

# *The relevance of Argumentation Theory*\*

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I examine Argumentation Theory (AT), a semantic framework best known for its detailed analyses of expressions with non-truth-conditional meaning, such as *but* and *even*. I sketch the development of the theory from its inception in the mid/late 1970s to the present day and I examine the basic AT notions and some of the theory's implications. In the last section, I discuss some problems with AT, e.g. its lack of a principled semantics/pragmatics distinction and its inability to explain why language is, quite routinely, used to convey information about the world. I then briefly suggest how a cognitive theory with a principled semantics/pragmatics distinction, such as Relevance Theory, can avoid the most serious problems encountered by AT.

## **1 Introduction**

While many current semantic theories set aside those linguistic expressions that don't succumb to a truth-conditional treatment, e.g. *but*, *even*, and *yet*, both Argumentation Theory (AT) and Relevance Theory (RT) have given such elements particular attention. It is not my concern in this paper to make detailed comparisons of their specific analyses but rather to examine some fundamental theoretical differences between them. For instance, the analyses of *but* within the two theories (Anscombe & Ducrot (1977) in AT, Blakemore (1989) in RT) are remarkably similar and, arguably, the grounds for choosing between them lie more with their theoretical underpinnings than with the details of the particular accounts. For this reason, my aim here is to investigate the central concepts and assumptions of Argumentation Theory. Obviously, it would quite likely be the work of a lifetime to capture AT, a theory which has been evolving for a quarter of a century, in all its detail and to do it justice in every nuance. Therefore, all I

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can hope to do here, is give a (possibly too) broad characterisation of the theory and some of its development, and point out some of the difficulties it runs into.

In its present state, AT is a non-cognitive, non-truth-conditional semantic theory, which takes linguistic utterances (as opposed to abstract sentence-types) as its domain. Its aim is to provide a semantic deep structure for each utterance, which includes a specification of the argumentative potential of the utterance (Nyan 1998). As mentioned above, the theory has produced some promising accounts of linguistic expressions encoding non-truth-conditional meaning, notably *but* and *even* (see e.g. A & D (1983), Nyan (1998)). However, as will be shown in this paper, the theory itself suffers from some very serious flaws, especially in its later incarnations (e.g. Ducrot (1993)).

In sections 2 to 5, I will give an outline of the central points of AT, show its development spanning two decades and indicate (only indicate) how argumentation theorists account for certain key non-truth-conditional expressions. In these sections I will mostly keep criticisms and queries to footnotes so as not to distract from the presentation. I will give a fuller critical discussion and evaluation of the theory in section 6, paying special attention to the move from a semantics with some truth-conditional and some non-truth-conditional elements to a completely non-truth-conditional semantics as it is argued for by Ducrot (1993). In the final sub-section, the AT approach will briefly be compared with the cognitive approach of Relevance Theory, which also takes a non-truth-conditional view of linguistic semantics, but, unlike AT, maintains a distinction between two kinds of linguistic meaning, conceptual and procedural, and applies the notion of truth conditions to mental representations.

## 2 The beginnings of Argumentation Theory

AT is based on the view that it is a fundamental characteristic of utterances that they can be used as premises or conclusions in arguments. It's important to note that the nature of these arguments is such that they cannot be captured by the standard rules of logic.

Anscombe & Ducrot (1976) observed that utterances with the same informational (i.e. truth-conditional) content cannot always be used as arguments in favour of the same set of conclusions. For instance, according to A & D, (1) and (2) have the same informational content, i.e. the same truth conditions<sup>1</sup>. However, (1) can be used as an argument in favour of both (3a) and (b). (2), on the other hand, can only be used as an

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, this is an arguable point. It could also be claimed that *as tall as* has the semantic value of *at least the same height as*. For further discussion of this topic see Atlas (1984), who, incidentally, argues against both positions and offers a third possibility.

argument in favour of (3a). Thus, (4a) and (b) are both perfectly acceptable, whereas (5b) is unacceptable.

- (1) Peter is the same height as Mary.
  - (2) Peter is as tall as Mary.
  
  - (3) a. Peter is tall for his age.  
b. Peter is short for his age.
  - (4) a. Peter is tall for his age: he's the same height as Mary who is a year older.  
b. Peter is short for his age: he's the same height as Mary who is a year younger
  - (5) a. Peter is tall for his age: he's as tall as Mary who is a year older.  
b. \*Peter is short for his age: he's as tall as Mary who is a year younger.
- (examples translated and adapted from Anscombe & Ducrot 1976: 10)

Examples of this sort led Anscombe & Ducrot to believe that a purely truth-conditional semantics was not sufficient and that the argumentative potential of an utterance was an important aspect of its meaning.

In early AT (e.g. A & D 1976), the argumentative potential of an utterance was characterised in terms of the conclusions it could be used to support. Thus, it would be part of the meaning of (1) that it can be used as an argument for both (3a) and its contrary (3b). In fact, A & D would say that the argumentative orientation of (1) was neutral (see e.g. Moeschler & Reboul (1994:314/5)). Similarly, the fact that (2) can only be used to support the conclusion in (3a) is part of the meaning of (2). Unlike (1), the argumentative orientation of (2) is not neutral; this utterance is oriented towards conclusions of the type in (3a).

