

Dissociation : a dialogue technique

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DISSOCIATION: A DIALOGUE TECHNIQUE

This article deals with the argumentative technique of *dissociation*, one of the two main categories of argument schemes described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. The treatment of these authors, being rhetorical in orientation, is strongly monological. This paper explores the *dialogue* contexts in which dissociation is used. It discusses the use of the technique in the various stages of critical discussion, and the consequences of that use for the resolution of the conflict of opinion around which the discussion revolves. Conclusions are drawn with regard to the nature and the use of the technique of dissociation and to the dialectical and rhetorical effects of its use in the various contexts in which it occurs. The material for the analysis consists of various kinds of texts: newspaper and radio interviews, discussions, parliamentary debates, argumentative newspaper articles, and newspaper articles in which discussions are rendered or reported upon. The theoretical framework that guides the analysis is that of Pragma-Dialectics.

Keywords: argumentation, critical discussion, argument scheme, dissociation.

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1. Introduction

Dissociation is one of the two main categories that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca distinguish in their influential taxonomy of argumentative techniques (the other being association). They define dissociation as an argument scheme in which the speaker separates elements that previously were considered by the auditorium as a whole or a conceptual unit (1969: 190). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca distinguish dissociation from undoing an association of elements that were previously already regarded as separate (1969: 412). Only in dissociation a more or less profound change is brought about in the conceptual basis of an argument: one single unitary concept is separated into two, new, concepts. An example is the separation of the single concept of “law” into two new concepts, “the letter of the law” and “the spirit of the law”.

Up till now, not much study has been made of dissociation. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are the only authors who have treated the technique in detail¹. Their treatment, being rhetorical in orientation, is strongly monological. In this paper, I will explore the dialogue contexts in which dissociation is used, and the consequences of that use for the resolution of the conflict of opinion around which the discussion in which the technique is used, revolves². In addition, I will make some remarks on the dialectical and rhetorical effects of the use of dissociation in these contexts. The material for the analysis consists of various kinds of texts: newspaper and radio interviews, discussions, parliamentary debates, argumentative newspaper articles, and newspaper articles in which discussions are rendered or reported upon. The theoretical framework that guides my analysis is that of Pragma-Dialectics (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992).

2. Dialogue contexts of dissociation in solving a difference of opinion

Dissociation can occur in various stages of the process of solving a difference of opinion: in the confrontation stage, the argumentation stage, and

¹ Goodwin (1991, 1992) treats similarities between making a distinction and dissociation. Schiappa (1985, 1993) points out the essentialistic basis of dissociation. Grootendorst (1999) analyzes an example of inappropriate dissociation.

² Elsewhere, I have given a conceptual analysis of the notion of dissociation (Van Rees 2002), and investigated the way in which dissociation manifests itself in argumentative discourse (Van Rees 2003).

the concluding stage of a critical discussion. In all cases dissociation is a move that brings the discussion back to the opening stage, since dissociation brings about a change in the starting points of the discussion. This is because through dissociation an existing and accepted conceptual unity that in some way or another serves as a point of departure for the discussion, is broken up.

The technique can be used both by the protagonist (defending), and the antagonist (attacking) of a standpoint. That results in several possibilities for placement in the succession of moves in the discussion.

2.1. Confrontation stage

In the confrontation stage, the antagonist can use dissociation (attacking) to criticize the standpoint of the protagonist. The protagonist can use it (defending) to reply to criticism against his standpoint³.

2.1.1. Attacking

An example of the antagonist using dissociation as an attack in the confrontation stage is offered by the following passage from a newspaper interview with a granddaughter of Maria Montessori.

- (1) That her grandmother is known for being ambitious and vain, she also deems irrelevant. And incorrect, as well. “She loved beautiful clothes, but was not vain. She had the gift of a profound scholarly modesty. She was driven, something different from ambition. She saw the education of the children of this world as her task. Rather, she was a medium. I remember that in a discussion with my father she picked up a book by herself and said: ‘Look, it says here’. So not: I say. She relayed what she knew”.

