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Argumentation, metadiscourse and social cognition: organizing knowledge in political communication

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ABSTRACT   The present article attempts to contribute to a multidisciplinary
approach to communication phenomena that emphasizes the interplay among
cognition, discourse and society. I propose an examination of the role that these
three elements play in argumentation and meta-discourse as a useful starting
point for understanding, first, how arguments are formed and second, the
role that meta-discursive devices play in this process. In the first two sections
I conduct a brief review of literature on the concepts of argumentation and
meta-discourse to show how a socio-cognitive approach can enlighten our
understanding of both. This model is then applied in the analysis section to look
at a plenary session at the European Parliament. I conduct a socio-cognitive
discourse analysis, based on which I identify different relevant paths followed
by speakers when constructing arguments: (re)framings, (re)definitions,
quotations and references to previous events. The findings demonstrate how
the different levels of meta-discourse – intra-textual, inter-textual and
contextual – are equally relevant for argumentative communication. Through
meta-discourse, speakers invoke knowledge about both the ongoing interaction
and other past or future communicative events. These other discourses,
however, are not only constituted by the actual words uttered, but they
encompass the context and situation models (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983)
that allow participants to make sense of them.

KEY WORDS: *argumentation, discourse analysis, European Parliament,
meta-discourse, political communication, social cognition*

The necessity to examine the ways in which knowledge, discourse and society
relate to each other has been pointed out by different authors in several dis-
ciplines (cf. Billig, 2003; De Beaugrande, 1997; Van Dijk, 2001). However,
communication scholars are still reticent to acknowledge the importance of
taking cognition into account when examining all kinds of communicative

practices (see, for example, Deetz, in press). It seems relevant, therefore, to offer possibilities for the advancement of a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that helps research in communication and in other disciplines establish this necessary link between cognitive aspects of discourse and the contexts to which they relate. The present study is an attempt to contribute to this goal by proposing a socio-cognitive, discursive approach to argumentation and meta-discourse in parliamentary debates. I believe that this perspective can help scholars go beyond the examination of the external aspects of arguments, to also start an important discussion about the processes that lead to the formulation of specific claims, the functions that meta-discourse serves in these processes and the role that knowledge plays in arguments' (in)effectiveness.

The starting focus of my discussion will be on the cognitive and social aspects of argumentation, understood as a *process* through which we organize knowledge. Building on Billig (1987), I will try to show how the practice of arguing is anchored in both previous and anticipated future interactions – as a way for speakers to put forward justifications and prevent criticisms – as well as in the contextual models (Van Dijk, 1999) of the ongoing communicative situation in which previous experience plays a very important role. In order to explain how these connections between the internal and external aspects of communication may be established through discourse, I will be analyzing excerpts of a plenary session at the European Parliament.

In the second section of this article, I propose a broadening of the notion of meta-discourse in order to better account for how arguing is done among Members of Parliament. My analysis then discusses how the argumentation moves identified in this type of political discourse are also, importantly, meta-discursive moves. I will also show how speakers engage in these moves, not only by commenting on the ongoing discursive situation, but also through the incorporation of and reflection on external, interdiscursive and/or socio-cognitive aspects of discourse. Ultimately, this analysis will hopefully constitute a convincing argument for the importance of examining together the cognitive and the social aspects of discourse production and comprehension.

Arguing, thinking and the social context: a socio-cognitive emphasis in argumentation

The present socio-cognitive approach to argumentation is anchored in two different traditions – rhetoric and social psychology – in order to relate individual mental processes to other types of contextual knowledge. More specifically, I will build on the works by Dale Hample (1980, 1985, 2007) and Michael Billig (1987, 1997, 2003). Briefly summarized, Hample (1985) proposes to focus on 'the cognitive dimension of argument – the mental processes by which arguments occur within people' (p. 2). A cognitive approach to argumentation, according to Hample, allows us to analyze the 'mental processes [that] encompass everything involved in "thinking out" an argument', as well as 'the creative processes by which people invent arguments' (p. 2). This alternative perspective,

therefore, does not concentrate on the argument, but on the *arguers,* on how people's cognitive systems process a particular stimulus (the message), whether this stimulus triggers an argument in someone else's head and, if it does, how the process of arguing takes place and what specific elements it responds to (Hample, 1980). This approach thus shifts the traditional focus on the textual elements of arguments, that is, on their visible manifestations through written, spoken or visual means, to look at the cognitive circumstances that surround the production, reception and evaluation of those texts.

Hample's proposal is a necessary starting point in moving away from the usual theoretical focus on the 'visible' aspects of argumentation, i.e. texts where an argument is seen 'as part of a message' (1980: 151). However, his discussion seems too narrowly directed towards an individual responding to specific stimuli. Even though he rejects the term 'receiver' and substitutes it for the more 'active' notion of 'arguer' (1980: 152), his model does not take into account the interdependence of mental, relational and contextual aspects, and their importance in argumentation or in communication in general. Thus, Hample is rightly reacting to a passive, mechanistic view of 'receivers', but his explanation of how people produce arguments fails to relate this cognitive process explicitly to external aspects (other participants, the context of the situation, etc.) which inevitably influence how we interpret, evaluate and produce discourse.

In more recent discussions, however, Hample has made reference to these connections, calling our attention to the relationship between 'what the arguers think or feel' and 'what people's attitudes are, from what values a statement emerges, what sort of private reasoning produces a public behavior, and whether an argument resonates with its audience' (2007: 170). Still, there is, I would argue, another crucial characteristic of argumentative communication (some, like Bakhtin, would say of language in general) that needs to be explored in more detail in an approach that emphasizes the interdependence of the cognitive and the social: the notion that arguing is a continuous process of reactions to previous statements; this leads us to see argumentation as the organization of knowledge in a specific discourse which, in its turn, will constitute the basis for new arguments/reactions in a dialogic fashion that influences both the production of arguments and their reception.

