Chapter 6
Pragmatics, Rhetoric and Semantics

In the introduction to their collection on Argumentation and Language, Oswald et al. cite three categories of research examining relations between linguistics and argumentation: the descriptive, explanatory, and semantic perspectives. Descriptive perspectives are those which 'aim to pair linguistic formulations with argumentative functions' (2018: 2), that is they look at how linguistic resources are used to perform certain moves in arguments: these are pragmatic perspectives. Explanatory perspectives seek to say how language can be used to achieve the goals of argumentation, this includes work on links between rhetoric and pragmatics, and rhetoric and argumentation. Semantic perspectives are those where 'the linguistic system is semantically taken to incorporate an argumentative direction in the sense that units are deemed to carry intrinsic argumentative orientations' (2018: 2–3). This is the approach of Anscombre and Ducrot, and as we have seen, it is a perspective which looks at the argumentative content of words, rather than the wider role of words in argumentative content.

This chapter contains a brief discussion of some of the works in the aforementioned volume, and then describes some of the most important aspects of linguistics-based research into argument. There can be no doubt that in recent years the study of argument as dialectic, heavily influenced by pragmatic theories of discourse, has been in the ascendant. The evaluation procedure to be set out below in Chapter 11 keeps the advances made through this approach in mind, but seeks to give more prominence to issues of semantics than has become the norm.

6.1 Linguistics in the Study of Argument

Oswald et al. examine the current state of research under a three-way categorisation: focus on Linguistic markers, Discursive processes, and Cognitive operations. Linguistic markers are of two distinct types: 'in the first case, the linguistic markers semantically express an argumentative relationship between words, while they help

shaping an argumentation process in the second case' (2018: 4). That is, there are the inherently argumentative semantic properties of some words, as described in Chapter 3, and there are words which are used to construct argument discourse, and signal the moves being made. The ways in which language can be used to effect these moves is an important part of research into strategic manoeuvring in argumentation. The study of this first type, the 'argument-within-language' approach, is purely semantic and pays no regard to the validity of the reasoning or its relationship to the truth. That makes it an area of linguistic theory which argumentation scholars, particularly those interested in close assessment of the language of argument, should keep in mind, rather than the basis from which to develop a theory of argumentation. Study of the second type of markers is much more closely related to the study of argument, in particular to the study of argument as a variety of discourse, although there is also a line of thought which sees all discourse as argumentative, given the inherently argumentative nature of language.

In the consideration of argument as discourse rather than a series of logical inferences to be abstracted from that discourse, a foundational role is played by the Natural Logic of Jean-Blaise Grize. The goal of this is to describe the logic of everyday argumentative discourse in a 'natural' way rather than to develop criteria for assessment. A key problem with formal logical approaches is that 'non seulement qu'il efface les interlocuteurs, mais qu'il vise à les éliminer' (Grize 1986: 46), that is, they do not simply ignore the interlocutors, they seek to eliminate them entirely. In *la logique naturelle*, this is not the case: 'Les raisonnements non formels, en revanche, s'expriment eux à travers des discours au sein desquels destinateur et destinataire restent presents' (1986: 47) (Informal reasoning, on the other hand, expresses itself through discourses in which the sender and recipient remain present [my translation]). This presence is essential to understanding the argumentative role and force of the discourse. The passage makes obvious the differing conception of an argument within the two perspectives: in one it is a series of statements made by a speaker in a situation, for the other, it is a set of propositions with an inferential relationship and truth values.

In order to gauge the deductive validity of an argument, as well as being depersonalised, it needs to be transformed and reconstructed out of its original form, into tidier language, or specialist symbols. For Grize, this move is unjustified, since the presentation of the argument may be crucial to its reasonableness, and certainly to its ability to convince. This stance is essentially dialogical as 'each argumentative discourse is seen as a proposal made by a speaker to a listener in a specific communicative situation' (van Eemeren et al. 2014: 483). As the name suggests, natural logic *is* concerned with the logic of a discourse, since it is concerned with forms of argument, and these forms are schematised in a way which fits the situation and the aim. The success of the arguer depends on this schematisation displaying discourse coherence: the discourse must be receivable, that is, capable of being understood in both style and content; it should be plausible, that is recognisable as grounded in reality; and acceptable, to the audience in terms of the values displayed. These are all necessary for the discourse to be convincing for the listener.

