

Dissociating between 'is' and 'ought': Recognizing and interpreting positions in climate change controversies

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This presentation focuses on the uses of dissociation in controversial debates. We report findings from an argumentative analysis of (N=22) interviews, in which participants were presented with contentious assertions concerning climate change action. We show how the interview responses were characterized by contrastive and concessive uses of the connective *but*, and explore the – temporal and spatial – patterns through which dissociation was used in enhancing the dialectical reasonableness together with the rhetorical effectiveness of the arguments.

KEYWORDS: appearance/reality pair, carbon offsetting, controversy, definition, dissociation, environmental discourse, temporality and spatiality

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore whether and how temporality and spatiality are used as organizing principles of dissociation in the discourse of climate change campaigners. We do this by examining argumentative *but*-constructions as linguistic vehicles of dissociation, and by considering the role of the *Appearance/Reality* pair (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) in sustaining the dissociations.

To achieve our goals, we focus on the argumentation carried out by climate campaigners in a controversy over the utility of carbon offsets. In order to instigate conflict and argumentation, an interview study we use video-elicitation, presenting the participants with contentious arguments about the utility of carbon offsets.

A carbon offset is a financial instrument devised to compensate for carbon emissions created in one location through reductions in another (Lovell & Liverman, 2010). Voluntarily paying a small amount to compensate the emissions created by one's consumption is portrayed – in the current global climate change governance framework – as an efficient and economically viable way to mitigate climate change. This instrument has however also been contested as sustaining old habits and impeding engagement with the (unequal) political and production relations that lie at the heart of the climate problem (Bumpus & Liverman, 2008; Rathzel & Uzzell, 2009). The controversy over the

utility of carbon offsets consequently gives us chance to examine the ways through which different definitions and meanings are contrasted and negotiated, and political and ideological incompatibilities are dealt with.

Below, we first explain why paying attention to the temporal and spatial characteristics of climate change discourse is relevant, constructing these as two important characteristics of environmental discourse at large. Then we summarize the relevant literature on dissociation, drawing mainly on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) rhetorical, and van Rees's (2009) pragma-dialectical accounts. After the analysis of exemplary excerpts from our interviews, we discuss the relevance of the *Is/Ought* pair, through which environmental campaigners – in dissociating between certain notions – organize their criticisms of the status quo, while upholding some basic features of it.

1.1 Spatial and temporal characteristics of environmental discourse

Many authors have pointed out that environmental discourse has particular spatial and temporal characteristics, and climate change is a case example these accounts (e.g. Beck, Blok, Tyfield & Zhang, 2013; Morton, 2010; Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999; Adam, 1998). Two basic findings that specifically concern climate change communication may be summarized as follows.

First, regarding the spatial characteristics, the global, national and local scales of the threat and contexts of action are often distinguished or contrasted. For instance, it is known that in media portrayals of climate change in the industrialized countries, the threat is often represented as distant from the viewer (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2014; Smith & Joffe, 2009). In the press of industrializing countries, on the other hand, the representation of solutions and responsibility as situated elsewhere, "outside the national borders", is a repeated finding (e.g. Uzelgun & Castro, 2015; Billett, 2010). Representation of the threat and solutions as "external to the collective" is also regarded as part of a de-politicizing discourse, and part of "environmental post-politics" (e.g. Williams & Booth, 2013, p. 25, Swyngedouw, 2010).

Second, regarding temporality, it is possible to broadly say that environmental discourse is typically oriented towards the future (Morton, 2010; Beck, Blok, Tyfield, & Zhang, 2013), mainly to act upon the present, and to cover – and in some cases constrain – the potentialities emerging from use of miscellaneous metaphors (Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999). This focus on the future has been criticized as evasion of problems and putting back of solutions (Uzelgun & Castro, 2014; Ramos & Carvalho, 2009), and also as part of a de-politicizing discourse on climate change (Demeritt, 2001). Furthermore, since problems like climate change are massively "distributed" in time

(Morton 2010), and our knowledge of them also extends to vastly different timescales (e.g. geological, cultural), the superimposition of different times and timescales in this type of discourse is almost inevitable (Harré et al., 1999).

Hence, looking at whether the imposition of value hierarchies in dissociating arguments is carried out through temporal or spatial categories may help to better understand the use of this technique in the given context.

