

Presumptive arguments turned into a fallacy of presumptuousness: Pre-election debates in a democracy of promises[☆]

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Abstract

This paper deals with pre-election discourse in Hungary identifying complex argumentative moves that call for modifications in traditional research methodologies. Based on theoretical studies and real-life public debates a fine-grained analysis is offered to discern substantive arguments from presumptive arguments. The assessment of politicians' argumentative practices takes into account both the critical-rationalist and the pragma-dialectical perspectives on reasoned discussion.

The results show that presumptions function as special kinds of inferences grounded in considerations related to the context or circumstances in which the inferences are to be drawn. Presumptive reasoning is shown to be a paradigm case of rational activity in assessing the expectations of others. In the analysis of political discourse the aim is to find out what beliefs electors entertain and how their positions on certain issues get influenced by politicians' arguments. Thus, the paper offers a new look at the notion of rational discussion. The early bed-rock certainty of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation as a prime example of normative pragmatics seems to be losing its primacy: at best we can try to adhere to a mixture of a critical-rationalistic view of reasonableness and the dialectical notion of reasonableness in real-life debates and public argumentations.

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1. The backgrounds

This paper provides an account of the first comprehensive results of a medium-range analysis of pre-election discourse in Hungary involving the pre-election candidate debates of the years 1998, 2002 and 2006. In our research we focus on the persuasive power of the candidates' rhetoric measured against immediate voters' responses and candidates' subsequent meta-argumentative moves. We indicate to what extent such complex argumentative moves may call for modifications in traditional research methodologies. However, the cross-fertilization of the relevant

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claims of theoretical studies in argumentation and rhetoric and the results of the evaluation of real world public debates has narrowed down our interest. Such considerations have yielded a better understanding of the relation between *politicians' rhetoric acts of presuming* and *voters' presumptions*, crucial in shaping electors' decisions. We are proposing a fine-grained method of analysis to discern *substantive arguments* (ones that are subject to the assessment of problem validity and relevance of premises and standpoints) from *presumptive arguments* (ones that are subject to intersubjective acceptance of standpoints) in order to understand corresponding types of voters' involvement that reflect characteristic features of both the *critical-rationalist perspective* and the *pragma-dialectical perspective* on reasoned discussion.

Studies in argumentation and rhetoric agree (cf. Rescher, 1977; Willard, 1983; Walton, 1987, 1996; Kauffeld, 2003; Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004; Komlósi, 2006a) that *presumptions* figure importantly in thinking and in a wide range of verbal interactions. "Presumptions are a special kind of inference, based only in part on evidence related to the truth of the inferred proposition and grounded to a great extent on considerations related to the context or circumstances in which the inferences are to be drawn." (Kauffeld, 2003:603).

Presumptive inferences are distinguished not by the truth of their conclusions to be warranted by relevant substantive facts (cf. substantive inference as *output*), but by *the unique strength or force of the inferred conclusion* (cf. presumptive inference as *process*). It has been suggested that presumptive inferences be treated as a particular subset of assumptions (cf. Walton, 1996). In our analysis we take it that when a person presumes something they may also (at the same time) assume that the presumption is – under the current circumstances – a practically sufficient basis for proceeding without further inquiry. Here *the function of a presumption is to warrant an assumption*. In our research we also compare the nature of presumptive inference with the Neo-Gricean notion of presumptive meanings decisive in mechanisms generating and licensing generalized conversational implicatures (cf. Levinson, 2000).

Presumptions and presumptive inferences also relate to rationality: instead of being warrants, presumptions are based on the standards of objectivity and justification of the community's traditions (*political culture* included) and function as rhetorical constructs which interlocutors believe in and strive to live up to. Presumptive reasoning is a paradigm case of rational activity in developing a line of action in order to assess the expectations of others (cf. Willard, 1983:86–145).

A presumption, i.e. a conclusion drawn in an inferential act of presuming, stands good until rebutted by parties undertaking an obligation to provide substantiated objections to its acceptance. Thus, presumptions are closely related to the distribution of responsibilities, rights and obligations (see, e.g. the discussion of the burden of proof in Kauffeld, 2003) in conversations, dialogues, debates and other types of social interaction.

In our analysis of political discourse, we aim at finding out what beliefs people entertain and how their positions on certain issues get influenced by political arguments. In our research we test the hypothesis according to which *advocates who overtly and unduly utilize the support of presumptive arguments, feel that they are by no means under obligation to provide support for the content of their presumptions*. We also hypothesize that such persons tend to be *immune to substantive arguments*, partly because they are biased for and, therefore, susceptible to presumptive arguments. On the other hand, persons who might challenge a presumptive position seem to be assuming an obligation upon themselves to take up the burden of substantiating the counter-position they advance. It is the latter ones, not the former ones, who can be called upon to justify their views. Due to this unique attitude, reasons in the way of evidence may be demanded from the challenger. Such a "division of labor" rests on an asymmetry caused by an uneven distribution of substantive arguments and presumptive arguments. We will go further in our analysis and draw up a possible genesis of the fallacy of presumptuousness – a type of informal fallacy – in the context of misusing presumptive arguments. It will be noted that a presumptuous attitude might conceal traits of overconfidence, excessive demands from partners, audaciousness and/or arrogance.

We set out to show that the plain pragmatic fact of *observing and identifying presumptions in politically decisive rhetorical situations* – whose employment receives support from cultural and epistemic contexts as well – can explain a lot about *the dynamics of public debate and argumentation*. With the help of the analysis of presumptive reasoning we are in a position to show *how political actors may easily violate the obligations they take upon themselves* as a consequence of their presumptive argumentative behavior. In cases of such violations presumptive argumentation may turn into *presumptuous public behavior*.

We have observed that the dual function of presumptions in argumentation can give rise to *strategic maneuvering* in the argumentation process. On the one hand, presumptions are used precisely because participants take them for granted and thus they feel justified in not arguing for them openly. Presumptions are in fact very much like

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