   Grize sums up the difference between his natural logic and formal logic by noting
that in the formal approach there is only one relation, that of implication or entailment,
which is determined by the truth values of the propositions; whereas in non-formal
reasoning, where natural logic is applied, the basic relation may be of different types:
causal, lexical, ideological, and so on, and this explains why conclusions from one
context cannot necessarily be transferred to another (Grize 1986: 55). This form of
approach is interesting to scholars from all traditions, but Grize illustrates precisely
why there is a gulf between the discourse analysis study of argumentation, and
the more propositional philosophical method: for philosophers, reasoning is exactly
that process by which conclusions can be reached which are capable of transfer
to other contexts; even when it is a piece of practical reasoning, applicable only
to the present situation, the methodology of reasoning, the standards employed,
these derive from the philosophical process of truth-seeking argument. This volume,
while acknowledging and respecting the natural logic approach, is concerned with the
evaluation of arguments abstracted to a degree from the discourse in which they occur.
Elements of that discursive situation are important to the understanding of process,
as the context in which argumentation takes place, and elements of it too may be
employed in the proper understanding of texts, particularly where reformulation is
necessary in order to isolate the argument structure, but the aim is still to regard
argument in an epistemological rather than purely communicative role. That some
theorists do not accept the legitimacy of such abstraction is noted.

   Oswald et al. go on to discuss a second category of research, into discursive
processes, where argumentation is viewed primarily as a contextually grounded form
of activity. They summarise this approach thus:

> tackling argumentation as a discursive process calls for an analysis of argumentative moves
> in context, taken at the same time as the local or global verbal context coming before and after
> the moves, the semiotic context surrounding the moves, the speech context anchoring the
> moves and the generic context constraining or influencing the production and interpretation
> of moves. (2018: 10)

There are two ways of looking at research of this type: it could be regarded as
discourse analysis, which happens to be of argumentative discourse, or it could be
a way for argumentation scholars to gain theoretical insights into argumentation by
observing it in practice. There is no doubt that in order to properly understand and
characterise the processes of argumentation one should examine discourses taking
place within those processes, especially when they are not highly formalised. It might
also reveal a lot about the nature of certain fallacies to look at the wider context in
which they occur, what type of language signals their presence, and what kinds
of moves precede or succeed them. At the same time, there is a clear difference
between studying the course which arguments take and studying the strength and
acceptability of the reasoning they contain. The language analysis I develop in the
later part of this book is an analysis of the language of the argument, rather than of
the language surrounding the argument. That is not to deny the importance of that
linguistic environment, it is simply a priority dictated by the aims of the study which
are focussed on argument as a philosophical concept, rather than argument as an

activity, bearing in mind all that has been said about the nature of language in earlier chapters.

The third strand of research described by Oswald et al. is that done at the level of cognitive operations. This approach focuses on the activity in the mind of the arguers, the processing of arguments, both by the producer and the audience, rather than the public activity of their discourse. Although this is the arena of cognitive science, the authors explain why linguistics, and specifically the study of the way arguments are formed out of language, is so important to understanding how those processes affect argumentation:

> If specific formulations are likely to yield specific representations which would vary should the formulation vary as well, and since processing an argument requires the representation of the contents of the premises and the conclusion, then in principle specific formulations are likely to influence the outcome of argumentative processing. (2018: 12)

This, they suggest, is of relevance to argumentation study in two ways: first, understanding construction processes can help in argument reconstruction, where parts of arguments are not made explicit; and, second, a clearer picture of evaluation processes should yield insights into what makes certain arguments persuasive.

6.2   Pragma-Dialectics

The pragma-dialectical approach is a way of looking at arguments which is explicitly grounded in linguistic theory. The degree to which that is the case is made clear by looking at the four meta-theoretical principles which are considered to be the necessary basis for allowing both normative and descriptive treatments of argumentative texts. These are 'functionalizing', 'externalizing', 'socializing', and 'dialectifying' the objects of argumentational study.

> Functionalization means that we treat every language activity as a purposive act. Externalization means that we target the public commitments entailed by the performance of certain language activities. Socialization means that we relate these commitments to the interaction that takes place with other people through the language activities in question. Finally, dialectification means that we regard the language activities as part of an attempt to resolve a difference of opinion in accordance with critical norms of reasonableness. (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 52–53).

All four of these principles categorise argumentation firmly as a species of communication, emphasising the public and social aspects of arguing, and treating it as an activity, not an abstraction. Although norms of reasoning, or at least reasonableness, are mentioned, it is the norms of language use which are most prominent. The principles also place the theory squarely amongst those which assume the constant presence of some Other with whom the difference of opinion has arisen. To reiterate: 'Argumentation is not just the expression of an individual assessment, but a contribution to a communication process between persons or groups who exchange

ideas with one another in order to resolve a difference of opinion' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 55).

This approach, it must be said, has been spectacularly successful, and a great many aspects of pragma-dialectics have become generally accepted by scholars in the field. Even though the informal logic movement grew out of a dissatisfaction with formal descriptions of real world argument, it still retained a principal interest in arguments as patterns of inference: this is clearly something very different. The focus in pragma-dialectics is on argumentation as something which people do, part of which only is the exchange of arguments. This is an insight which has been taken on board quite universally and has led to a more rounded understanding of how arguments work and how they may go wrong.