Billig (1987) explores this possibility as an alternative to more static psychological models of human thinking. In his *Arguing and Thinking*, he presents a rather innovative approach to social psychology based on rhetorical analysis and, more specifically, on the concept of argument as the basis for human thinking that leads to the formation of attitudes and beliefs. According to Billig (2003), an attitudinal opinion does not stand in isolation, but it is 'a stance that is directed against counterstances or anti-logoi' (p. 229). Even though Billig is concerned with reasoning in general rather than with the process of production or reception of arguments, it is clear that his view allows us to go beyond the examination of arguments in isolation to see them in relation to other arguments. Thus, it is extremely relevant for the present analysis, since it allows us to put the process of arguing in its necessary social and historical contexts, moving it away from the isolated individual. As explained by Billig (2003), arguments and the consequent

attitudes that go with them are not internal structures that organize our response to stimuli; they are 'stances that persons may make in matters of public controversy' (p. 229). Consequently, Billig says, attitudes should be examined, not in isolation, but 'within the context of controversy and argumentation', and a perfect way to do this is by studying 'how people give their opinions in talk' (p. 229). This, according to Billig, will allow us to see that the main goal of speakers when constructing their own accounts is to implicitly or explicitly discredit the versions of others' accounts. This means that every argument must have two important and indispensable components: a justification for how the specific position was taken, and the anticipation of a possible criticism to come.

The fact that arguing can be equated to reasoning, therefore, does not mean that it is a purely internal process that takes place within the individuals' minds and thus cannot be observed. As Billig (2003) argues: 'many of the phenomena that psychologists traditionally treat as internal mental processes are actually formed within discourse' (p. 228). We can therefore go from cognition to discourse and back to examine these processes and to see, not only what arguments look like, but also, as Hample (2007) proposes, whether they are effective, and why.

A socio-cognitive understanding of argumentation is extremely relevant for contemporary rhetorical criticism in general and for the present analysis in particular. It is important to examine argumentation as a process[1] through which we organize and make use of knowledge, in the form of personal beliefs but also of (assumed) shared attitudes, and to analyze the ways in which this is achieved in discourse. In the next section, I will try to show how the notion of meta-discourse can help us better appreciate the important role that knowledge plays in argumentation, and more specifically, how it can inform our understanding of the dynamics of parliamentary discourse. As the present analysis will show, meta-discourse plays a crucial role in revealing – explicitly or implicitly – the relationship between the different justifications and criticisms and the contexts in which they are embedded. But in order to account for the different functions of meta-discourse in argumentation, we need to acknowledge that people may argue by referring not only to what has been or is expected to be uttered in the ongoing interaction, but also to the socio-cognitive aspects that are brought into that interaction. These different levels of meta-discourse, I will argue, are all equally important for putting forward coherent, strong and convincing arguments.

A socio-cognitive view of meta-discourse

Meta-discourse is one of those difficult-to-grasp concepts that still has an enormous relevance to the study of discourse in different fields. As defined by Craig (2008a), 'meta-discourse ranges along a continuum from the relatively blatant verbal framing moves [. . .] to relatively unconscious cues (such as a slightly noticeable word choice, vocal emphasis, or facial expression) in which meta-discourse may be hardly distinguishable from first-level discourse'

(p. 3707). At a more abstract level, meta-discourse participates in 'the ubiquitous social processes through which norms and meanings for communication are continually negotiated' (Craig, 2008a: 3707).

In general, it is agreed that meta-discourse refers to the unique reflexive capacity of language, as used by human beings, to have itself as its subject matter. However, the term meta-discourse is not always used in a consistent way across, and even within, disciplines. In the linguistic tradition, for example, meta-language is the preferred word to account for a distinction between an 'object language', usually a formal system, and the jargon that is used to talk about it (Trask, 1999). Meta-language, then, is a separate system and therefore easily distinguishable from the language it describes and also from 'natural' language,[2] although in the case of linguistic analysis, it can be both object of study and explanatory tool (Jaworski et al., 2004). The term meta-discourse, on the other hand, has a shorter history in the discipline of linguistics, and it is usually reserved for describing talk about 'natural language', which conveys a difficulty in distinguishing it from plain discourse, since meta-discourse is both about discourse and part of it.[3]

However, these terminological distinctions are far from being widely accepted, and while some linguists use the term meta-language indistinctively (Preston, 1996), others argue explicitly that it does not need to be distinguished from meta-discourse (Berry, 2005) and still others prefer to talk about 'discourse reflexivity' instead (Mauranen, 2003). Scholars within the field of communication tend to align more with Bateson's (1972) concept of meta-communication and Watzlawick et al.'s (1967) extensions of it and they are, therefore, more comfortable with using the term meta-discourse to account for the different referents (message and relationship) of communication and also to encompass all the different ways in which language can refer to itself.

Apart from disagreements in terminology, there is an overemphasis in different studies on meta-discourse on the analysis of written texts (cf. Beauvais, 1989; Hyland, 2005; Mao, 1993). In fact, very few studies concentrate on oral communication. This could be due to the linguistic orientation of most of these studies, and also to the realms in which meta-discourse has been studied. Thus, for example, researchers have mostly focused on how meta-discourse helps organize academic discourse (Barton, 2005) or how it is used in the foreign language textbooks (Al-Kasey and Weston, 1992). However, significant – although scarce – research in other contexts (Craig, 2008a; Craig and Sanusi, 2000; Mauranen, 2003) reveals that meta-discourse in oral settings is both distinctive and significant, and therefore worth examining.