1.2 Dissociation and its underlying pairs

Dissociation is an argumentative technique that consists of separating a (previously unified) idea into two elements, and imposing a value hierarchy on them (Perelman, 1982). The use of this technique is “always prompted by the desire to remove an incompatibility”, and in dealing with a given incompatibility through dissociation, the speaker can “sacrifice one or even both of the conflicting values” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 413).

In their seminal work, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) focus on the patterns through which the sacrifice of “conflicting values” is carried out in epistemic discourse. Their main concern is the *organising principle(s)* of dissociations and for this they identify a lengthy list of “philosophical pairs” (e.g. means/end, subjective/objective, particular/general). Among these, one is emphasised as the prototypical pair: *Appearance/Reality*. According to the authors, all other pairs boil down to this fundamental opposition (Jasinski, 2001), and dissociation is essentially founded upon the contrast created between the *apparent* and *real* interpretations of an idea, notion, or concept.

Researchers who pursued more elaborate accounts of dissociation (e.g. van Rees, 2006, 2009; Gata, 2007; Jasinski, 2001; Schiappa, 1993) maintain the proposition that the *Appearance/Reality* pair is central. That this fundamental pair manifests a differential valorisation of the dissociated notions is widely taken up in these accounts, however, it does not seem to have inspired research that focuses on its various formulations. Our goal in this paper is to pursue this task in a specific discursive context, and for this we mainly use van Rees’ (2009) analytical treatment of this argumentative technique, introduced in the next section.

1.3 Basic characteristics and indicators of dissociation

So far we introduced that for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, dissociation involves, above all, a change in the organization of knowledge and values “used as the basis of argument” (1969, p. 413),

and that this change is steered through certain conventional patterns or pairs. Compared with their explorations of different patterns of dissociation, van Rees' (2009) interest in the use of this technique is quite methodical. In an effort to devise a more systematic account, van Rees outlines three groups of clues for identifying dissociation. She does this by drawing on the three central characteristics of its use:

(1) A distinction between two notions is made: "at the basis of dissociation there are two speech acts, distinction and definition" (van Rees 2006, p. 474). These speech acts can be direct (e.g. I define...), indirect (e.g. We need to distinguish...), or implicit (e.g. The difference between...), and they are the essential features of dissociation.

(2) The hierarchy of values associated with a given notion is altered: In this regard, the use of expressions such as "real", "true", "central", "technical", "pseudo", "quasi" etc. serve as the indicators of dissociation (van Rees, 2009, p. 39). It is through these adjectives that a value hierarchy is imposed on the previously undifferentiated meaning categories.

(3) A contradiction is resolved or dealt with: In this regard, the indicator specifically expounded on by van Rees (2009, p. 42) is the presence of a contrastive or concessive *but* (see Snoeck-Henkemans, 1995, Uzelgun, Mohammed, Lewiński, & Castro, 2015). While the *contrastive but* indicates a contrast about which the speaker has a clear preference such as negation (not-but), the *concessive but* indicates a limited preference about two contextually differentiated interpretations (yes-but). Overall, the mere presence of a *but* signals that some contradiction or incompatibility is being dealt with.

Regarding the first set of clues, it can be said that these help the researcher to determine the degree of explicitness in externalizing this argumentative move; i.e., to decide whether one is dealing with performed vs. presupposed dissociations (van Rees, 2009; see also Jasinski, 2001; Gata, 2007). Furthermore, they also constitute linguistic means through which the most important – clarifying – function of dissociation is carried out. In this regard, from a rhetorical point of view, Schiappa (1993) argues that definitions indispensably involve questions such as:

"How *ought* we use the word X?" or "What should be described by the word X?" Normative questions of this sort cannot be answered acontextually; they virtually compel

interlocutors to address the *pragmatic* needs of a given community of language-users located in a particular historical moment. (Schiappa, 1993, p. 413)

This means that, especially in definitional disputes, the clarifying function of dissociation (van Rees, 2009) is brought to bear by normative considerations, through which value hierarchies are imposed (by the use of the second set of clues) in accordance with a certain pragmatic project, and in a certain point in time in the course of that collective project.

Our main interest in this study is at the intersection of the use of the second and third set of clues, that is, the differential valorization indicated or implied by the use of the connective *but*. To put it in one sentence, the literature on argumentative but-constructions suggests that the statements – and the underlying values – constituting the post-but segment of an argument is typically preferred against – or over – the statements constituting the pre-but segment (e.g. Billig, 1999). Building on this, we investigate the ways the underlying values are valorised or disqualified (stated before or after the *but*); or in other words, we will examine the organising principles of the dissociations: whether they are carried out with pertinence to certain characteristics of environmental discourse, namely temporality and spatiality.