Pragma-dialectics has also brought a wider awareness and appreciation amongst those engaged in argument study of the linguistic theories it takes as foundational; in particular the work of John Searle and Paul Grice. Pragma-dialectics looks to integrate the Searlean speech act theory with Grice's maxims of co-operation, to produce rules of use in accordance with a Principle of Communication. Thus, the Gricean maxim of Quality (Grice 1989), which relates to the truthfulness of what one says, becomes: 'You must not perform any speech acts that are insincere (or for which you cannot accept responsibility)' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 77). The other rules prohibit speech acts which are incomprehensible, redundant, meaningless, or unconnected to the previous acts in the situation. When the specific factors of the argumentative discourse are factored in and combined with these rules, the result is the list of Rules for a Critical Discussion, which runs to a fully elaborated fifteen in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: chapter 6, and a more accessible list of '10 commandments' described in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992a and reproduced in their 2004: chapter 8, which are straightforward prohibitions.

A further element is the listing of Searlean speech acts (Searle 1979) as belonging to certain stages of the critical discussion. The four types given are assertives, commissives, directives, and usage declaratives, with a fifth from the original typology, expressives, not being considered to have a role in this variety of discourse. These acts can mostly be used at any stage, but assertives, for instance, feature heavily in the first, Confrontation stage, and not at all in the second, Opening stage. There are also various moves which can be made with each type of act: directives, for example, can be used to challenge an opponent to defend a standpoint, and to request from him an argumentation or a usage declarative (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 67). This way of looking at argument discourse—as a series of moves rendered by the employment of various speech acts—has clearly influenced work such as that discussed in the previous chapter by Cristina Corredor, as well as leading to the later development of pragma-dialectics into the study of strategic manoeuvring.

The pragma-dialectical approach is, quite naturally, concerned with pragmatics and dialectic. That means, in my conception of argumentation, that it is mainly concerned with issues of process and has less to say on reasoning and expression. Because of this, while I think it is an excellent starting point for the assessment of arguments as appropriate or otherwise to the given process, it does not completely fulfil the needs of argument analysis as this work perceives them. Rule 15 is concerned

with clarity of expression and states that both parties have the right to request and to perform usage declaratives at any times. It is explained that 'discussants must formulate optimally and they must also interpret optimally' which means that 'a discussant must choose formulations that are comprehensible to other discussants' and 'be prepared to replace their formulations and interpretations with better ones' (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 156). As one would expect, this refers to the rights and obligations of the parties in their role in the discourse; it does not, however, say anything about the assessment of those formulations or interpretations. It is for this reason that the evaluation process I describe below should not be seen as an alternative to pragma-dialectical analysis, rather as a complementary tool.

6.3 Pragmatics and Inferentialism

It is not only the pragma-dialectical approach which has made use of notions from pragmatics in the understanding of reasoning. Jim Mackenzie (2014) traces the roots of inferentialism back to Leibniz and Kant, then forward via Frege and Hamblin to Brandom. Some of the key stages along this journey will be discussed in this section, since, although inferentialism is not frequently referred to in argumentation theory, some version of it seems indispensable to the full and proper consideration of the language of arguments.

To begin with, a basic definition: 'Inferentialism is the view that something's linguistic meaning is a matter of its inferential role […] A statement's inferential role depends on what it can be inferred from (its circumstances of application), and what can be inferred from it (the consequences of its application)' (Mackenzie 2014: 131–132). Given that the crucial relationships in arguments are ones of inference, the possible impact of such a theory of meaning on argumentation study is clear. As a starting point for this way of looking at matters we may consider the rationalism of Leibniz: 'where empiricists begin with a primitive notion of *representation* and seek to ground in it whatever inferences are to be recognized [… Leibniz] as a rationalist begins with inference and then explains the notion of representation in terms of it' (Brandom 1981: 479, original emphasis); and for Kant, 'the fundamental unit of awareness or cognition is the judgement (assertion)' (Mackenzie 2014: 134), which makes the understanding a faculty of judgement. When we understand correctly, we have made the correct judgements, we have inferred meaning. This, in turn, gives rise to the notion that words do not have meaning outside of the statements made using them. Frege takes this as fundamental: 'I start out from judgements and their contents, and not from concepts […] instead of putting a judgement together out of an individual as subject and an already previously formed concept as predicate, we do the opposite and arrive at a concept by splitting up the content of a possible judgement' (Frege 1881: 16–17).