The fact that (1) and (2), and other examples of the same sort, clearly differ in their encoded meaning, even though they don't differ in their truth-conditional content<sup>2</sup>, led A & D (1976: 8) to postulate an **integrated pragmatics** (*pragmatique intégrée*). They call it a 'pragmatics' because it is concerned with the sort of meaning that can't be captured in terms of traditional truth-conditional semantics. What they mean by 'integrated' is that the non-truth-conditional aspects of the meaning of *as...as* in (2) are, nevertheless, aspects of its encoded meaning and do not depend on the recovery of some prior truth-conditional semantic meaning the way, for example, Gricean conversational implicatures depend on the recovery of the truth-conditional content of the utterance ('what is said'). In perhaps more intuitive terms, A & D's integrated pragmatics could be seen as a non-truth-conditional semantics, which they saw, at that time, as existing alongside a

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<sup>2</sup> see fn. 1

traditional truth-conditional semantics. In effect, it seems that, the postulation of an integrated pragmatics means that there is no semantics/pragmatics distinction in AT, since it is not clear that A & D also allow for a non-integrated pragmatics which deals with non-encoded aspects of utterance meaning. It will be seen at the end of this paper that this is an important issue.

### 3 Argumentative contents, the law of negation & the law of inversion

#### 3.1 Sentence (*phrase*) and utterance (*énoncé*)

Before presenting A & D (1983)'s more detailed way of accounting for examples like (1) and (2), let me say something about their conception of the basic notions of sentence (*phrase*) and utterance (*énoncé*). As mentioned in the introduction, A & D (1983) are interested in utterance meaning. By 'utterance' (*énoncé*) they (1983: 84) mean utterance token, i.e., as they put it, linguistic material with 'historical' characteristics (e.g. a specific position in space and time). They contrast this with the notions of utterance type (*énoncé-type*) and 'sentence' (*phrase*). According to them, the utterance type is the linguistic material the utterance consists of. Thus, for A & D, (6b) and (7), which they see as an 'act of hoping', are tokens of the same utterance type because, at least in French, they both contain exactly the same linguistic material.

- (6) a. Est-ce que Pierre va venir au rendez-vous?  
       'Is Peter coming to the meeting?'  
       b. J'espère.  
       'I hope so'
- (7) J'espère.  
       'I'm hoping.'

(A & D 1983: 84)

A & D's 'sentence' (*phrase*), on the other hand, is a theoretical construct, the deep structure underlying an utterance (token). Thus, for them (6b) is a token of the 'sentence' in (8), while the 'sentence' underlying (7) will be just *J'espère*.

- (8) J'espère que p.  
       'I hope that p.'

For A & D, utterance tokens are the starting point, the 'observable facts' (A & D 1983: 80-81; Ducrot 1984: 180) on which their work is based. In a bid to account for the

meaning of utterances, each of them is assigned a 'sentence' or deep structure. While statements concerning utterances are intended to describe the 'facts', those concerning 'sentences' are intended to explain them. This shows that A & D's notion of 'sentence' (*phrase*) is significantly different from what is generally understood by 'sentence' in linguistics and philosophy. For this reason, I am following Nyan (1998) in referring to A & D's *phrase* as 'deep structure' rather than 'sentence' in the rest of this paper.

A & D (1983: 85) and Ducrot (1984: 180) call the semantic value of utterances **sense** and the semantic value of deep structures **signification**. Analogous to utterances and deep structures themselves, senses are observable, but significations are not (Ducrot 1984: 180). According to Ducrot (1984: 181-183), the signification of a deep structure is a set of instructions as to how to assign sense to the utterance. Thus to know the signification of the deep structure underlying (9), is to know what to do to interpret an utterance of it.

(9) The weather's nice.

(from Ducrot 1984: 181)

Ducrot claims that it is part of the signification of the deep structure underlying (9) that the hearer is instructed to look for the place the speaker is talking about and to accept that the speaker is asserting the existence of fine weather in that place. The sense of the utterance, on the other hand, Ducrot describes as a description of the event of making the utterance (*énonciation*). This includes information about the illocutionary force of the utterance and its argumentative potential.

According to Ducrot (1984: 180), the systematic association between senses and utterances is an 'observable fact'. To explain this observable association, he chooses to associate the theoretical construct of signification with the deep structures that underlie utterances. He believes that this is an interesting way of proceeding because he supposes that it's possible to formulate laws to calculate the signification of a deep structure on the basis of its lexico-grammatical properties and different laws to predict the sense of an utterance on the basis of the signification of the deep structure that underlies the utterance. While Ducrot sees the signification of deep structures in terms of instructions, A & D (1983) saw it in terms of contents (*contenus*). This is what the next sub-section is concerned with.