In the realm of political communication, it seems fair to assume that meta-discourse will play a very important role in how interactions unfold, both in explicit confrontational settings and in more 'pacific' contexts such as the Parliament. Thus, politicians seem to be especially inclined to comment on others' use of words, previous statements and topics of discussion in order to develop their own views. In fact, two of the notable exceptions to the much-studied, written meta-discourse are Simons' (1994) and Ilie's (2000, 2003) focus on

argumentation in political communication.[4] Both are, undoubtedly, valuable contributions to the development of the consistent body of analyses of meta-discourse in oral settings.

A final important conclusion that can be drawn from this brief review is that the notion of meta-discourse is usually associated, not only with the written text as a unit of analysis, but also with a pragmatic understanding of discourse as 'language in use'. This leads to a limitation of the different analyses to the explicit and visible manifestations of discourse reflexivity that are based on the *ongoing* discourse. There is, of course, variation in the elements studied, from purely self-reflexive comments (Craig and Sanusi, 2000; Ilie, 2000), references to pre-ceding statements (Simons, 1994) and more general discussions of commu-nicative terms as they are used in conversation (Cameron, 2000; Craig, 2008b). In some cases, authors establish an explicit delimitation of what counts as meta-discourse that is deliberatively exclusive of cases that are not intradiscur-sive (cf. Mauranen, 2007). For most authors, however, the bias towards 'internal' meta-discourse seems to be a consequence of a more or less conscious decision to concentrate on some aspects and not others. Still, it seems relevant and therefore worth noticing that the preferred discussions consistently leave out less apparent manifestations of meta-discourse which, I would argue, are at least as import-ant as the visible ones. This is definitely the case in analyses of argumentative contexts, where the short existing literature I referred to above follows this narrowing trend. Thus, Ilie's (2003) examples of meta-discourse consist of specific words or sentences uttered by speakers to reach the different goals she identifies. Although she does acknowledge that participants in parliamentary debates need to be aware of each other's representations of the world, cognitive structures, political experience and other 'out of the current interaction' as-pects, she does not elaborate enough on how these could be brought into a debate through meta-discourse. In Simons' (1994) definition of 'going meta', we find an acknowledgment that the 'shared message context' may play a role in argumentation. This context could also surpass the ongoing interaction to include other important elements. However, as Simons recognizes, his analysis concentrates on 'the smallest unit of going meta' (p. 477). Thus, he describes 'individual metamoves' (p. 477) as responses to a single message, and leaves out more general – and maybe more interesting – possibilities of going meta by using elements from higher levels as a reference to put forward a specific argument.

In sum, we need more comprehensive analyses of meta-discourse, especially in oral settings. The approach proposed here, far from trying to be definitive or exclusive, is based on a socio-cognitive understanding of language and com-munication in general. This view, I would argue, allows for a definition of meta-discourse that includes important cognitive and contextual elements which also need to be examined, following a trend in the analysis of 'plain' discourse developed in some (especially Van Dijk's) versions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Van Dijk's approach takes into account the role that both the personal and the shared aspects of cognition play in the production and understanding of discourse. Discourses, in this view, are produced and understood 'as a function of socially shared attitudes and ideologies, norms and values, and possibly other forms of "social cognition"'.[5] A socio-cognitive approach to discourse, therefore,

attends not only to individual cognitive processes, but also to the numerous social factors which allow us to incorporate in our understanding of situations the pertinent elements of what is not communicated. As Van Dijk (2001) explains: '[d]iscourses are like icebergs of which only some specific forms of (contextually relevant) knowledge are expressed, but of which a vast part of presupposed knowledge is part of the shared sociocultural common ground' (p. 114).

With this multidisciplinary approach to discourse in mind, we can now go back to our initial, generally agreed-upon definition of meta-discourse and try to incorporate this framework into it. Meta-discourse, I argued, refers in general to the unique reflexive capacity of language, as used by human beings, to have itself as its subject matter. As we have seen, discourse can be understood as including both what is said and its relation to a context, together with non-explicit social and cultural knowledge that helps make sense of it. Meta-discourse, then – discourse about discourse – will account for our reflexive capacity to make *any* of these elements our subject matter. The analysis carried out in the next section, therefore, will try to constitute a first, imperfect application of this notion by tracing how, through discourse, relevant cognitive and cultural elements may be invoked by speakers in order to influence the context of argumentation both locally and globally. My goal is to discuss how the functions played by meta-discursive components become crucial elements in a view of argument that emphasizes its socio-cognitive aspects.

Context of the analysis: the European Parliament and the debate

CONSTRUCTING THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament (EP), together with the Council of the European Union, constitutes the highest legislative body in the European Union (EU). It was first elected in 1979, and it constitutes one of the most important symbols of a cohesive and democratic Union. Unlike the Council, however, the Parliament does not have a legislative initiative, and thus the function of making proposals for legislation still resides with the different national parliaments across the Union. The European Parliament, however, can approve and reject laws, and it also exerts a great influence through non-binding resolutions because, as Dupret and Ferrié (2008) have pointed out,

> within parliaments, a distinction must be drawn between the dialogical site of parliamentary debates and their embedment within the broader dialogical network of public debates. On the dialogical site, parliamentary debates are organized in contextually dependent though institutionally constrained ways. Within dialogical networks, parliamentary debates are publicly and explicitly oriented to their social out-of-the-parliamentary-precinct dimension. (p. 960)

Thus, even though the EP seems limited both in its form and in its functions, it has been described as a 'pan-European soapbox with the ear of thousands of Brussels-based journalists' (Schnabel and Rocca, 2005: 111) and this has important consequences for the formation of public opinions.