In modern studies of argument, this theme is taken up by Charles Hamblin, with his conception of reasoning dialogue as consisting of 'commitment stores' of the

participants, the role of which is 'to provide us with a dialectical definition of state-ments' (Hamblin 1970: 265). When we make a statement or assent to somebody else's, we add that statement to our store until such time as we offer a retraction. The similarity with the speech act based approach of the pragma-dialecticians is noted by Douglas Walton (1993), whose own account of commitment 'goes beyond the "externalized" notion of commitments as explicit concessions found in Hamblin and van Eemeren and Grootendorst by postulating non-explicit (dark) commitments that have to be inferred by presumption' (Walton 1993: 94). In all systems, there is a requirement of consistency: clashing commitments derail the dialogue. That may not always be possible in the real world, especially as Walton points out that we may not even be aware of all of our own 'dark' commitments. As Hamblin notes:

> At first sight we would suppose it to be a requirement of the statements in a commitment-store that they be consistent; but on reflection, we may come to think that, although there does exist an ideal concept of a "rational man" which implies perpetual consistency, the supposition is by no means necessary to the operation of a satisfactory dialectical system. In fact, even where our ideals of rationality are concerned, we frequently settle for much less than this; a man is 'rational', in a satisfactory sense, if he is capable of appreciating and remedying inconsistencies when they are pointed out. (1970: 263–264)

That is, we cannot expect total consistency from others or from ourselves, but neither can we defend or accept an inconsistency when it is once exposed.

This raises some interesting points for argument assessment. What one is committed to, in this sense, is whatever can be inferred from what one has asserted—even if one does not believe that oneself—as Hamblin points out 'consistency presup-poses the ability to detect even very remote consequences of what is stored' (1970: 264). These consequences of one's commitments need to be drawn out in any assess-ment of one's position, but that will occur at different levels of analysis. The analysis described in Chapter 11 below would allow for these implications of an arguer's assertions to be exposed at an initial, first sight of the argument, or at a later stage of reasoning analysis, or, finally, and most likely for those which are 'dark or 'remote', at the stage of deep linguistic analysis. The ability to find these inferential relations, and to find them quickly, also depends on the level of one's knowledge and famil-iarity with the topic, and perhaps with one's skill and experience in dialectic as well: 'Expertise in a field includes the ability to recognise as immediate implications which those without that expertise need to have explained' (Mackenzie 2014: 129).

I shall close this section with a quotation from Brandom in which he responds to the criticism that since reason-giving is just one function of language, one game which can be played with it, rationalism as a basis for meaning is over-reaching itself. Brandom's response recalls certain points made earlier in Chapters 1 and 2, and reaffirms the centrality of arguing to the very idea of communication:

> that our expressions play a suitable role in reasoning is an essential, necessary element of our saying, and their meaning, anything at all. Apart from playing such a role in justifica-tion, inference, criticism, and argument, sentences and other locutions would not have the meanings appealed to and played with by all the other games we can play with language. (2008: 43)

6.4   Rhetoric and Argument

Rhetoric is concerned with persuasion, but it is also part of the structure of discourse. All arguments must be shaped into some form of linguistic figure in order to be expressed, and like other distinctions already mentioned, that between figurative and literal use of language can be difficult to draw and to maintain. Still, there clearly is a distinction and when it is not properly recognised it can lead to bad arguments in two ways. One is that an equivocation may result when some quality is predicated of a real *x* and a metaphorical one. This is the case in one of the examples examined in Chapter 12, where the phrase 'university of life' is employed. Any argument based on a comparison of this 'university' and the experiences it provides with actual universities and the education they offer, is likely to fall into equivocation: the arguer has been seduced by the metaphor into thinking that the two are really types of the same thing, and can be compared like for like. Of course, there is no reason not to contrast the advantages of life experience with those of formal education, but they should not be considered as near equivalents.

The second danger is in taking the metaphor too literally and extending it too far. In his election campaign of 1996, Bill Clinton referred often to the task of building a metaphorical bridge to the future (see Hinton and Budzyńska-Daca 2019). Such a metaphor can be extended: we can ask if his bridge is wide enough to take everyone across, for instance; but there is a limit, if one were to argue against his policies on the basis that a tunnel would be better for the surrounding scenery or that his bridge was open to attack by enemy aircraft, then he would quite reasonably respond that it's not a real bridge, and such concerns are not relevant. This is not the subtlest example, but the quiet workings of repeated figurative language on our minds and our perception of the world should not be under-estimated.