De Volkskrant, October 5, 1999

Renilde Montessori attacks the standpoint that her grandmother was vain by making a dissociation between “loving beautiful clothes” and “being vain”. Subsequently she gives an argument for the standpoint that Montessori was not vain. She does the same with regard to the standpoint that Montessori was ambitious. There she dissociates between

³ Strictly speaking, we cannot speak of protagonist and antagonist here, since in the confrontation stage the roles of defending or attacking have not yet been distributed. But since the one who brings forward a standpoint, usually will be the one who will take upon him- or herself the task of defending it, and the one who questions it, the task of attacking it, for briefness sake I use the terms in this context.

“being driven” and “ambition”, and subsequently gives arguments for the standpoint that Montessori was driven and for the standpoint that it was not the case that she was ambitious. The pairs of concepts that are dissociated here, in ordinary speech generally are considered to be identical. The dissociation is brought about by opposing the two aspects that are distinguished (p', but not p), and by denying their similarity (p' which is something different from p).

2.1.2. *Defending*

An example of the use of dissociation for the defense in the confrontation stage can be found in the following passage of a newspaper report of a feud between Eurocommissar Frits Bolkestein and TV personality Fons de Poel.

(2) Eurocommissar Frits Bolkestein must stop his accusations against Netwerk presenter Fons de Poel. In addition, he must publish a different rectification in *Vrij Nederland* [a weekly magazine - MAvR]. This is what De Poel's attorney demanded, this past Friday before the court in Amsterdam, in a case against Bolkestein.

The latter accused the Netwerk presenter some time ago in *Vrij Nederland* of making a fraudulent declaration against him with the IRS “and, as you know, this is a crime”. According to his attorney, N. Meijering, De Poel never made a declaration, “let alone a fraudulent one”.

Bolkestein earlier did place a rectification in VN. In this, he says: “I meant ‘fraudulent declaration’ not in the technical sense of the word, but in the sense of cooperating in giving a patently false impression of things with regard to my tax declaration”.

De Volkskrant, November 13, 1999

Bolkestein has presented the standpoint that De Poel made a fraudulent declaration. De Poel denies this. Bolkestein agrees that De Poel did not make a fraudulent declaration in the technical sense of the word, but persists in his opinion through making a dissociation: he states that De Poel made a fraudulent declaration in another, “non-technical” sense. The dissociation is brought about by distinguishing two meanings, one of which is new, of the term “fraudulent declaration”.

In the next example, too, the protagonist responds to criticism against his standpoint with a dissociation, albeit that the standpoint here is a virtu-

al one (for the term *virtual standpoint*, see Jackson 1992). Only, in this case the protagonist does not persist in his original opinion, but gives it up. The fragment comes from a radio interview with Mr. Wesseling, the public relations officer of the Public Prosecutor of Rotterdam, in which he announces that Rotterdam, unlike Groningen, will not prohibit posting an offending poster by the artist Serrano whose work is exhibited in Groningen:

- (3) W: yeah well this is the Rotterdam point of view what I just told you
 I: isn't it a bit strange that in a small country like The Netherlands such diverging opinions reign between two large cities?
 W: eh well for the moment yes you assume that there is a difference of opinion it could very well be the case that in practice in the end it will lead to the same result

An implicature of Wesseling's first utterance is that Rotterdam has an opinion of its own. When the interviewer questions the desirability of this, Wesseling distances himself from this implicature; he says that "in practice" there is no difference of opinion between the two cities. He makes a dissociation between opinions in the abstract, and opinions in practice.

2.2. *Argumentation stage*

In the argumentation stage, dissociation is always used to attack an argument of another party. In a non-mixed difference of opinion, the antagonist can attack the protagonist's argument; in a mixed difference of opinion, the protagonist of the one standpoint can attack as an antagonist the argument of the protagonist of the opposite standpoint. In the latter case, the protagonist gives an indirect defense of his own standpoint, but that makes no difference for the attacking character of the move. Dissociation can be used in two ways: to attack the tenability of the argument, or to attack the connection between argument and standpoint.