### 3.2 Contents (*contenus*)

Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 79-113) give a detailed analysis of the meaning of utterances like (1) and (2) above. First, they make it clear that they don't want to assign

meaning to utterances themselves, but rather to the deep structures underlying them. Thus, each deep structure is given a set of ‘contents’ (*contenus*), some of them asserted, some of them presupposed. The asserted contents are equivalent to informational or ‘factual’ (or, indeed, truth-conditional) contents, and at least some of the presupposed contents are seen as argumentative. According to Anscombre & Ducrot (1983: 102), (2) will have the asserted content in (10a) and the presupposed content in (10b).

- (2) Peter is as tall as Mary.  
 (10) a. [Peter’s height equals Mary’s height].  
 b. [[Peter’s height equals Mary’s height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]<sup>3</sup>

Although they don’t spell this out, it seems reasonable to assume that they would say that (1) has the same asserted, or factual, content as (2), i.e. (10a), but that it lacks the (argumentative) presupposed content in (10b). Hence its neutral argumentative orientation. The idea is that these contents are arbitrarily assigned to a finite number of core deep structures (*phrases-noyaux*) and that the contents of more complex deep structures can be calculated on the basis of the contents of the core deep structures which make up the more complex deep structure (A & D 1983: 97). This is done with the help of two basic rules: the law of negation (*la Loi de Négation*) and the law of inversion (*la Loi d’Inversion*), which will be illustrated below.

All in all, A & D’s semantic description involves three steps or mechanisms. The first assigns a set of asserted (factual) contents and presupposed contents, some of which are argumentative, to each core deep structure. The second derives new contents from those that make up the meaning of the core deep structure using the laws of negation and inversion. The third uses the results of the first two mechanisms to assign an argumentative orientation to the whole (complex) deep structure.<sup>4</sup> The best way to see how this works is to look at some examples.

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<sup>3</sup> The square brackets indicate that we are dealing with contents.

<sup>4</sup> NB. The first two mechanisms assign argumentative orientation to *contents* and not to the *deep structure*. Also note that, from this point onwards, the argumentative orientation of *deep structures* and utterances is only ever given in comparative terms, e.g. ‘same as’ or ‘opposite’.

### 3.3 The law of negation (*la Loi de Négation*)

Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 99-104) account for the meaning of (11) as follows.

- (11) Peter is wrong to believe that he's as tall as Mary.  
 (12) a. But he is quite tall.  
       b. \*But he is quite short.

First of all, they observe that an utterance of (11) can be followed quite easily with an utterance of (12a) but not with an utterance of (12b). They analyse the meaning of *but* in such a way that it can only felicitously connect two clauses with opposite argumentative orientation<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, A & D predict that (11) and the clause after *but* in (12a) have opposite argumentative orientations, while (11) and the clause after *but* in (12b) have the same argumentative orientation (hence the infelicity when (11) is followed by (12b)). They then proceed to show that this is the case by appealing to the law of negation.

A & D start by assuming that *P* in (13) has the asserted content *a* and the presupposed content *b*. They then assign the whole deep structure in (13) the asserted content  $\alpha$  and the presupposed contents  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  in (14)<sup>6</sup>.

- (13) X is wrong to believe that P.  
 (14)  $\alpha$ : [not-P]  
        $\beta_1$ : [b]  
        $\beta_2$ : [X believes that a]

As mentioned above, (2) is assigned the asserted content *a* and the argumentative presupposed content *b* in (15).

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<sup>5</sup> Clearly, this can't be the only condition for the felicitous use of *but*. If it were, utterances of the form 'P but not-P' should be felicitous, since, presumably, P and not-P have opposite argumentative orientations. However, utterances of this form clearly are not felicitous: For instance, Peter is tall but he's not tall. is not acceptable. It is quite conceivable that, at this stage, A & D would say that such utterances are not acceptable because their asserted contents are contradictory. For a fuller AT account of *but* see A & D (1977).

<sup>6</sup> It seems curious that there is no asserted content along the lines of 'X is wrong about something'.

- (2) Peter is as tall as Mary.  
 (15) a: [Peter's height equals Mary's height]  
 b: [[Peter's height equals Mary's height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]

Now (11) can be assigned contents on the basis of the contents of (2) and (13). (11) will thus have the asserted content  $\alpha$  and the presupposed contents  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  in (16), where  $\beta_1$  is an argumentative content.

- (11) Peter is wrong to believe that he's as tall as Mary.  
 (16)  $\alpha$ : [Peter's height doesn't equal Mary's height]  
 $\beta_1$ : [[Peter's height equals Mary's height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]  
 $\beta_2$ : [Peter believes that his height equals Mary's]

Now, the argumentative orientation of the deep structure underlying (11) cannot be calculated on the basis of (16) because the presupposed content  $\beta_1$ , which is concerned with argumentative orientation, does not apply to the asserted content  $\alpha$ , but to its unnegated counterpart. This is where the law of negation comes in. A & D's law of negation is given in (17).