There is no reason to ban metaphorical expressions from arguments, and several recent studies such as Oswald and Rihs (2014) and Macagno and Zavatta (2014) have joined Aristotle[1] in defending and examining their use, so there will be no fallacy of metaphor or fallacy of figurativeness included in the list of fallacies of language in Chapter 8. There is, however, very good reason to think that metaphors, especially those so ingrained into normal language as to creep clandestinely into sentences quite unbeknownst to the speaker, can lead to all the major types of linguistic error which are sought for in the evaluation scheme presented in Part IV of this work. They can lead to ambiguity when the metaphorical thing and the real thing are taken to be the same, they can lead to evaluative implication loading when the metaphor makes a positive or negative association, and they may well lead to errors of conceptualisation, such as reification: knowledge may be your weapon, but it is not, in fact, an actual implement of war, and the metaphor, just like any analogy,[2] will break down at some point. Macagno and Zavatta note that: 'a metaphor becomes relevant to the extent that one of the possible predicates that characterize it can be used to support the presumed communicative purpose of the metaphorical utterance' (2014: 484). When

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[1] See Parson and Ziegelmueller (2003) for a discussion of Aristotle's views in the Rhetoric.

[2] See D. Gentner et al. (2001) for a discussion of the relationship between the two.

analysing arguments featuring metaphors, it is the relevance of that characterisation which must be determined.

In spite of the dangers, Scott Jacobs is right when he says: 'While a case can be made that all fallacies involve rhetorical strategy (at least at the levels of arguer responsibility and critical judgment), we should not also conclude all rhetorical strategies involve fallacies' (2006: 422). Any scheme for the assessment of arguments must be able to unpack the rhetorical baggage with which they may have been laden to get at the reasoning within, and not simply discard those which are imperfectly neutral or overly ornate in their expression.

That last sentence, however, makes certain assumptions about how the term rhetoric is to be understood and how it is related to argument; assumptions which may not be warranted. Christian Plantin (2009) provides an excellent discussion of the argument/rhetoric divide, showing how it is based on an earlier jettisoning of a good deal of the meaning of rhetoric, leaving it as a synonym of eloquence, often mistrusted and scorned. He points out that: 'Traditionally, there is no theoretical opposition but a complementarity between the argumentative stage, *inventio*, and the linguistic one, *elocutio*' (2009: 327), and that the move towards understanding rhetoric as merely the *elocutio* did not occur until the sixteenth century. This conception is most famously and strongly reinforced by John Locke, who saw rhetoric as the enemy of good argument:

> if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. (Locke 1690, III, X, 34 [1975: 508])

This appears to rule out a great deal of natural language from use in science and philosophy, and leaves us wondering just what it is that Locke considers 'artificial'. Also, as Plantin points out, it assumes an understanding of figurative speech which 'is grounded in the concept of a possible choice between two strings of signifiers to express the same semantic content or state of the world' (2009: 329), that is, that there is always a straightforward way of saying things and that the use of a figure is a choice made in order to embellish or obscure the content. As a result: 'Ornaments are worse than fallacies; they are the mask of fallacies' (2009: 330).

This conception of rhetoric has been challenged and to a large extent discarded in more recent writing. Lloyd Bitzer introduced the idea of the 'Rhetorical Situation' in a famous paper with that title. He sees rhetoric as the product of a certain set of circumstances and a way of effecting necessary change:

> rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense rhetoric is always persuasive. (Bitzer 1968: 4)

There is no sense of rhetoric as embellishment here, indeed, there is no mention of figures. Rhetoric becomes a way of responding to a situation which requires a response. This view was rejected by Richard Vatz, who saw things rather in reverse:

'Bitzer argues that the nature of the context determines the rhetoric. But one never runs out of context. One never runs out of facts to describe a situation […] The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration' (1973: 156–157). From Vatz's perspective, it is the rhetoric which creates the situation, rather than responding to it: 'To the audience, events become meaningful only through their linguistic depiction' (1973: 157). Rhetoric, then, is the creator of reality, a far remove from Locke's conception of rhetoric as an obstacle to the discussion of what is real.

Such a definition of rhetoric, without any reference to eloquence, is also found in what Plantin calls Ducrot's 'intuition of an argument as the ordinary capacity of a sentence to re-frame the following discourse and, more broadly, the dialogal context' (2009: 326). All of which is to move some distance from how the word has traditionally been employed. A more common approach is to divide rhetoric into the argumentative and the ornamental: while Locke's criticism may apply to the one, the other facets of the ancient art are preserved in the other.