2. METHOD

In-depth interviews (N=22) were conducted with climate change campaigners in Portugal and Turkey. The participants were referred members of environmental NGOs that are active in climate information and policy in the two countries, as well as internationally. In the last part of the interviews, they were presented with a series of short video-excerpts, and our assumption was that the people featured in the video-excerpts would be the main argumentative opponents of the interviewees. The video-excerpts were selected so as to contain minimal visual information – other than the speakers' faces – and to elicit conflict and contradiction.

The analysis presented below focuses exclusively on the video-excerpt that features a climate activist who contests the usefulness of carbon-offset mechanisms. The climate activist argues:

Carbon offsets are a fictitious commodity that have been created to exploit the rising levels of climate consciousness. [...] I think the more emphasis we put on individuals, we're moving away from what really needs to happen, in terms of people to come together in communities, to start organizing, to create political pressure for the bigger systemic changes that need to

*happen, in moving away from the growth based model, reigning in... eh, at the corporate self-interest...*¹

In arguing this way, he contests (1) an existing practice adopted to abate climate change, (2) a hegemonic discourse that prioritizes privatized (individual) solutions, and (3) broader legitimizing norms – e.g. a growth based model, corporate self-interest. Hence, his discourse represents a minority perspective in the framework of global climate governance and action.

We expected this intervention to incite conflict and contradiction, and following the scholarly calls to pay attention to “small words” in the analyses of language and argumentation (Billig, 1999; Castro, 2006; van Rees, 2009), attended specifically to the argumentative uses of the connective *but*. The analysis of contrastive and concessive *but*-constructions was structured along the lines proposed by van Rees (2009): Although the use of a *but* itself indicates or implies a value hierarchy, we looked for further markers (e.g. real, true), as well as indirect and implicit speech acts. Finally, we also looked at whether and how the temporality of the *but*-constructions was organized in particular patterns, and whether it had any relevance in terms of the differential valorization of the dissociated notions.

3. ANALYSIS

We identified N=196 contextual uses of the connective *but* in our corpus. Almost half of these were concessive constructions, and the other half consisted of contrastive uses. In analyzing dissociations made through these, we did not focus on the argumentatively relevant differences between the uses of contrastive and concessive *but*-constructions. The attention paid to the temporal and spatial arrangements made by the interviewees in these constructions revealed some salient temporal patterns, and no spatial ones. Hence, below we focus only on the former. Due to space limitations, we here focus on only one conflict – between profit-making and costly climate action or solutions. We start with a response given to the interviewer’s question concerning people’s tendency to change their lives “only if they see a personal profit”.

Example 1. Interview 3

I think we have to be very clear with definitions, what do we mean by profit? Because, when we’re talking about profits, today, eh, like it or not, most of the profit goes to big huge

¹ The full video-excerpt (duration 2 minutes 20 seconds) can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uk9Ev91jjQ8>, starting from the beginning to 02’20”.

corporations, and most of the people have... it's irrelevant for them, that kind of profit. We're talking about that... yeah, we don't need this, it's not beneficial. But if we're looking for benefits, to force people to act, to convince people to act, then it would be arranged in a way. [...] We are talking about two different things here. You know, profits of corporations, that's different from, from what it means for individuals.

In this example, a distinction between (corporate) profit and (personal) benefit is made, using a contrastive *but* located at the middle of the excerpt. The interviewee condemns "that kind of profit" which is "irrelevant" for people, "not beneficial", and not what we need. On the other hand, "benefits" are valorized – after the *but* – as they help to "convince people" to act upon climate change. The clarifying function of dissociation (van Rees, 2009), as well as indirect and implicit speech acts (e.g. "be very clear with definitions", "that's different from"), may be traced through the entire excerpt.