The official seat of the European Parliament is located in the Louise Weiss building in Strasbourg, where 12 plenary sessions are held per year. These sessions last from three to four days, and they typically include key addresses – two of the latest speakers were the Dalai Lama and Ingrid Betancourt – followed by different debates on current issues. The debates have a unique structure, probably as a result of the singular form and function of this transnational institution. Thus, a typical debate starts with a hearing of statements. These may include report and resolution proposals, or declarations about legislative measures needed, and they are followed by the reactions of the different Members of Parliament (MPs) through short speeches in which they express their views on the proposals. The special nature of these plenary sessions, with 23 official languages being used by the different MPs, produces a less 'natural' discussion if compared to other, monolingual parliaments. Thus, interruptions or heated arguments are less likely to occur due to the inevitable delays caused by the interpreting process. Once the 'debate' is over, MPs express their preferred vote, usually by a show of hands. The session concludes with what are called 'explanations for votes'. Here, MPs take turns to explain, based on what they have heard throughout the debate, their reasons for supporting or opposing the resolution(s) proposed or, if applicable, their rationale for their abstention. In the end, if a specific resolution or report is approved by a majority of the MPs, there is a resulting text adopted which becomes official.

The present analysis will focus on the MPs' explanations for votes to illustrate how argumentation can be seen as a way to organize our knowledge as we process the information around us. The MPs' interventions, therefore, will be examined in terms of how they allow speakers to put together different sociocognitive elements in discourse in order to justify their decisions and avoid subsequent criticisms. In order to do this, it is expected that speakers will refer to previous knowledge that they and others (should) have, and also to preceding uttered or absent words. As a result, the different levels of meta-discourse and their context-shifting functions should emerge as equally relevant in influencing both the ongoing interaction and the larger context in which it is embedded.

A DEBATE ON THE PEACE PROCESS IN SPAIN

The data for the present study are part of a debate held during the European Parliament's plenary session on 25 October 2006. The complete transcripts of all the debates, together with the audio and video files, are available at the official web page of the European Parliament.[6] Briefly summarized, the events that led to this debate started with the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA announcement of a permanent ceasefire on 22 March 2006. Following this, the Spanish Chamber of Deputies, presided over by the Socialist Party, adopted a resolution on 18 May 2006 which authorized the government to start a dialogue with ETA that would hopefully lead to the end of violence. This resolution was then presented at the EP in order to gain support. Since, as argued above, the EP's resolutions are non-binding, this support would be at the most symbolic level; but nevertheless, it could be important for the formation of a favorable European, and more specifically Spanish, public opinion.

The basic proceedings of what was called the 'debate on the peace process in Spain' were as follows: prior to the debate, two different resolutions were tabled, one by the Party of European Socialists (PES), calling for the EP to support the Spanish Parliament's resolution, and another one by the conservative European People's Party (EPP), arguing that the conditions for dialogue, namely ETA's disarmament and apology to the victims' families, had not been met, and therefore the EP could not support the Spanish resolution. After a heated debate, the house finally passed the PES resolution by a slim majority, with 321 votes in favor, 311 against and 24 abstentions. MPs then proceeded to give their explanations for votes.

Meta-discourse and argumentation at work

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

As mentioned before, the data for the present analysis were taken from the explanations for votes after the debate on the peace process in Spain, held at the European Parliament on 25 October 2006. I conducted a qualitative, discursively based, analysis of the transcript in order to identify a variety of relevant paths followed by speakers when constructing arguments. These devices were then classified and quantified in order to determine which ones were more relevant and would therefore be analyzed more carefully in terms of their possible relation to socio-cognitive aspects. The organization of the speeches through discursive markers was left out of the classification in an attempt to leave space for those understudied, less visible meta-discursive elements, as argued above.

The four relevant categories established, that is, those that had a consistent presence throughout the explanations of votes, were labeled as follows: (re)framing, (re)definitions, quotations and references to similar events. The different levels of meta-discourse are thus equally represented: in the first two categories, speakers take the ongoing interaction as a frame of reference, whereas in the last two they incorporate external elements. These categories, however, should not be understood as closed or exclusive of each other, and thus in many cases a particular intervention by an MP combined elements of two or even more of them. In order to facilitate the discussion of findings, however, the examples will be presented in separate sections according to the predominant strategy.

(RE)FRAMINGS: DEBATING THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S ROLES

Throughout the examined interaction, one of the most pervasive ways in which speakers react to the two tabled propositions is by considering whether their content is supposed to fall within the realm of the EP or, on the contrary, it is an issue that has to be discussed in the national context of the Spanish Parliament. This positioning of the topic as a whole inside or outside the ongoing debate serves then as a justification for supporting or opposing one of the two resolutions, and also for abstaining from voting on one or the two of them:

(1) Christine De Veyrac (PPE-DE), in writing. (FR) Without prejudging the basis and the validity of the approach taken by Mr Zapatero's government, *it is not for the*

European institutions to adopt a position on a matter that, by its very nature – relating
as it does to the status and the future of a province – falls within the internal policy of a
Member State. [. . .]*The Spanish should be left to manage and settle this conflict between*
themselves. In these conditions, an alternative resolution by the Group of the European
People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats was fully justified. I
should, however,* have liked the reasoning to have revolved around rejection on principle*
of the examination of a matter internal to a Member State. That is why I abstained from
voting on both resolutions.