This is the distinction used by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in their treatment of rhetorical figures, in *The New Rhetoric*. They note that: 'If the argumentative role of figures is disregarded, their study will soon seem to be a useless pastime' (1969: 167) and state that their interest lies in 'how and in what respects the use of particular figures is explained by the requirements of argumentation' (1969: 168). This leads to a division between argumentative figures and figures of style; it is, however, a division which cannot be made in advance of the speech's being made:

> We consider a figure to be argumentative if it brings about a change of perspective, and its use seems normal in relation to this new situation. If, on the other hand, the speech does not bring about the adherence of the hearer to this argumentative form, the figure will be considered an embellishment, a figure of style. (1969: 169)

This appears to make the nature of the figure dependent on the reception it receives from the audience. It also establishes a clear hierarchy: 'a figure which has failed in its argumentative effect will fall to the level of a stylistic figure' (1969: 170). Plantin is uneasy about this: since we cannot access the reception of the figure, we cannot classify it. We might then fall back on the intention of the speaker, but this does not fit with the idea that a failed figure becomes a merely stylistic one. What we can say for sure is that the authors of The New Rhetoric were interested in figures for their argumentative effect, 'what each of them contributes to argumentation' (1969: 171), and this is how they study them, acknowledging that the same figure may be used to different effect at different times.

Plantin suggests that this is best expressed by defining the use of figures of speech as a discourse strategy: 'a discourse strategy that has nothing to do with decoration or embellishment: these clusters of figures are the specific manifestation of the argumentative function of language' (2009: 334). He goes on to conclude with a statement I am happy to endorse and one which expresses at once the importance of rhetoric in our understanding of discourse, and of language in our understanding of argument:

> Argumentation is necessarily embodied in language, and ordinary argumentation in ordinary language. So, a theory of argumentation is necessarily embodied in a theory of language and, more specifically in a theory of discourse. The rhetorical theory of figure is the traditional theory of discourse, and not a theory of any fallacious "supplement". (Plantin 2009: 334)

6.5   Disputes Merely Verbal

The debate over verbal disputes perhaps lies more in the realms of philosophy of language than linguistics, and is not at the heart of any theories of argumentation. However, that may be simply a result of the lack of attention paid to semantics in the field, which this book seeks to redress.

Verbal disputes are usually contrasted with substantive disputes, and come down to a disagreement over the meaning of certain terms, although, at first sight, they often appear to be of a more fundamental nature. In certain fields, of course, the meaning of a term may be a very significant subject for a dispute, contract law, for instance, or, indeed, linguistics. Such cases allow us to make a distinction between verbal disputes and 'merely' verbal disputes (Chalmers 2011). If I say that your blouse is white and you say, no, it's cream, then we can both go along happily together without ever bothering to even try to resolve the dispute, since nothing rests on it. If, on the other hand, you are about to take to the court at Wimbledon and an official claims that your clothing is cream, and not white, then you are in trouble, and must either convince the official or change your kit. This distinction isn't recognised universally: for C.S.I Jenkins 'Merely verbal disputes, then, are ones in which the dispute arises only in virtue of the parties' divergent uses of language' (Jenkins 2014: 20), with no mention made of whether or not something rests on that divergent use. The difference here is pleasingly ironic: Jenkins uses the word 'merely' in a neutral sense to mean perhaps 'no more than', while Chalmers removes it from non-trivial disputes since it has a pejorative sense of 'not important': there appears to be a small, merely verbal, dispute over the merely in merely verbal disputes.

Since such disputes apparently arise due to differing beliefs over the meaning and extension of certain language items, it ought to be possible to resolve them by paying attention to those differences: where that resolution is not possible, a substantive dispute has been exposed. David Chalmers suggests that verbal analysis of disputes is a good way to make progress: firstly, 'the diagnosis of verbal disputes has the potential to serve as a sort of universal acid in philosophical discussion, either dissolving disagreements or boiling them down to the fundamental disagreements on which they turn' and also 'Reflection on the existence and nature of verbal disputes can reveal something about the nature of concepts, language, and meaning' (2011: 517).

The suggested method is the elimination technique, rephrasing the dispute with a restricted vocabulary, avoiding the word which is the basis of the problem. This could certainly help in some instances. Suppose we disagree over whether a friend has lied, although we both agree that she has spoken and not told the truth. We rephrase our positions avoiding the verb 'lie'. I may say, 'Jane has uttered a falsehood' as

I understand this to be what lying means, your response may be to accept that she has, but to say 'Jane did not knowingly utter a falsehood' or 'Jane did not sincerely utter a falsehood'. If I disagree with your statements, then it seems we do have a substantive dispute, but if I agree, our dispute has vanished and we have discovered that my understanding of 'to lie' is rather simplistic, while yours is more nuanced. If we were to check with other competent speakers we would also find that your understanding of the meaning was the generally accepted one and I should have to update my own beliefs about the appropriate use of the word. This dispute was not trivial, since an accusation of lying is always a serious thing, but could easily be cleared up.