2.2.1. *Tenability of the argument*

In principle, an attack on the tenability of an argument through dissociation does not differ from such an attack on the tenability of a standpoint. However, the attack does have consequences for the application of the argument scheme. For in this case, dissociation is used in the way that

Garssen (1997) specifies, in order to attack a starting point for applying an argument scheme.

In the symptomatic scheme, the starting point consists in declaring an entity the equivalent of another entity or class of entities (such that the characteristics of the latter are conveyed to the former). This equivalence can be attacked through dissociation. That is what happens in the following example. Minister Jorritsma has been brought to book in Parliament because she wants to adapt the allowable noise levels for Schiphol airport. Parliament is of the opinion that adaptation is the same as tolerating that the standards are exceeded, and had the minister earlier not asserted that such a policy of tolerance should no longer be put into force? The symptomatic argument that Parliament applies is: adaptation is not to be allowed, because adaptation comes down to tolerating, and tolerating is no longer an allowable option. The minister defends her policy by attacking, through dissociation, the equivalence that forms the starting point of the argument made by Parliament.

- (4) According to Jorritsma, the cabinet will not revert to a tolerance policy, as it was applied in 1997. “That was once, but never again, we said at the time. But tolerating is something quite different from anticipating on a change of law which everybody thinks should be put into effect.”

De Volkskrant, January 22, 1998

Jorritsma contests the argument that adapting the allowable noise levels is the same as carrying out a tolerance policy. She dissociates between tolerance and anticipating a change of law that everybody thinks should be put into effect. The dissociation consists in distinguishing two aspects of the same thing: allowing the violation of current legal regulations. The dissociation serves to attack the starting point of the symptomatic argument that Parliament brings forward.

2.2.2. Connection between argument and standpoint

When dissociation is used to attack the connection between argument and standpoint, this can be done in several ways. These possibilities correspond with the types of critical questions that can be asked with regard to the application of the various argument schemes:

1. Does X result in/ is X characteristic for/ is X comparable to Z?
2. Does X not result in/ is X not characteristic for/ is X not comparable to something else than Z?
3. Is it X, and not something else, which results in/ is characteristic for/ is comparable to Z?

The first critical question regards the connection as such: it denies that such a connection exists. The second critical question concerns the second member of the relationship. The third critical question concerns the first member of the relationship.

2.2.2.1. The first critical question

The first critical question attacks the heart of the relationship: the existence of a connection is denied. This means that the association that is made by the other party is undone. Such an attack usually is only dissociative in the wider sense of the term, since in the relationship (X results in/is comparable to/ is characteristic of Z) two independent, different entities are brought together. But when the attack is directed against the connection in a symptomatic scheme in which identity is claimed, the attack is dissociative in the proper sense of the term, separating into two entities something that is regarded as one and the same thing. In such a case the scheme is used as follows: X is Y because X is Z and Z is the same as/comes down to/means Y. The attack involves the breaking up of this identity. An example can be found in the following fragment from a radio broadcast of a press conference in which the director of a hospital is questioned about an allegation of culpable negligence.

- (5) S: it is not correct that in our hospital fatal consequences have occurred on account of culpable negligence in our medical treatment ((...))
- I: one of the complaints for instance that was filed could be heard in the program here the story was told of a patient who asked six times for a gynecologist which did not come all that time but according to the hospital this does not say anything about culpable negligence.
- S: a complaint was filed that was treated by the grievance committee and they declared the complaint justified ((...)) the complaint was filed with reason which means that the gynecologist should have responded earlier to the request of the nursing staff.
- I: so culpable negligence after all?

S: I made a distinction between a complaint, a justified complaint and culpable negligence.

I applies the symptomatic argument that a justified complaint is the same as culpable negligence. S denies that identity, and dissociates between the two⁴.

2.2.2.2. The second critical question

The second critical question is used to attack the application of the argument scheme by pointing out that the argument leads to/is comparable to/ is characteristic of something else than what is postulated. That distinction can be prepared through a dissociation in the second member of the relationship. An example in which this is the case with regard to a causal relationship can be found in the following fragment of a newspaper interview with a genetic biologist on cloning.