Regarding the underlying philosophical pairs, the individual/corporate pair seems obvious at first. However, this spatial organization of the dissociated terms – made in terms of scales of human economic activity – can be further pursued to identify a temporal organization as well: Against "today's" huge corporate profits, the interviewee seems to "look for" (tomorrow's) benefits – in a future that is not pervaded by corporate interests but by action of convinced individuals. Arguably, it is this way that the interviewee resolves the incompatibility of asking people to take costly action without offering them any "profit" in return – by depicting the present *appearance* of benefits (i.e. profits) as "not beneficial", and reserving the proper meaning or the *reality* of benefits exclusively for individuals. Importantly, whether we "like it or not" the appearance *is* the present states of affairs, and the new definition is offered in an implicitly ("if we are looking") normative manner (Schiappa, 1993). The trouble with "profit", or its role in climate-relevant action, characterizes also our next example.

Example 2. Interview 8.

...this growth, focusing too much on growth, growth-based mentality, it's too much you know it's, eh, that's too much. Profit, I don't wanna use the word profit, but I think it... that's why I said you know well-being, you know we, have to develop, not, not focusing on growth doesn't mean we have to stay, stand still. You know? But there is a way, for development to happen when responding, when taking eh, hm..., I mean I'm trying to have a sustainable development. Sustainable development is possible.

In this example, we find an old contradiction of the environmental movement, which was perhaps most at the fore in the 1970s: the incompatibility between development and environmental protection. From the 1980s on, the term “sustainable development” was instrumental in dissolving and overthrowing this incompatibility (Sachs, 1999; Lemke, 2002). Likewise, our interviewee criticizes the excessive focus on “growth, growth based mentality”. As “profit” is associated with or seen within this mentality, “well-being” is offered as its alternative, which allows the interviewee to reconcile development and environmental protection. This reconciliation effort is quickly captured by the umbrella term sustainable development, which allows pursuing both goals. In short, a dissociation between *profit* and *well-being* is carried out and justified by organizing these concepts respectively in the framework of *growth* vs. (sustainable) *development*.

Concerning the temporality of this normative construction, we can say that sustainable development is not yet here and now, as it merely “is possible”, constituting only “a way”, and the interviewee is “trying to have” or achieve it. On the other hand, that there is “too much growth” is emphasized three times. Hence, a simplified reconstruction can be that there *is* too much profit or growth mentality *at present*, but what we ought “to have”, *as a target*, is not a standstill but a mentality sustaining both well-being and development. Underlying this apparently concessive move is the notion that profit and growth at all costs is only the *present day appearance* of development, and the *reality* of development – to transpire in the future – is well being.

Example 3. Interview 4.

The thing is, people think short term, yeah it’s not profitable, that’s for sure. I mean you can’t give them any profit in the short term, but in the medium term or the long term, the solutions are more profitable actually.

In this example, again the conflict is between climate solutions and profit. To manage this conflict, a dissociation is made between two interpretations of “profit”. Here, the main difference from the previous examples is that the connective *but* is used as a *concessive* (yeah, it’s not profitable... but...) and not as a *contrastive*. In the initial part of this *but*-construction, the interviewee admits that climate solutions are in conflict with “short term profit”, which is negatively valorized or even presented as the problem (“the thing is...”). After the *but*, she asserts that the profitability of (real) climate solutions becomes evident when conceived in broader timescales; i.e., in the medium or long term. This way, by valorizing “thinking big” in time (Morton, 2010), the solutions are separated into *apparently* profitable (as understood in present time) and “*actually*” profitable (once understood properly). Our final example

makes clear what may have remained cursory or obscure so far in this regard:

Example 4. Interview 15.

...the way the profit is measured nowadays, you can't, you don't... climate and profit are not going on the same direction. I mean you can, nowadays you can still reduce... the effects on climate change, and still make profit, because of energy efficiency measures that you can still implement. And that's helping a company to improve their business case, eeh... but you can only do it until a certain point, until you reach a maximum level of efficiency. And then after that, the only way you can... eh, go in, avoid climate change is to actually reduce production. So energy efficiency is a way of fighting climate, but impro- and improving profit of the company, but that's limited. You can only do that until a certain point and after that then you need that systemic change, in the system, you need to change the way the companies do profit, or the way we see profit or measure profit. So that... a company can still try to do profit, but profit is a different concept and therefore it's not conflicting with climate change.

That the incompatibility dealt with in this example is between "climate and profit" is evident already from the first sentence. The interviewee argues that "nowadays", the companies can "still" make profit while fighting climate change; that is, by adopting no-regret energy efficiency measures. "But" one can do it "until a certain point", or for a relatively short period. In the long term, or "after" this certain point, the companies would have to (change the way they) see or make profit while "actually reducing production". In other words, it is through the dissociation between *profit as it is today* and *profit as it ought to be seen* in the future, the interviewee resolves the conflict he sets forth at the outset.