- (17) Law of Negation:  
 If  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  are two contents and if a deep structure has the content  $c_3$ : [ $c_1$  is an argument for  $c_2$ ], then this can be re-written as [ $\neg c_1$  is an argument for  $\neg c_2$ ].<sup>7</sup>  
 (A& D 1983: 101)

Since ' $c_1$  is an argument for  $c_2$ ' is equivalent to ' $c_1$  and  $c_2$  have the same argumentative orientation', the law of negation can be applied to  $\beta_1$  in (16) to yield  $\beta_1'$ , given in (18).

- (18)  $\beta_1'$ : [ $\neg$ [Peter's height equals Mary's height] and  $\neg$ [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]

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<sup>7</sup> This shows clearly that 'is an argument for' is not equivalent to the material conditional and that argumentative laws are not based on the rules of standard logic. For, from  $P \rightarrow Q$ ,  $\neg P \rightarrow \neg Q$  does not follow.



A & D call this process of deriving a presupposed content which applies to the asserted content of a deep structure from one which doesn't apply to the asserted content with the help of the laws of the second mechanism *centrage* (A & D 1983: 103).

The third mechanism assigns an argumentative orientation to a deep structure on the basis of its argumentative presupposition after this presupposition has been 'centred' on the asserted content of the deep structure. This means that now an argumentative orientation can be assigned to the deep structure underlying (11) by using  $\beta'_1$  in (18). In this way, (11) comes out as having the same argumentative orientation as 'Peter is not tall', which is obviously the opposite of the argumentative orientation of 'Peter is tall'. This explains why the use of *but* to connect (11) and (12a) is felicitous, while the result of using *but* to connect (11) with (12b) is rather less acceptable.

### 3.4 The law of inversion (*la Loi d'Inversion*)

As Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 104-111) observe, the law of inversion concerns two sets of argument and conclusion. First, the law of inversion is given at the (observational) level of the utterance (as opposed to the theoretical level of the deep structure of the utterances, i.e. what A & D refer to as the 'sentence'). It states that if utterance  $u$  is a stronger argument for conclusion  $c$  than utterance  $u'$  for conclusion  $c'$ , then the negation of  $u'$  (*not- $u'$* ) will be a stronger argument for *not- $c'$*  than *not- $u$*  is for *not- $c$* . This shows again that A & D's argumentative laws are a far cry from the rules of standard logic. Before saying more about the law of inversion and its applications, let me say something about the notion of the comparative strength of arguments, which, as A & D (1983: 105) note, is basic to AT.

According to A & D (1976: 15),  $u$  is a stronger argument than  $u'$  in favour of  $c$  if a speaker who uses  $u'$  as an argument for  $c$  would also have to admit  $u$  as an argument for  $c$ , but not vice versa. For example, (20) could be seen as a stronger argument in favour of (21) than (19), because, intuitively, a speaker accepting (19) as an argument for (21) would also have to accept (20) as an argument for the same conclusion<sup>8</sup>. Conversely, a speaker accepting (20) as an argument for (21) would not necessarily have to admit (19).

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|----------------------------------------------|------------|
| (19) Jane has a sore throat.                 | $u'$       |
| (20) Jane has pneumonia.                     | $u$        |
| (21) Jane can't sit the exam this afternoon. | $c (= c')$ |

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<sup>8</sup> As will be discussed below, there are counterarguments, which pose a problem for this definition of comparative argumentative strength (and other central AT notions) and which led A & D (1983: 163-179) to adjust their definitions.

This explains the notion of argumentative strength for utterances supporting the same conclusion.

Examples (19)-(21) can also be used to show that the law of inversion states something intuitively correct in cases where  $u$  and  $u'$  are arguments for the same conclusion. Let (20) be  $u$ , (19)  $u'$  and (21) both  $c$  and  $c'$ . Now, it has been shown above that (20) is a stronger argument in favour of (21) than (19). According to the law of inversion, the negation of (19) should therefore be a stronger argument for the negation of (21) than is the negation of (20). The negations of (19)-(21) are given in (22)-(24).

- |                                            |                  |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------|
| (22) Jane doesn't have a sore throat.      | $not-u'$         |
| (23) Jane doesn't have pneumonia.          | $not-u$          |
| (24) Jane can sit the exam this afternoon. | $not-c = not-c'$ |

Intuitively, the law of inversion makes the right prediction in this case. (22) does indeed seem to be a stronger argument than (23) in favour of (24): a speaker who accepts that the fact that Jane doesn't have pneumonia is an argument in favour of her being able to sit an exam that afternoon will also have to accept Jane's not having a sore throat as an argument for the same conclusion. However, someone accepting Jane's not having a sore throat as an argument for Jane's being able to sit an exam will not necessarily have to accept Jane's not having pneumonia as an argument for the same conclusion. After all, Jane could have a heavy cold, a state of affairs compatible with her not having pneumonia, which would nevertheless be an argument for her not sitting the exam. This seems to show that, intuitively, the law of inversion is right for cases where  $c = c'$ . However, the law of inversion is also supposed to apply to cases where two utterances are arguments for different conclusions. The problem with this is that A & D do not make it clear how their notion of argumentative strength applies to utterances that are arguments for different conclusions<sup>9</sup>. All they do is give an example of a case where  $c$  and  $c'$  are not identical but opposites.