(6) The discomfort at cloning of humans seems to me to be the product of confusion between the notions “identical people” and “genetically identical people”. When you have two genetically identical flowerbulbs, you can exchange the one for the other without any problem: genetically identical for bulbs means identical. In other words: the value of an individual bulb decreases, the more genetically identical ones there are. One black tulip is very special. But if the Keukenhof is full of them, no tourist will come and look at them.

But people are not bulbs. The value and dignity of people is not determined by their genetic make-up, but by the fact of them being humans. Or are identical twins (a “natural” clone!) worth less than two “ordinary” brothers? Someone married to half of a twin wouldn’t want to exchange the one for the other, would they?

There is a simple reason for that: “genetically identical” in humans is something quite different from “identical”. Individuality does not reside in the genes.

That is why humanity or human dignity is not threatened by cloning as such. That only happens if we start to value people differently on the basis of their genes. As happens now, already as well, by the way, under the name of “racism”.

De Volkskrant, April 11, 1997

⁴ This example is a vivid illustration of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s claim that it can be a matter of debate whether something must be regarded as a dissociation or as an attack on an associative connection, depending on the question whether the tie between the elements is considered to be natural or essential, on the one hand, or artificial or incidental, on the other (412). I considers the two elements as one and the same thing, inextricably bound up; S sees them as two different matters.

The speaker contests the viewpoint of people who reject human cloning because it would lead to identical people (and thus loss of human dignity). The causal relationship that underlies the argument of these opponents is attacked through dissociating between identical and (merely) genetically identical: cloning produces humans with only the latter characteristic, not the former.

In a symptomatic scheme, too, the second member of the relationship can be attacked through dissociation. An example can be found in the following (reported) conversation fragment.

(7) A: he is a good manager

B: well, he certainly couldn't prevent that subsidy cut-off

A: yes, he isn't a good crisis manager, but as a general manager he's just fine

B uses the symptomatic argument that not being able to prevent a subsidy cut-off is a sign of not being a good manager. A attacks that connection by dissociating between management and crisis management and by claiming that not being able to prevent a subsidy cut-off is not a sign of not being a good manager, but of something different, namely, of not being a good crisis manager.

2.2.2.3. *The third critical question*

The third critical question attacks the relationship between argument and standpoint by pointing out that it not that which is stated in the argument, but something else leads to the postulated result/ is comparable to the postulated object/ has the postulated characteristic. That distinction can be prepared through a dissociation in the first member of the relationship. The following fragment from the television debate program *De Worsteling* offers an example. Filmmaker Ate de Jong claims that producer Matthijs van Heijningen has lost his passion. Van Heijningen tries to refute this claim by pointing out that he is producing no less than four movies at that moment in time.

(8) dJ: I think that Matthijs's flame has subsided (...)

vH: well ((mentions four movies he is producing at that moment)).... no certainly not, no no just just

dJ: yes but I have the feeling that Matthijs does this because he is a producer and is supposed to do something again, not because he really wants to do that specific production

Van Heijningen makes use of a symptomatic argument scheme: producing a lot of movies points to passion. De Jong attacks the first member of the relationship that the scheme applies by dissociating between movies that are produced because the producer really wants to, and movies that are produced because the producer has to. Only producing the first type shows that the producer has not lost his passion. De Jong does not contest that Van Heijningen is producing four movies (in this sense he does not contest the tenability of the starting point), but he does contest that Van Heijningen produces the kind of movies that enables the application of the symptomatic relationship.

In pragmatic argumentation, the starting point for the argument posits a causal relationship. The starting point for this causal relationship can be attacked as well. That is what happens in the following fragment from a parliamentary debate about the voluntary resignation of Minister Peper after rumors of financial malversation during his period as Mayor of Rotterdam.