As in the previous example, the dissociation is carried out through a concessive but-construction. After conceding that "nowadays" it may *appear* as if one can make profit while fighting climate change, the interviewee argues that this appearance – the current state of affairs – is ephemeral. Is it possible to conclude that the interviewee places this present-time meaning of profit "outside" its proper meaning, disqualifying it "into a mockery of the real thing" (van Rees, 2009, p. 7)? An important constituent of the answer is that the interviewee does not define or distinguish explicitly the proper or "real" meaning of profit. As in example 2 above, there is rather a call, a "need" or a quest for a "different concept" that does not – more precisely *will not* – conflict with climate change. This temporal pattern can be described through the model of practical reasoning in political discourse suggested by

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), which we discuss in the following section.

4. DISCUSSION

In this study we explored how temporality is used as organizing principles of dissociation in the discourse of climate change campaigners. We did this by examining argumentative *but*-constructions as linguistic vehicles of dissociation, and by examining the role of the *Appearance/Reality* pair in sustaining the dissociations.

The pairs identified above, in the specific controversial context created via video-elicitation, were Profit/Benefit, Profit/Well-being, Short-term/Long-term conceptions of profit, and the definition of profit *At present/At a certain point in future*. The prototypical pair *Appearance/Reality* does not straightforwardly characterize these dissociations, rather it underlies such salient patterns (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This “fundamental pair” is difficult to apply *directly*, when, for instance, profit “as it is defined today”, “nowadays” or “in today’s society” is disqualified for the search of a better notion; i.e., when the disqualified term reflects precisely the existing reality that – according to the speaker – has to be transformed.

The dissociations in our corpus seem to be characterized, in numerous occasions, by a linear arrow of time: from the (disqualified) interpretation of the notion in the *present state of affairs* to its new (valorized) interpretation in a *necessary future state of affairs*. In other words, the examples we analyzed suggest what may be called the *Is/Ought* pair, through which a unifying notion that structures the existing reality is disqualified for the search of a better notion, which *must* render the former notion somewhat irrelevant or trivial. Yet, it *can* only render the former notion in some future time. This seems in line with Fairclough & Fairclough’s (2012) account of practical reasoning in political discourse. In this model, practical reasoning departs from *circumstances*, in order to attain *goals*, through the discursive and non-discursive *actions* of the speaker (and others). The temporal organization of this model – the arrow from present to future – mirrors the organizations in our corpus, however there may be some differences that require further consideration. Critically, in the model, such an arrow of time is established or obtained through the active efforts of the speaker and the collective. However, in many of the argumentative constructions in our corpus, the future is – represented as – rather certain, or determined by structural forces, or physical limits (e.g. you can do profit “until you reach a maximum level of efficiency”).

More importantly, the suggestion of an *Is/Ought* pair as one of the possible organizing principles of dissociations needs to be clarified: can this pair be conceived as one of the main organizing principles of

dissociations made in environmental discourse, or in controversial debates such as the one on climate action? Is its relevance limited only to definitional disputes, or can it apply more broadly to practical reasoning and argumentation? Surely the limitations of the present study – that it is based on a very limited corpus and a specific context – do not permit such conclusions. Further research that takes into account both the situated, interactional linguistic contexts (level of speech acts), and the underlying meaning systems that subsist in broader political-cultural contexts (level of implicit meanings, values, norms) is necessary to answer these questions.

It may be crucial to emphasize again that the existing reality or the present states of affairs cannot be simply rendered “*irrelevant... to take into account*” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 411, emphasis added). It can neither be changed right away, nor even in a future; and the success of the efforts to transform it depends largely on the relations and coalitions of these efforts with others. Arguably, this is among the reasons why our interviewees saliently resort to concessive but-constructions, and even when using *but* as a contrastive – as in example two – carry out dissociations and associations simultaneously.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper we showed evidence for the use of the dissociative pair *Is/Ought*, through which the prototypical *Appearance/Reality* pair may allow speakers to disqualify the status quo, and some of the no-regret solutions used for mitigating climate change, as temporary or ephemeral (apparent). In our examples, this was done to support and emphasize the necessity (reality) of climate change mitigation, which, for our interviewees reside mostly in a future time rather than the present.

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