According to A & D (1983: 107), the *but* in (25) is scalar in nature, i.e. it not only indicates that the two clauses ( $p$  and  $q$ ) support contradictory conclusions (or have opposite argumentative orientations) but it also indicates that  $q$  (*Peter has cleared the table*) is a stronger argument for  $c$  (*Peter is quite helpful*) than  $p$  (*Peter didn't do the dishes*) is for  $not-c$  (*Peter isn't helpful*).

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, this oversight is not redressed in later definitions.

(25) (Peter is quite helpful)<sub>c</sub>: (he didn't do the dishes)<sub>p</sub> but (he cleared the table)<sub>q</sub>.

If this is correct, the law of inversion should be applicable to *p* and *q* and *c* and *not-c*, i.e. *not-p* should be a stronger argument for *not-not-c* (= *c*) than *not-q* is for *not-c*. Therefore, it should be possible to construct an acceptable utterance of the form '*not-not-c* (= *c*): *not-q* but *not-p*'. As (26) shows, this is indeed possible.

(26) (Peter is quite helpful)<sub>c</sub>: (he didn't clear the table)<sub>not-q</sub> but (he did the dishes)<sub>not-p</sub>.

Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 107-109) contrast this with (27), where, according to them, *but* is not scalar in nature and where, consequently, an utterance of the form '*not-not-c* (= *c*): *not-q* but *not-p*' would not be acceptable to a speaker uttering (27), as (28) shows.

(27) (I like Peter)<sub>c</sub>: (his manners are bad)<sub>p</sub> but (his intentions are good)<sub>q</sub>.

(28) (I like Peter)<sub>c</sub>: (his intentions are bad)<sub>not-q</sub> but (his manners are good)<sub>not-p</sub>.

Thus, A & D argue, in cases of scalar *but*, like the one in (25), an utterance of '*p* but *q*' supports the conclusion *q* supports because *q* is a stronger argument for *c* than *p* is for *not-c*. In cases of non-scalar *but*, like the one in (27), on the other hand, this is supposed to be because the speaker gives more importance to *q* than she does to *p*.<sup>10</sup> Now, let's look at the formal use of the law of inversion.

A & D (1983: 110/1) use (29) to show how the law of inversion, this time formulated at the level of contents, works formally.

(29) Peter is wrong to believe that he is taller than Mary and even that he is as tall.

In fact, they don't actually give the formal version of the law of inversion, but it seems plausible that, analogous to the law of negation, this law for contents would look something like (30).

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, it seems doubtful to me that the difference between (25) and (27) lies in the fact that *but* doesn't have the same meaning in the two utterances. It seems far more likely that the difference simply lies in the informational content of the two utterances.

(30) Law of Inversion

If  $c_1$ ,  $c_2$  and  $c_3$  are contents and a deep structure has the content  $c_4$ : [ $c_1$  is a stronger argument than  $c_2$  for  $c_3$ ], then this can be rewritten as [not- $c_2$  is a stronger argument than not- $c_1$  for not- $c_3$ ].<sup>11</sup>

Before looking at its application to (29), a word needs to be said about A & D's analysis of *even*. According to them (1983: 105), *even* in an utterance of the form ' $p$  and even  $q$ ' indicates that  $p$  and  $q$  support the same conclusion and that the speaker sees  $q$  as a stronger argument than  $p$  for that conclusion. Thus, A & D's prediction is that *Peter is wrong to believe that he is as tall as Mary* is a stronger argument than *Peter is wrong to believe that he is taller than Mary* for some conclusion  $c$  which they both support, because, otherwise, (29) would not be felicitous.

As has been shown above, (11), the second conjunct of (29), has the asserted content  $\alpha$  and the argumentative presupposed content  $\beta_1$  given in (16).

(11) Peter is wrong to believe that he's as tall as Mary.

(16)  $\alpha$ : [Peter's height doesn't equal Mary's height]

$\beta_1$ : [[Peter's height equals Mary's height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]

Without going into the question in more detail, A & D (1983: 110) state that (31), has the asserted content  $a'$  and the presupposed content  $b'$  in (32).

(31) Peter is taller than Mary.

(32)  $a'$ : [Peter's height > Mary's height]

$b'$ : [[Peter's height > Mary's height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]

If this is combined with what was said above about the contents of 'X is wrong to believe that P', (33), the first conjunct of (29), can now be assigned the asserted content  $\alpha'$  and the argumentative presupposed content  $\beta_1'$  in (34).

(33) Peter is wrong to believe that he is taller than Mary.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that this only covers the case where both arguments support the same conclusion. Since these are the only cases A & D discuss in any detail, this version of the law of inversion seems sufficient.