(9) Mr. Marijnissen (SP)

I gladly will do so, because it is the task of a member of Parliament to bring to light inconsistencies and that is what we have a case of when we are talking about “the interest of public administration”. In the interest of public administration Peper, according to his own say-so, has taken his decision. The Prime Minister has said that in the interest of public administration it is better to fight back in this kind of situation. He also said that in the interest of public administration it would be sheer folly to resign only on the basis of rumors and insinuations from anonymous sources. All this raises the question whether Mr. Peper in resigning does not do a disservice to public administration, because with regard to those insinuations and facts nothing has changed.

Prime Minister Kok:

I understand your observation and Minister Peper certainly will have taken that into account in his own considerations. It is good that there is an exchange on this matter, but it seems to me some distinction must be made between imputations against people in office against which they can defend themselves and the consequences which can or can not be drawn from that, that is, more in general, and the indeed very special situation which is in evidence here, namely that now no other than the Minister of Interior Affairs, the first one responsible for public administration, possibly for a longer period would be a party, could be discredited if only in connection with being a party, in a situation regarding the accountability for expenses related to his past, to his for-

mer responsibility. That *is* a different case, if I may say so. That is something different from an incidental accusation, a reproach, a publication or certain outcomes of an investigation, which, by the way, may very well be extremely irritating, but against which one can defend oneself. If one really has the impression that one will be a party in a conflict in which these two roles will completely be mixed up, possibly will stay mixed up, and will increase being discredited, mind you: if it has to do with the responsible minister for public administration, than that is something essentially different.

Marijnissen points out an inconsistency: Prime minister Kok earlier had defended the standpoint that Minister Peper should stay in office, because that would be in the interest of public administration; now he agrees with Peper that he should not stay in office in the name of that same interest. Kok defends his current standpoint through dissociating between staying on in a situation of incidental accusations and staying on in a situation in which one would be discredited for a longer period. In the former case, it would serve the interest of public administration; in the latter, it would not. Because the causal relationship that is attacked through the dissociation forms the starting point for a pragmatic argument scheme, that starting point is attacked as well.

2.3. The concluding stage

In the concluding stage, dissociation can be used to give a precization of the conclusion that was reached. Although in the material so far I have not found an example of a distinction being used in this fashion, this particular use of dissociation can be easily envisioned. An example in which a dissociation is made after the concluding stage of a discussion, but does regard the result of this discussion, may illustrate this. That kind of dissociation is often applied in differences of opinion regarding the interpretation of treaties and agreements. The following fragment reports on such a difference of opinion.

(10) That is why the Bundestag added a clause, that unfortunately has been phrased somewhat vaguely: files about persons of historical interest must be released, unless these persons are “victim” or “third party”.

Kohl is a “victim”, the judge ruled, because he was illegally wiretapped for years.

The interpretation of the word “victim” is debatable. Does the law mean real victims or everyone who was illegally tapped?

De Volkskrant, July 13, 2001

The concept of “victim” in the law gives rise to differences of interpretation. The commentator applies a dissociation between true victims and people who were merely illegally wiretapped.

3. Conclusions

The above investigation of the dialogical contexts in which dissociation occurs, shows that dissociation can be used in a variety of ways. But it always is used in reaction to the standpoint or argument of another party. The conceptual unity that is presupposed by the opponent is attacked and separated. That is why it is a typically dialogical technique. It is important to describe the dialogical possibilities of the use of this technique and the dialectical and rhetorical effects of that use in the various places in the dialogical profile in which it can occur.

As some authors pointed out earlier, in spite of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's classification, dissociation is not an argument scheme. At the most, dissociation can bring about a change in the conceptual basis of an argument that is connected with a standpoint through an argument scheme. The present investigation shows that this change can be brought about in the basis of both the argument presented, and the argument scheme involved. The latter can occur in various places in the scheme, corresponding to the critical questions that may be asked about the scheme. What this investigation further shows, is that dissociation also may be used as an argumentative technique in the confrontation and the concluding stages of a critical discussion. In these cases, a change in the conceptual basis of a standpoint is effected. In the confrontation stage, it may be used both in maintaining and relinquishing standpoints, and in attacking standpoints. In the concluding stage, dissociation may be used to precizate or to bring about a shift in the conclusion that is drawn from the preceding discussion.