Other examples are not so simple to deal with. Chalmers offers the case of disagreement over Pluto's being a planet, which is not easy to restate without the word planet, and it is hard to see how we could persuade the Wimbledon official to accept your tennis shirt without using the words 'white' or 'cream'. This may be attributable to 'vocabulary exhaustion' which Chalmers notes is rare in a language like English: he also, more controversially suggests that 'these exceptions will arise only for terms expressing especially primitive concepts' (2011: 529). Such terms he later refers to as 'bedrock terms' which express 'bedrock concepts', giving the concept of 'ought' as a paradigmatic example.

There are interesting parallels to draw here. These 'bedrock' terms and concepts seem to be reflected in Robert Fogelin's argumentation category of 'deep disagreements' (Fogelin 2005). Just as argument requires a certain level of agreement on fundamental practices of argumentation, without which it simply hits a wall and stops, so there are certain terms which are not susceptible to further analysis and so it becomes impossible to say whether disagreement over their meaning is verbal or not. It may be that there is a sort of 'deep disagreement' about the usage of the words involved, or some more substantive dispute, but there is no way to find out and advance. Opinions will differ in both cases about possibilities for finding a way around the apparent obstructions.

Secondly, although Chalmers doesn't mention him, there is some reflection of G.E. Moore's natural and non-natural objects (1903), where the natural are not capable of definition in terms of the non-natural and to attempt to do so is to commit the naturalistic fallacy (see Chapter 9), since natural terms such as 'good' are, by their nature, unanalysable. Chalmers himself sees a parallel with Carnap and the logical empiricist attempt to clarify philosophical problems in order to resolve them.

I have given the Chalmers account here, but the discussion of verbal disputes is far from settled. Chalmers himself was reacting to work by Eli Hirsch (2005) and Theodore Sider (2009), and there has been a good deal of further discussion since. Jenkins (2014) uses the idea of prima facie disputes, which may or not contain real disputes, in his paper; Balcerak Jackson (2014) sees the verbalness of disputes as a discourse defect, but does not think it necessarily implies non-substantiveness; Rott (2015) analyses disputants 'fact profiles' and 'meaning functions', where a difference in the first means a substantive dispute, but if there is only a difference in the second, it is merely verbal. He also mentions, as do several others, that we should also be aware of merely verbal agreements. Almotahari (2019) rejects the 'semantic

deflationism' brought on by categorising philosophical questions as merely verbal, and Vermeulen (2018) brings us full circle by arguing for a pragmatic understanding of verbal disputes, invoking the Gricean distinction between utterance meaning and speaker meaning. Her paper suggests that verbal disputes can be caused by syntactic ambiguity and conversational implicature, making it a more strictly linguistics-based account, and a very interesting one for more linguistically-minded argumentation scholars.

The papers cited here are just a selection, designed to show that this one type of dispute is itself the subject of much dispute, but also that there is a good deal here to interest argumentation scholars, from questions of what is a real dispute to the role of ambiguity and implicature in creating such situations. Of greatest interest at this moment and to the purposes of this work, however, are certain points which can be of relevance to the understanding of linguistic fallacies and the analysis of language as part of the assessment scheme with which I conclude. The first has to do with definitions. Chalmers points out that many philosophical questions are of the nature 'what is x?' where x may be knowledge, justice, meaning, and so on. Such debates are common and important in philosophy, but both likely to be in fact verbal disputes, where it is the meaning of the word which is at issue, not something more fundamental about the concept, and likely to lead disputants into one of the definitional fallacies described in Chapters 8 and 9. Arguments which include definitional fallacies are difficult to salvage through rephrasing, but the elimination method outlined here suggests that they might avoid outright rejection if the entire debate is rephrased without the contentious word. This is particularly important since a large, though rarely emphasised, part of the aims of argumentation theory is to find ways to allow for the continuation of debates which seem to be running out of road in which to establish resolution. Just as critical questions to argument schemes can serve to evaluate arguments but can also serve to extend them, so rephrasing and reconstructing arguments can work, not only to see that arguments are properly expressed, but to better clarify the crux of the disagreement and expose the differences upon which it rests.

The second point is found in the question of conceptual analysis. The content of certain concepts is a common cause for disagreement in philosophy, and academic debate generally, but the realisation that disputes are common about the exact meaning of conceptual words ought to push us towards considering not what a concept is, but what role we want it to play and an acceptance that the same word/concept can have different roles. This is something I have been at pains to acknowledge in my own definitions of the vital, but variously understood concepts of 'reasoning', and 'argumentation'. It is also a point which is of relevance in the consideration of both the definitional and conceptual fallacies which I describe throughout the second part of this book. Any theory of meaning which is based in a general principle of 'meaning as use', must conceive of words in terms of the roles they can play, rather than as symbols of a 'real' something which philosophers are tasked with discovering.