- (34)  $\alpha'$ :  $\neg$ [Peter's height > Mary's height]  
 $\beta_1'$ : [[Peter's height > Mary's height] and [Peter is tall] have the same argumentative orientation]

At this point A & D make use of an axiom of the second mechanism, which states that if  $[x > y]$  and  $[x = y]$  are two contents that are arguments for the same conclusion, then  $[x > y]$  is always the stronger argument than  $[x = y]$ . If one applies this axiom to the contents of (11) and (33), the two conjuncts of (29), (29) can be assigned the argumentative content  $\gamma$  in (35).

- (35)  $\gamma$ : [[Peter's height > Mary's height] is a stronger argument than [Peter's height = Mary's height]

Now the law of inversion can be applied to (35) to yield (36).

- (36)  $\gamma'$ : [ $\neg$ [Peter's height = Mary's height] is a stronger argument than  $\neg$ [Peter's height > Mary's height]

The third mechanism, which assigns argumentative relations to deep structures (rather than contents), contains the law in (37)<sup>12</sup>, which explains the use of *even* (A & D 1983: 111).

- (37) If A and A' are two deep structures with the asserted co-oriented contents  $\alpha$  and  $\alpha'$  respectively and the second mechanism derives from the conjunction of A and A' the argumentative content [ $\alpha$  is a stronger argument than  $\alpha'$ ], then A and A' have the same argumentative orientation and A is stronger than A'.

This means that it follows from (36) that (11) and (33), the two conjuncts of (29), have the same argumentative orientation and that (11) is a stronger argument than (33), which explains why the use of *even* in (29) is felicitous.

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<sup>12</sup> It is not entirely clear what the motivation of this law is, apart from the fact that it is needed to account for these examples. In general, there seems to be a proliferation of laws and axioms in AT at this stage, whose motivation is not always clear.

### 3.5 A counterexample and some revised definitions

As mentioned in footnote 8 above, A & D (1976)'s definition of comparative argumentative strength runs into counterexamples. A & D (1983: 164-166) discuss the following case.

On their original definition,  $u_2$  is a stronger argument than  $u_1$  for some conclusion  $c$  if a speaker who accepts  $u_1$  as an argument for  $c$  also has to accept  $u_2$ , but not vice versa. One of the examples A & D use is the utterance pair in (38). The original AT account of the meaning of *nearly* (*presque*) states that the word indicates that an utterance containing it has the same argumentative orientation (i.e. supports the same types of conclusion) as the corresponding utterance without *nearly* and that  $p$  is a stronger argument than *nearly*  $p$ . In other words, if the AT account of *nearly* is correct, (38b) should be a stronger argument than (38a) for the same type of conclusion<sup>13</sup>.

- (38) a. The barrel is nearly empty.             $u_1$   
       b. The barrel is empty.                     $u_2$

(adapted from A & D 1983: 164)

It seems clear that, on A & D's definition, (38b) is indeed a stronger argument than (38a) for a conclusion like (39), for example: Any speaker who accepts that (38a) is an argument for (39) will also have to accept that (38b) is an argument for the same conclusion, but not vice versa.

- (39) We need to get a fresh barrel.

However, as A & D (1983: 164) point out, if the conclusion were not (39) but something like (40), their definition of the notion of stronger argument would not apply.

- (40) We need to drink just a little more.

(adapted from A & D 1983: 164)

As (41a) and (b) show, it is not the case that any speaker who accepts (38a) as an argument for (40) also has to accept (38b); for (38b) isn't an argument for (40) at all.

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<sup>13</sup> NB. There is, of course, a truth-conditional difference between (38a) and (b). However, A & D (1983: 165) don't want their explanation to hinge on this, because they're already moving towards abandoning truth conditions and they certainly don't want the truth conditions of an utterance to take priority over its argumentative properties.

- (41) a. The barrel is nearly empty. So, we need to drink just a little more.  
 b. The barrel is empty. So, we need to drink just a little more.

The existence of examples like (41a) and (b) means that A & D's definition of argumentative orientation and stronger argument and their account of the meaning of *nearly* cannot all be right. At this stage A & D (1983: 166) change their definitions of argumentative orientation and argumentative strength. However, as will be seen in the next section, at a later stage their definitions, and the account of the meaning of words like *nearly*<sup>14</sup>, underwent some changes of a more far-reaching sort.

A & D's first step in changing the definition of argumentative strength is the introduction of a new distinction, between **argumentation** and the **act of arguing** (A & D 1983: 163-166). According to A & D (1983: 163) an **argumentation** is a discourse with at least two utterances  $u_1$  and  $u_2$ , one of which is the premise (or argument) and the other the conclusion. An **act of arguing**, on the other hand, is an illocutionary act<sup>15</sup> which is part of the meaning of every utterance, whether it is used as a premise or as a conclusion in a given argumentation. This act consists in attributing a certain degree of a certain property (e.g. tallness, helpfulness, emptiness, etc.) to one or more entities or objects. This, according to A & D (1983: 166), is part of the meaning of the utterance in the sense that the utterance "presents itself" as accomplishing such an act. The idea is that the kind of property a given utterance is taken to attribute to an object on a given occasion determines the kind of conclusion in favour of which the utterance can be used.