Although dissociation is a critical technique, used in responding to standpoints and arguments, it can be also used in anticipatory fashion. Moreover, it can be used both in the attack and in the defense of a position.

Dissociation entails that a single, unitary concept is split up. The old, reduced concept is referred to by term I, and the other, split off concept, by term II. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's description of the opposition between these two terms as an opposition between appearance and

reality can easily be conceived of as essentialistic, as for instance in Schiappa (1985, 1993). However, term II does not always represent the “true” meaning, but can refer merely to the interpretation that the speaker prefers at that moment. Example (2) is a clear instance of the latter case. Nor does the concept that term II refers to necessarily always receive a positive evaluation. Negative evaluation is possible just as well. And propositions containing either term with either value can be denied as well as asserted. The following matrix shows the various possibilities.

Table 1. Evaluation and assertion of the dissociated terms

term	I	II
Denial/assertion	-	+
Negative/positive value	-	+
example 2	technical meaning	intended meaning

term	I	II
Denial/assertion	+	-
Negative/positive value	+	-
example 3	opinions in abstracto	opinions in practice

term	I	II
Denial/assertion	-	+
Negative/positive value	+	-
example 9	incidental accusations	continual accusations

term	I	II
denial/assertion	+	-
Negative/positive value	-	+
example 8	making movies because one has to	making movies because one wants to

Dissociation serves to resolve an inconsistency. It can fulfill this function because the statement to which the dissociation is applied is asserted in one of the interpretations that have been dissociated, and negated in the other. The present investigation shows that this is not necessarily an inconsistency in the position of the speaker him- or herself (as in examples, 2, 3, 4, and 9). It can also resolve an inconsistency between the position of the speaker and that of the opponent. The contradiction can

reside both in the statement to which the dissociation is applied (in the confrontation and concluding stages), and in the conclusions that may be derived from that statement (in the argumentation stage).

The dialectical effect of dissociation depends on the question in which stage, by which party, and in which way the dissociation is performed. For instance, if the protagonist uses the dissociation in the confrontation stage to maintain his standpoint, the discussion is shifted to another standpoint, but if he uses it to relinquish his standpoint, the difference of opinion is cancelled. The antagonist using dissociation in the confrontation stage, does thereby not only bring forward the opposite standpoint of that of the protagonist, but another standpoint as well, making the difference of opinion into a multiple one.

The rhetorical effects, as well, depend on the place in which, by whom and how the dissociation is performed. But in all cases, dissociation is used to bend the discussion in a direction that is to the advantage of the speaker.

Because dissociation serves to resolve an incompatibility, the technique offers an instrument to the speaker to escape his commitments without the risk of being accused of inconsistency. A vivid example of this is (9): although the speaker earlier had defended the standpoint that Mr. Peper should resign in the interest of public administration, now he is of the opinion that Mr. Peper should resign in that same interest. The facts (Peper is the subject of criticism) have not changed, but the speaker dissociates between being the subject of occasional criticism and being the subject of continual criticism.

Another rhetorical effect inherent to dissociation is a consequence of the fact that dissociation involves redefinition of a term. By replacing the old definition by the new one, the state of affairs is represented in a different light: dissociation involves "remodeling our conception of reality" (Perelman en Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 413). Of crucial importance here is the fact that the two dissociated concepts are valued differently. This means that the new representation of the state of affairs also receives a new value. A clear example is (1): the qualification that in the standpoint under attack is attributed to Maria Montessori generally has a negative connotation. By attributing a dissociated qualification with a positive connotation to Montessori, the negative judgment of Montessori's character is converted to a positive one.

The rhetorical effects of dissociation are enhanced because the dissociation usually is presented as self-evident and is introduced without further argument. Since dissociation changes the conceptual starting points which protagonist and antagonist share, the acceptability of a dissociation certainly is a point of debate, potentially requiring a subdiscussion (Grootendorst 1999). But through presenting the dissociation as self-evident, the opponent is confronted with a *fait accompli*, on which it is difficult to re-open the discussion.

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