(2) Hans-Gert Poettering, on behalf of the PPE-DE Group. (DE) This debate is not about
party-political tactics and gains, but principles and fundamental convictions. *The*
problem of terrorism in Spain is not a Spanish internal problem; it is a European problem.
Terrorism is an attack on our values. Terrorism is always an attack on everything that
we in this Parliament defend on the basis of our common European convictions. No
terrorism, absolutely none, is justified. *It is for all of us to find ways out of this terrorism*
because we are all – when it is our values that we are defending – victims.

Example (1) shows the construction of the most common argument that pre-
cedes a decision to abstain or to vote against any dialogue with ETA: the speaker
reframes the debated issue, situating it outside of the current context, and thus
is able to justify her decision. The legitimacy of the whole session is questioned,
and thus the corresponding abstention seems a logical decision. As Goffman
(1986) argues, through framing, 'observers project frames of reference into the
world' (p. 39) and thus in order to break a frame, as it happens in (1), speakers
need to rely on the audience's knowledge of the EU's competence and authority –
in this case, their standards for what is defined as an 'internal' matter and what
is not. By invoking this knowledge, the speaker goes up one level (Bateson,
1972) in a meta-discursive move that allows her to comment on the context of
the messages in order to organize her argument and influence the audience's
perceptions on this matter. The reframing here, therefore, also constitutes an
argumentative move.

Example (2) shows the same type of meta-discursive/argumentative move,
this time to justify a radically different position: the 'problem' is framed as
'European', and therefore support for the Spanish government's attempts to
end terrorism is justified. In order to do this, the speaker searches for a common
ground with which the whole audience can identify. This is not an easy task, since
the transnational character of the EP does not allow for the typical rhetorical
devices used in this context: Billig (2003) argues that 'the nation-state is often
taken to be the frame of reference for political discourse' (p. 239). For him,
national communities are easily imagined through the construction of an 'us'
that carries with it the different national 'histories, sense of collectivity, sense of
destiny, and so on' (p. 239). However, this is not the case in the EP, where MPs
represent 492 million citizens distributed across 27 states with very different
collective identities. The speaker, however, can – and does – appeal to a 'universal
audience' in what Billig (2003) calls the 'rhetoric of commonplaces' (p. 238). As
he puts it: '[p]olitical discourse is typically marked by the use of common places
[which] frequently express basic ideological values, such as those of "freedom"
or "responsibility"' (p. 231). In (2), the common place used is the universally
justified condemnation of and fight against terrorism, since it is an 'attack on

our values' and therefore 'we are all' victims of it. The issue is thus placed into the context of the EP by a meta-discursive appeal to cognitive aspects, or what Craig (2000) calls 'metadiscursive commonplaces familiar to the participants' (p. 1) – the MPs' ideologies, their expectations formed thorough past experiences, etc. – that justify the decision and prevent future criticisms of it.

(RE)DEFINITIONS: POSITIONING ONESELF AND OTHERS

Another consistent way in which speakers organize their arguments through meta-discourse is by reflexive moves in which they define themselves and others. These (re)definitions serve the purpose of placing the person who is giving his or her explanation for a vote in a more legitimate position to make a reasonable decision. The alleged privileged status would be based on the knowledge and experience that comes with, for example, belonging to a particular national group. The speakers, then, explicitly categorize themselves through discourse, usually highlighting group membership, while at the same time they (re)define and categorize others in order to delegitimize their positions:

> (3) Bryan Crowley, on behalf of the UEN group. *We in Ireland know* what that is like – there have been 3000 victims of terrorist violence in Ireland over the last 30 years – and *yet we could find* a way forward and bring extreme opinions together.

> (4) James Hugh Allister (NI). Mr President*, coming from Northern Ireland*, which has experienced what at times was euphemistically called a peace process, *I see uncanny parallels* and lessons to be learned.

> (5) Rosa Díez González (PSE). (ES) *Mr President, I too am a Basque political representative. Basque and Spanish.* I would like to state in this House that Basque society has always been against terrorism, not just now. I would like to state in this House that *the terrorist group ETA is not an extremist organisation, it is a terrorist organisation*, which for forty years has been murdering in violation of Spanish democracy. *I would like to state in this House that there is no political conflict in Spain that is any different from that of any other democratic country in the European Union.* These are the political conflicts inherent in democracy. What exists in Spain, in Euskadi, is a terrorist organisation, called ETA, which has been murdering in violation of democracy for forty years. Mr President*, I have not voted for any of the Resolutions in a political gesture opposed to a debate entitled 'on the peace process in Spain', because I am fifty-four, Mr President, I have never lived through war, I have lived the whole of my life in Euskadi and in Euskadi we do not lack peace, we lack freedom.*

> (6) Luís Queiró (PPE-DE), in writing. (PT) First of all, it is unacceptable, in my view, that (these or any other) initiatives aimed at putting an end to ETA's terrorist activities *are referred to as a 'peace process'. The choice of words is biased and disingenuous.* There is no war. Rather, what we have is, on the one hand, a free, democratic country that respects autonomies and, on the other, a people that has suffered from the indiscriminate, unjustifiable violence of a terrorist group.

Examples (3) and (4) both position the speakers within the same specific group although, interestingly, this serves as the basis for two opposing views on what resolution the EP should adopt. Belonging to a single category, as we see here, may thus lead to radically different inferences. The speakers are aware of this, and that is why they both state explicitly what being from Ireland or Northern

Ireland means for them. This implies being a witness of 'terrorist violence' in (3) and dealing with what is 'euphemistically called a peace process' in (4). In both cases, these definitions or classifications (Goodman and Speer, 2007) are bound up with participants' attempts to undermine their opponents' position, so again, they function as a justifying device and as a way to prevent posterior criticism.

