [A, therefore B], where $[B]_S$ is a formulation of the intended orientation of $[A]_S$ in situation S. A more detailed analysis of an example will allow to better understand why this challenges the assumption we started with. In utterances of (E5):

> (E5) *Ha llovido, entonces, la carretera estará atascada*
> ("it rained, therefore the road will be jammed")

the second member formulates an argumentative orientation of the first member, while in utterances of (E6), the same segment is oriented towards the conclusion formulated by the second member:

> (E6) *La carretera estará atascada: te conviene ir andando*
> ("the road will be jammed: you'd better walk")

Thus, the Spanish sentence *la carretera estará atascada* can give rise to two different types of utterances:

1) the *formulation* of an argumentative orientation concerning the state of the road (E5);

2) an utterance *orientated* towards some conclusion, which hearers can determine taking into account, among other factors, the language units which are used and their perception of the situation in which those units are used (E6).

As a result, speaking of the pair *<S,O>* is ambiguous in that it may refer to either an utterance of sentence S with orientation *O*, or an utterance of a formulation of the orientation *O*, by means of sentence *S*.

It follows that, even though an utterance can still be characterized by a pair *sentence* and *argumentative orientation*, such a pair may characterize the utterance in two different manners (either the orientation *is the argumentative conclusion* of the utterance, or the orientation *is what is formulated* by the utterance).

If things stayed as simple, in order to account for what has been observed, we would only have to disambiguate the formulation <S,O>, in order to name utterances, according to one or the other function they play, adding, for instance, an explicit third term for *formulation* or *conclusion*: <S,O,f>, or <S,O,c>. However, things get more complicated, as we will see in the next section, in which we will also propose a more complex solution.

4. THE NECESSITY OF ARGUMENTATIVE REINTERPRETATION

The facts corresponding to the cases analysed in section 3 can be considered as simple cases, where nothing more is required than the 'meta-disambiguation' proposed above. We will now see, through more complex cases, that (and why) that solution is not general enough, and will propose a more general solution, which predicts a new kind of markers. And, fortunately, we will be able to exhibit this new kind of markers.

4.1 *Simple and complex cases (with respect to our concern)*

In both examples (E5) and (E6), the global utterance was composed of two segments related by a connector (*entonces* for (E5), the colon for (E6)). But utterances can be composed of several segments, with several (minus one) connectives.

In cases of utterances of sentences with more than one occurrence of a connective, things get more complicated. The observation of examples (E7)-(E9) will show why and how. (The following notations are used for the transcription of the examples: "+" means that the utterance is easy to understand; "?" means that hearers need a major effort of imagination in order to understand the utterance –if they can; "…" indicates a prosodic pause)

(E7) +*Ha llovido, entonces, la carretera estará atascada, … por lo que te conviene ir andando*
+"It rained, therefore the road will be jammed, … consequently, you'd better walk"

(E8) ?*Ha llovido, pero la carretera no estará atascada, pero te conviene ir andando*
?"It rained, but the road will not be jammed, but you'd better walk"

(E9) +*Ha llovido pero la carretera no estará atascada, ...*
        pero te conviene ir andando
        +"It rained, but the road will not be jammed, …
        but you'd better walk"

Utterances of (E8) are difficult to understand, and this, in spite of the fact that usual semantic descriptions of *pero* (established for a usual mono-occurrent *pero*)[1] provide a straightforward description of what their meanings should have been… (E9), which differs from (E8) in that it has a pause between the second segment and the second connective, is however easily understandable. When (E7) is understandable, it is understood that its second member formulates the orientation aimed at with its first member and, then, becomes argument in favour of the third member.

For (E9), in a first step, the second member formulates the orientation opposed to the one aimed at with the first member, and, in a second step, is re-interpreted as an argument opposed to the conclusion formulated in the third member.

4.2 *The prosodic pause as an argumentative reinterpretation marker*

The prosodic pause seems to function as a *reinterpretation marker*: comparing the behaviour of (E8) with that of (E9) supports this hypothesis. The fact that the prosodic pause may have a semantic effect is not really surprising: lots of well-known examples already support that idea, as can be seen in table 1 (pause in a dialog), and table 2 (pause in an utterance), which show the contrasts between utterances with vs. without a pause:

– Do you love me? – Yes I do!	– Do you love me? – … Yes I do!
– Max? – Yes?	– Max? – … Yes?

Table 1: pause in a dialog

This is nice, isn't it?	This is nice, … isn't it?
Max is nice, nice	Max is nice, … nice
? Tom has finished almost	Tom has finished, … almost
Jim was here	? Jim was… here

Table 2: pause in an utterance

There is something common between the effects of all those utterances with pauses (including our examples (E7) and (E9)): they involve an (possibly partial) evaluation of what has been said and / or of possible continuations[2].

The fact that occurrences of prosodic pauses are numerous in dialogs and discourses, combined with the fact that they produce the same effect (instruct an argumentative reinterpretation), at least in a great number of languages, compels to consider that those languages have a corresponding sign (call it the *prosodic pause*) whose meaning is the instruction to reinterpret. A reader who finds that reasoning hard to admit could compare it with the following:

The fact that occurrences of [kæt] are numerous in dialogs and discourses, combined with the fact that they produce the same effect (instruct to include a cat in the

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[1] One of the proposals for such a description can be found in Raccah (2005: 73-75)

[2] Adam Makkai (1980) suggested, almost forty years ago, that "A semantic pause […] is a chance to change your mind in mid-utterance".

universe of the discourse), at least in some languages, compels to consider that those languages have a corresponding sign (call it /kæt /) whose meaning is the instruction to include a cat.

Since the second reasoning is identical to the first one and is a prerequisite for studying semantics, the introduction, in the first reasoning, of the *prosodic pause* in the realm of the signs of (at least some) languages cannot be dismissed without very good reasons.

A contrastive analysis involving very different languages would be interesting, especially in order to test the surprisingly likely hypothesis according to which all languages share this same sign, ... and with the same meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

The principal benefits of the work presented here can be divided into (i) *descriptive consequences*, and (ii) *theoretical consequences.*

(i) In order to correctly account for the facts presented in this paper, one must include the following phenomena in the set of semantic facts that must be taken into account in a semantic description:

(a) when the utterance of a sentence is involved with the argumentative aspect of a discourse that actualizes it, it may either *be oriented towards* some conclusion, or else *formulate* some conclusion;

(b) the *prosodic pause* is a semantic unit (like a lexical item of some language), whose meaning is to indicate the hearer that the segment preceding it (the pause) has to be reinterpreted from a *formulation*-utterance to an *oriented*-utterance.

(ii) Adding facts (a) and (b) in the set of facts that must be taken into account in a semantic description has important theoretical consequences.

(C1) Argumentative utterances can no longer be simply characterised by a pair (sentence, conclusion): their role with respect to that conclusion (*oriented towards* it or *formulating* it) must also be specified. This change may have interesting consequences on theoretical semantics.

(C2) Admitting that a prosodic pause in a discourse is the actualisation of a sign of the language (sign that we called *prosodic pause*) requires a change in the conception of what a *sign* is. I haven't explored yet the consequences of such a change, but one can guess that it can lead to interesting challenges in several disciplines, among which, linguistic theory and semiotics.

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