In their new definition of argumentative strength, A & D make use of this notion of act of arguing. Instead of defining argumentative strength and argumentative orientation in terms of conclusions, they now define them in terms of the properties the utterances attribute to objects and the degrees to which they do so. On A & D (1983: 167)'s new definition, two utterances have the same argumentative orientation if they attribute the same property to the same objects<sup>16</sup>. They have opposite argumentative orientations if

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<sup>14</sup> See Moeschler & Reboul 1994: 320-321.

<sup>15</sup> The fact that Ducrot (1984) states in the preface that he studied and was influenced by the works of Austin and Searle, might lead one to assume that A & D's notion of illocutionary act is identical to that of Austin (1962) or Searle (1969, 1979), i.e. an act performed *in* speaking, such as warning, requesting, promising, etc. However, it is not entirely clear that A & D's notion is the same. At the very least, the illocutionary act of arguing is different from all other illocutionary acts in that it is supposed to be performed by every single utterance.

they don't, to any degree, attribute the same property to the same objects<sup>17</sup>. A & D (1983: 166)'s new definition of argumentative strength is the following:  $u_2$  is a stronger argument than  $u_1$  if they both present their object as possessing the same property  $R$  and  $u_2$  indicates a higher degree than  $u_1$ . In those cases where  $u_1$  and  $u_2$  support the same conclusion,  $u_2$  will do so more strongly than  $u_1$ , but the definition of argumentative strength no longer demands that they should support the same conclusion, because the definition of argumentative orientation is no longer given in terms of conclusions<sup>18</sup>. This solves the problem posed by (41a) and (b) without a change in the account of *nearly*, because even in those examples (38b), *the barrel is empty*, attributes a greater degree of emptiness to the barrel than does (38a), *the barrel is nearly empty*, and, therefore, (38a) and (b) have the same argumentative orientation and (38b) is a stronger argument than (38a) on the new definitions. It's just that in (41a) and (b) the two

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<sup>16</sup> This might make it look as though (1) and (2) have the same argumentative orientation, because they seem to attribute the same property to the same entity, i.e. they both seem to attribute height to Peter. However, A & D would be likely to say that *as tall as* attributes tallness, whereas *the same height as* can attribute tallness or shortness. This highlights a general worry about what a property is on this picture, i.e. why are tallness and shortness different properties? Similarly, it isn't clear why there couldn't be a property of near-emptiness, which would mean that (38a) and (b) don't attribute the same property to the same object – one could attribute emptiness and the other near-emptiness.

<sup>17</sup> This change in the definition of opposite argumentative orientation has an undesirable effect on A & D's account of the meaning of *but*. Remember that it was a necessary (and, in the case of non-scalar *but*, also sufficient) condition of the felicitous use of *but* that the two conjuncts should have opposite argumentative orientation without contradicting each other. When argumentative orientation was defined in terms of conclusions and two utterances were said to have opposite argumentative orientation if they supported opposite conclusions, (i) would have been ruled out, because it is hard to see what opposite conclusions could be supported by *Peter likes chocolate* and *Most birds can fly*.

(i) ?*Peter likes chocolate but most birds can fly*.

However, given A & D's new definition of opposite argumentative orientation, (i) should be acceptable, because the two conjuncts do indeed not attribute the same property to the same object to any degree whatsoever and the two conjuncts certainly don't contradict each other.

<sup>18</sup> It's interesting that, by this stage, A & D seem to have given up (or at least forgotten) the idea that different degrees of argumentative strength can also be attributed to arguments with different argumentative orientations (as allowed for by the law of inversion). If the new definition of argumentative strength given here is the whole story, A & D can no longer claim that there is such a thing as the scalar *but* discussed above – the law of inversion will no longer be applicable in cases where two utterances don't attribute the same property to their objects, because the notion of argumentative strength only applies to utterances that attribute the same property.



utterances can't support the same conclusion. It will become clear below that this change is the first step in the direction of topoi and topical forms.

## 4 Argumentative operators, topoi, topical forms & topical fields

### 4.1 Argumentative operators

In argumentation theory, expressions like *as ... as*, *nearly*, *but* and many others are referred to as 'argumentative operators' (e.g. Nyan 1998: 52)<sup>19</sup>. As the discussion above may have made clear, these argumentative operators can be seen as determining the argumentative orientation, or constraining the argumentative potential, of utterances. Thus, the presence of *as tall as* in (2) had the effect of adding the (argumentative) presupposed content (10b) to the meaning of the utterance. (1), on the other hand, which has the same asserted content as (2), but doesn't contain *as tall as*, doesn't carry this presupposed content.

- (1) Peter is the same height as Mary.
- (2) Peter is as tall as Mary.

Similarly, *nearly* in (38a) has been analysed as determining the argumentative orientation of its host utterance, in that it indicates that an utterance containing it has the same argumentative orientation as a corresponding utterance without *nearly*. This would be a banal observation if it wasn't for the fact that, from the point of view of informational content, 'nearly X' is equivalent to 'not X'. This is made even more interesting by the fact that the argumentative orientation of an utterance containing *barely*, e.g. (42), is the opposite of that of the same utterance without *barely*, e.g. (38b), in spite of the fact that 'barely X' is informationally equivalent to 'X'.