In (5), the speaker also presents herself as an 'insider', this time highlighting her belonging to both the Spanish and the Basque communities and, implicitly, the advantaged perspective that comes with it. Again, specifying in/out-group differences serves the purpose of justifying a particular opinion (Shi-Xu, 1992). Since the speaker is physically and emotionally closer to the problem, the audience is invited to infer that she should 'know better' and therefore her argument will express what is 'really' going on. Thus, the speaker is invoking socio-culturally bound and shared group representations to organize her argument, starting from the assumption that she is in a better position to understand this particular situation.

This positioning of the speaker, apparently, entitles her to redefine a series of terms and offer alternative words for them. Thus, ETA is redefined as a 'terrorist organization' in response to previously used expressions such as 'extremist organization';[7] this term is then linked to murder and the violation of democracy, which is what ETA has been doing according to the speaker. Similarly, the issue affecting the Basque country is defined as a 'political conflict' and then normalized as 'any other' similar conflict in democracies. Moreover, the whole topic of the debate, called 'on the peace process in Spain', is explicitly rejected on the grounds of the alleged assumptions or inferences that it carries with it: that there is a war in Spain. This last meta-discursive device is also at the basis of (6), where the use of the expression 'peace process' is explicitly questioned and criticized as 'biased' and 'disingenuous'. In the case of (5), the interpretation of the term 'peace process' is deliberatively literal and thus serves a purely rhetorical function; the same can be said of the criticisms in (6) since we may well assume that politicians are aware of the fact that there are no 'unbiased' and 'ingenuous' uses of language in political discourse.

The conscious use of specific terms and the speakers' awareness of the associations that they carry – based on their assumptions about the audience's background knowledge – are therefore a crucial element in the process of arguing. As we see in these examples, speakers argue by constantly shaping and contesting different categories in an attempt to credit themselves while discrediting the legitimacy of others' words and actions, and in some cases of the debate itself. In examples (3) to (6), the presupposed knowledge about labels such as 'Irish', 'Basque', 'terrorist', 'conflict' and even 'debate' play an important part in the perceived overall coherence and strength of the statements.

QUOTATIONS: INCORPORATING OTHERS' WORDS AND SILENCES

Quotations have been described as serving the purpose of validating one's opinion through the citation of apparently neutral sources (Potter and Edwards, 1990). As pointed out above, they will be understood in this analysis as a form

of meta-discourse, since, although they do not always stay at the level of the ongoing interaction, they still highlight a stretch of discourse – the audience's knowledge of other discourses – and comment reflexively on it. As the following examples will show, in the process of arguing, it seems important, whenever necessary, to appeal to the participants' general knowledge of past statements in an explicit way. Moreover, the statements that have *not* been made in the past are also incorporated into the current discourse and interpreted in particular ways in order to justify the speakers' position:

> (7) Hans-Gert Poettering, on behalf of the PPE-DE Group. (DE) We in the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats would like to know how it is that we can trust that ETA and Batasuna want peace when *they have not expressed a single word of regret or apology or made any kind of appeal for forgiveness to the families of the over 800 people that they have murdered.* Until this occurs, we must expect that they will begin to kill again if they do not achieve their goals through negotiation.

> (8) Martin Schulz, on behalf of the PSE Group. (DE) I admire the courage of the Spanish Government in choosing this path, a path that is controversial and fraught with risks. It is, however, a path that is best described by a quotation that I would like to read to you. (ES) *For the sake of peace and your rights, we shall not close ourselves off but, rather, we shall open ourselves up to peace, hope, forgiveness and generosity and we shall do the best we can to ensure that peace is lasting with the help and hope of everybody.*

> (Applause)

> *(DE) What I have just read out to you is a wonderful sentence that describes what this is all about. It is a sentence uttered by the Spanish Prime Minister who sent his Secretary of State off to negotiate with ETA. It is a sentence spoken by the Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar in 1998.* That is the spirit that can form the basis for us all to reach a common solution to this problem of violence, since what the Spanish Government is doing today is in the tradition of all the governments before it.

> (Applause)

In (7), the speaker makes reference to what members of ETA have not said as the basis for his argument that they cannot be trusted. This is a sort of imaginary, ideal quotation which implies that the 'regret', 'apology' and 'appeal for for-giveness' was expected and, since it has not occurred, more violence is instead predictable. Thus, the 'unuttered' becomes a quotation which is incorporated into the interaction and interpreted in a certain way. This is a crucial device that other speakers also use[8] and that shows the importance of incorporating external elements into argumentation, since the assumptions that go with these meta-discursive references make the speakers' positions appear reasonable when seen as responses to previous and relevant events. Interestingly, the references to the words not said and the actions not taken by ETA are usually bound to ideological statements about what are seen as necessary conditions for dialogue, in yet another meta-discursive move. Thus, speakers link the absent words to statements such as 'ETA has not fulfilled the conditions for becoming a credible negotiating partner' or that 'in a normal political world, talks can only be held

with people who completely denounce violence'. Through discourse, then, emerges a normative, moral understanding of dialogue[9] in which violence is seen in opposition to any form of communication.