The relationship between verbal disputes and fallacy theory is also worth exploring. When two parties are engaged in a verbal dispute, we might say that they have misunderstood the nature of language and committed the fallacies I mentioned

in the last paragraph; but that would apply mainly to philosophical debates. In more mundane disagreements we could characterise the situation in two ways: either the response to the original standpoint is irrelevant and the argument is being pursued at cross-purposes, since the proponent did not mean what the antagonist has taken him to mean; or an equivocation has been committed where one of the parties is not aware that one of the uses of a term employed in the argument differed in meaning from another of the uses, and has combined them, perhaps to show the absurdity of his opponent's position. In the former case, especially if we feel that the attack on the original argument has been made with some awareness of the possibility of a verbal dispute, we might characterise the attack as a straw man, rather than an innocent irrelevance.

There might be another way of characterising what is going on when looking at natural argumentation practice. Arnulf Depperman (2000) provides a thought-provoking analysis of semantic shifts within arguments. Depperman looks at cases where there is no equivocation on a term, but where the semantics of a given term, often a 'keyword' in the debate, change and develop over its course. Rather than characterising this as a flaw in the discourse, it is seen as a normal part of the flow of argumentation. In his paper, he analyses a debate in which differing conceptions of 'freedom' come to be a key issue, and notes how they are moulded and developed throughout the discourse:

> As the instances of 'freedom' show, speakers actively shape the meaning of words with respect to their context of use. They do this by practices of what I would call 'local semantic elaboration': by explicating and exemplifying the semantics of a word, by contrasting it with other words or by establishing relations of class-inclusion, implication or synonymy. (Depperman 2000: 23)

Since this 'local elaboration' is common, particularly when there is a 'verbal' element to the dispute, semantic shifts are inevitable, but rarely lead to outright contradictions. Depperman warns against the 'logical semantics' which regards such changes in meaning as a route to fallacy and which he sees as prevalent in argumentation theory, and encourages a more positive view of semantic shifts. Apart from their role in precisification of meaning, there are two reasons for this: firstly, when two disputants have differing understandings of a word, they may be talking at cross purposes, but the difference may retain what he calls 'the coherence of a confrontation between two global positions' where opposing 'parties interpret local moves in terms of a global positional confrontation' (2000: 27). In the philosophical debates discussed in the literature on verbal disputes, such global differences are easier to spot since disputants generally have names for each of the positions they take, and often readily identify themselves as 'something-ist' before debate even begins. In the less rarefied atmosphere of everyday debate, it may only be through the refinement of one's understanding of local terms that one's global position becomes obvious.

Secondly, Depperman cites the phenomenon of preference for disagreement (Bilmes 1991), where the structure of argument discourse favours conflict over agreement, and claims: 'Together with higher order interpretation, this general preference for disagreement itself lends a coherent structure to the debate as a global positional

confrontation'; all of which explains why 'participants don't seem to care about obvious contradictions that result from divergent semantics' (2000: 28). The conclusion which Depperman draws and which is, I think, worth noting and keeping in mind as we move into Part III in the next chapter, is that 'phenomena like semantic shifts can be coherent, functional and often unproblematic for discussants. Argumentation analysis therefore should not prematurely condemn such processes as defective because of their dissociative impacts on argument structure' (2000: 29).

One final reason why argumentation theorists might gain from looking at the category of verbal disputes is the, it seems to me, quite widespread prevalence of retorts to arguments along the lines of 'that's just semantics' or 'you're splitting hairs' as though the precise meanings of words in arguments were not of any real concern. Some examples of this can be quite fascinating. This is from an interview with a Nigerian physician: 'There is misinformation going on. There is recreational and medicinal marijuana, those are just semantics. Marijuana is marijuana' (Okundia and Efunla 2019). Intriguingly, the doctor goes on to describe quite clearly the difference in use of the two terms, but his point seems to be that recreational marijuana is a misnomer. A clearer use of the phrase comes in a second example where foreign students in the UK accused of cheating in an English language test had visas revoked and had to leave the country. A report quotes a government spokeswoman and gives a response: 'Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes defended the government's actions as "measured and proportionate" and said that the students were removed, but not deported from the country. This is just semantics for those affected' (Sharma 2019). In this case the question of whether the process is best termed 'removal' or 'deportation' is a merely verbal one, and is of no consequence to those who have had to leave. The complaint that it is just semantics is actually an accusation of irrelevant argument and, from the writer's point of view, seems justified, although in a legal context, this would not be 'just semantics', but might determine whether the removals were in line with the law or not.

If the 'it's just semantics' response is as popular an argument move as the number of websites discussing it would suggest, then argumentation theory ought to be ready with a description of when it is justified and when it is a fallacious accusation. That will require a proper description of verbal disputes in the argumentation literature integrating them with more general theoretical structures.