In (8), the speaker introduces a direct quotation that also deals with the topic of 'peace process' in Spain. In an interesting strategic move, however, he does not reveal the author of this statement, or when it was uttered; the audience only hears about its content, which clearly shows an intention to be open-minded 'for the sake of peace'. The quotation, as the rest of the MPs will learn later, is not of a statement made during the current interaction, but of one uttered in a different temporal and spatial context. However, the speaker finds it relevant enough for the discussion in progress to explicitly comment on it. In fact, the radically different context of this utterance will be extremely relevant for the strength of this argument, since its revelation leads to an effective breaking of expectations that makes it very difficult for opponents to argue against it. This meta-discursive move serves two different goals: first of all, it reinforces the speaker's position, which appears stronger when endorsed by another speaker; second, and more important, it weakens his opponents' arguments by ultimately revealing the specific context of the statement: when it was stated, and more important by whom (in 1998, José María Aznar was the President of Spain and of the Partido Popular, the political party which, during the course of these explanations for votes, expresses its opposition to a peace process in Spain). The reframing of this statement into such an unexpected situation, therefore, serves the purpose of questioning the consistency and/or genuineness of the position of the speaker's opponents who, although they are not Aznar, belong to the same party and therefore cannot question the source used or the content of the quotation.

REFERENCES TO SIMILAR EVENTS: ASSESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF PAST EXPERIENCES
One final type of contextual meta-discourse has to do with how speakers use what they see as similar instances of political confrontations taking place in other European countries in order to support their positions. As in the case of reframings and redefinitions, here the same event can be referred to in order to argue for radically opposed reactions to the previously held debate. The most recurrent parallelism is established with Northern Ireland and the peace process that led to the IRA's depositing of weapons and subsequent end of violence in the UK. However, other instances of demands for regional autonomy also become relevant as the resolution adopted in the present plenary session could be seen as a precedent that will affect how these other situations are perceived:

(9) Pál Schmitt (PPE-DE). (HU) I would like to comment that the Spanish Government's efforts to begin a dialogue with the ETA terrorist organisation *is nothing new.* In my capacity as a former Hungarian ambassador, I came to learn that every democratic government conducted negotiations with representatives of the organisation. This was done by the Suárez government, by several governments led by Felipe González and also by the government of José María Aznar.

It is therefore unacceptable that every democratic process, which entails a change to the EU's internal borders, based on the right to self-determination, should be

condemned from the word go. This would also immediately condemn *all democratic and peaceful processes leading to more autonomy and independence in other European Member States. Take Belgium, where the call for Flemish independence is getting louder.*

(10) Proinsias De Rossa (PSE), in writing. If the criteria the EPP seeks to apply *were applied initially to the Irish process*, the IRA would still be engaged in its murder campaign [. . .]. *In the UK and Ireland* there is cross-party support for the Irish peace process, even though from time to time parties have been critical of details. This is one of the reasons it has been successful to date.

(11) Brian Crowley, on behalf of the UEN Group. I believe it is wrong to draw parallels or to say all processes are exactly the same. However, *previous peace processes can act as a guide* to what might happen.

(12) Avril Doyle (PPE-DE), in writing. The vote on this resolution has put the PPE-DE Irish delegation in a difficult position. The Irish Peace Process has been a success and we recognise the support of the EU for that process. *After more than 40 years of terrorism, violence and conflict all parties are now working towards a lasting peace in Ireland*. We would like to see a successful peace process in Spain also and an end to the use of violence for political ends. *However, there are dangers in drawing parallels between the Irish Peace Process and the situation that currently exists in Spain.*

The argument in (9) starts off with a reference – this time without a final twist – to similar attempts to 'begin a dialogue with ETA' in earlier contexts. The fact that previous Spanish governments have tried to put an end to violence is taken as the basis for the reasonability of the resolution proposed by the PES. Thus, since it is 'nothing new' and an initiative put forward before by governments adhering to different, even opposing, ideologies, facilitating negotiations for peace should be seen as necessary and therefore supported by all MPs. Moreover, other 'democratic processes' that affect the EU's internal borders could be affected by this decision, and as an example of this, the speaker reminds the audience of what he sees as a similar situation in Belgium. Again, knowledge about previous experiences and possible future ones is incorporated as part of discourse and referred to in order to put forward a consistent and powerful argument.

Examples (10) to (12) all respond to the topic of the discussion by enlarging its frame to incorporate their reflections on the peace process in Northern Ireland. This past experience, with which all MPs are assumed to be familiar, is interpreted in different ways. (10) describes an imaginative situation to argue that if the same standards proposed by the EPP's resolution had been applied to the British context, the peace process there would have failed. The example of the IRA is then presented as a model for how the different political parties should approach a similar issue: 'cross-party support'. Thus, the speaker specifically points out how different parties have been able to agree on the essence of what needs to be solved, something that by implication is not happening in the present interaction. The speaker in (11), although prefacing his statement with a warning about how different contexts might have to be dealt with differently, again refers directly to the usefulness of past experiences and our knowledge about them when making decisions. The speaker in (12) is more interested in establishing the differences between the British and the Spanish contexts; however, even in this case, she is

still referring to this knowledge as a way to determine what it is that is different in Spain and how being aware of that difference may help politicians develop more effective solutions for this particular context.

MPs, then, 'give their views as their own "subjective" opinions while at the same time offering justifications for such views' (Billig, 2003: 230). As they argue, MPs constantly rely on and explicitly refer to background and contextual knowledge. These examples, then, show the pervasiveness of interdiscursive references in this argumentative context that allow speakers to comment on the topic of the interaction by making explicit allusions to what is understood as relevant experience. These allusions again serve the function of influencing the audience's views on such topics.

This analysis concentrated on four specific ways in which participants reacted to previous arguments while at the same time providing new ones by offering justifications and preventing criticisms related to those reactions. These argumentative processes were informative of specific aspects on which speakers relied in order to put forward coherent and strong positions. First of all, the framing of the debate itself within or outside the competence of the EP revealed ideological assumptions about the nature of terrorism in Spain, while at the same time it placed a specific European institution in a questionable position. Second, the implications of explicitly categorizing the speakers and their opponents constituted a particularly common way in which identity was used to 'validate political claims and to discredit the counter positions of others' (Billig, 2003: 236). At the inter-discursive level, quotations, both of the uttered and the 'unuttered' kind, served the purpose of reinforcing particular positions while weakening others, again through the political inferences associated, this time, with specific words and actions. Last, the importance of past experiences categorized as (dis)similar by speakers was constantly highlighted in discourse as a way to strengthen one's own argument.

Conclusions and further research

The main purpose of this discussion is twofold: first, to foment a diversification of research in argumentation that, while acknowledging the importance of textual analyses, also pays attention to the processes that lead to these texts, both in production and in interpretation; second, to make a case for an expansion of the concept of meta-discourse to include less explicit manifestations of it both at the intra-discursive and the inter-discursive levels. As a first attempt to apply this socio-cognitive, discursive approach to a specific argumentative context, I have presented an examination of a plenary session at the European Parliament.

As this analysis has shown, while putting forward their explanations for votes, speakers constantly make use of different types of knowledge in order to organize their arguments and influence the argumentative context at different levels. Following Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic view of language, we can argue that, through meta-discourse, speakers invoke knowledge about both the ongoing interaction and other past or future communicative events. These other

discourses, however, are not only constituted by the actual words uttered, but they encompass the context and situation models (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983) that allow participants to make sense of them.

Of course, much more research needs to be conducted in order to determine more precisely the ways in which meta-discourse relates to argumentation processes, the specific manners in which it does so, and the implications of meta-discursive devices for the final outcome of decision processes. This article, however, is a step towards a more comprehensive examination of political discourse which is not 'limited to structural features of text and talk' but accounts also 'for their conditions and *functions* in the political process' (Van Dijk, 2005: 66, my emphasis). The incorporation of socio-cognitive aspects of meta-discourse and argumentation is essential if we want to accomplish this goal, especially with regards to political communication. As Van Dijk (2005) points out, we need to pay attention to political implicatures: 'inferences based on general and particular political knowledge as well as on the context models' of a particular speech (p. 65). This, again, could help researchers make the necessary move from pure description to actual explanation. This would then move us beyond 'an analysis of the usual properties of ideological and political discourse [. . .] towards a deeper discussion of their relationship to socio-cognitive representations as attitudes, norms, values and ideologies' (Van Dijk, 2005: 66).

As far as the present context of analysis is concerned, it would be convenient to explore whether the categories identified here constitute a widespread strategy in European parliamentary debates, and what socio-political factors may be affecting this. For example, are (re)framings of the topics discussed a frequent consideration that leads to particular positions? Could this be related to the reluctance of some states to accept a common government whose power may eventually surpass that of the individual states? In this sense, are representatives of some countries more likely to question the competences of the EP?

A more extensive set of data across different periods of time and topics would be necessary in order to begin to answer these questions. This article will, however, contribute to the intellectual conversation in different fields by pointing out alternative starting points for the examination of argumentation and meta-discourse, specifically in the realm of political communication. As Billig (2003) puts it, 'people's political thinking can be analyzed directly by examining political talk, noting the outward discursive and rhetorical functions performed by such talk' (p. 228). In order to do this, I would add, we need to relate these external functions to different levels of meta-discourse so that we can better examine the cognitive structures of argumentation and the ideological beliefs that lead to specific ways of organizing knowledge.

NOTES

1. My proposal to emphasize the *process* of argumentation contrasts with Wenzel's (1990) well-known discussion of process in his division between rhetorical, dialectical and logical approaches to argument. Whereas Wenzel sees the rhetorical approach as focusing on process, what he is emphasizing here is the practice of addressing persuasive messages to an audience to win their acceptance of a standpoint. It is the persuasion process, therefore, that he sees as crucial from a rhetorical approach to argumentation. This view, however, is still anchored in the external means through which this persuasion is achieved. My view of process, in contrast, is meant to incorporate an understanding of argumentation as related first to interpretation mechanisms that are then externalized in discourse.

2. The theoretical foundations of this notion are found in works by de Saussure ([1916] 1974) on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, Jakobson's (1960) functions of language, specifically the metalinguistic function, and Halliday's (1978) systemic-functional approach, which distinguishes a textual function of language (Jaworski et al., 2004).

3. Unpublished paper by Mauranen available at: http://fl.hs.yzu.edu.tw/ESP/esp_slide/200708_27_28_Anna%2FMeta-discourse_handout.pdf

4. The special nature of political discourse, described as oral but still formal, and performative in the sense that it has real, important consequences (Van Dijk, 1998), may allow for the overcoming of the prejudiced view of oral discourse as less elaborated, less consequential, and therefore not as interesting from a meta-discursive point of view and in general from an academic point of view.

5. Unpublished paper available at http://www.discourses.org/UnpublishedArticles/cogn-dis-anal.htm

6. See http://www.europarl.europa.eu. It is also worth noticing here that, although MPs were originally speaking in different languages, for this analysis I used the official transcript in English of the different interventions. This may have had (minor) consequences in the form of mistranslation, but most importantly in the loss of semantic subtlety, for the claims that I make throughout the analysis.

7. ETA is also referred to in other parts of the session as an 'independent movement', a 'group of extremists', a 'terrorist organization', a 'revolutionary Marxist-based organization' and its members as 'terrorists', a 'group of extremists' or 'Basque left nationalist political activists' depending on the political orientation of the speaker.

8. The total of references to the *not* said or done by ETA was four.

9. See Craig (2008b) for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon.

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