- (38) a. The barrel is nearly empty.
- b. The barrel is empty.
- (42) The barrel is barely empty.

While (38a) and (b) support the conclusion in (39), (42) can, in the same context, only be used to support its negation, (43).

- (39) We need to get a fresh barrel.

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<sup>19</sup> Nyan also uses the term 'metalinguistic operator'.

(43) We don't need to get a fresh barrel.

However, Nyan (1998: 52-3) shows that there are examples where there is an argumentative operator present but the operator doesn't seem to affect the argumentative orientation of the utterance<sup>20</sup>.

(44) It's eight o'clock.

(45) It's only eight o'clock.

(44) and (45) could be said to have the same factual (or truth-conditional) content. However, (45) contains the argumentative operator *only*, while (44) doesn't. Given what was said above about argumentative operators constraining the argumentative orientation of the utterance containing them, one would expect (44) to be capable of being used as an argument in favour of some conclusions for which (45) cannot be used. However, Nyan claims that (46a) and (b) and (47a) and (b) show that both (44) and (45) can be used as arguments in favour of *hurry up* or *take your time*. In other words, both (44) and (45) are neutral from the point of view of argumentative orientation. Thus, the presence of *only* in (45) doesn't seem to make a difference to the utterance's argumentative potential.

(46) a. Hurry up: it's eight o'clock.

b. Take your time: it's eight o'clock.

(47) a. Hurry up: it's only eight o'clock.

b. Take your time: it's only eight o'clock.

As a matter of fact, at first glance, (47a) does not look terribly acceptable. However, if a suitable context is set up, it becomes perfectly acceptable. Imagine for example that Peter and Mary are going to a concert which starts at half past eight and it takes them twenty minutes to get there. Peter is not quite ready and has started slowing down, believing that it's quarter past eight and too late for them to make the first half of the concert. In this context it seems perfectly natural for Mary to utter (47a). As this shows, the presence of *only* in (45) doesn't necessarily make a difference to the range of conclusions that can be reached on its basis. Nevertheless, A & D feel that *only* does make a difference to the argumentative content of (45). The notions of 'topos' (based on Aristotle's notion) and 'topical form' were introduced to capture the difference in

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, it's unclear whether it does or doesn't on the definition of argumentative orientation discussed in 3.5, because it isn't clear what property (44) and (45) attribute to what object.

argumentative content between (44) and (45). These notions take further the ideas behind the new definitions discussed in 3.5.

## 4.2 Topoi and topical forms

According to Moeschler & Reboul (1994:317-322) and Nyan (1998: 52-59), a topos is an argumentative rule shared by a given community (which need have no more members than the speaker and the hearer). This argumentative rule is used to license the move from an argument to a conclusion. It is an important feature of topoi that they are scalar in nature. The general form of a topos is given in (48).

(48) The more/less object O possesses property P, the more/less object O' possesses property P'.

As Moeschler & Reboul (1994: 317) point out, if one assumes that proposition A = 'object O possesses property P' and proposition B = 'object O' possesses property P'', then a topos can have the four forms in (49a)-(d), with (49a) reading "the more O is P, the more O' is P' ", (49b) "the less O is P, the less O' is P' ", and so on.

- (49) a. <+A, +B>  
 b. <-A, -B>  
 c. <+A, -B>  
 d. <-A, +B>

If we assume that A is something like 'the weather is warm' and B 'the beach will be pleasant', the four possible topical forms will be something like (50a)-(d).

- (50) a. (The warmer the weather)<sub>+A</sub>, (the more pleasant the beach)<sub>+B</sub>.  
 b. (The colder the weather)<sub>-A</sub>, (the less pleasant the beach)<sub>-B</sub>.  
 c. (The warmer the weather)<sub>+A</sub>, (the less pleasant the beach)<sub>-B</sub>.  
 d. (The colder the weather)<sub>-A</sub>, (the more pleasant the beach)<sub>+B</sub>.

As (50) illustrates, there are two incompatible underlying topoi to each set of topical forms. Thus, a speaker who accepts (50a) (or (49a) in the general case) will also have to accept (50b) (or (49b)), but she will not be able to accept (50c) or (d) (or (49c) or (d)). In Anscombe & Ducrot (1989: 83)'s terminology (49a) and (b) are 'converse' topoi (*topoi inverses*), as are (49c) and (d). Nyan (1998: 55) refers to the topos underlying (50c) and (d) ((49c) and (d) in the general case) as "the converse topos". Moeschler &

Reboul (1994: 317) use the expression ‘contrary topoi’ (*topoi contraires*) to refer to the two incompatible topoi underlying (49a, b) and (49c, d) respectively. To avoid confusion I’ll refer to incompatible topoi as contrary topoi.

Different sequences from argument to conclusion will be licensed by different topoi. Let us call the topos underlying (50a) and (b) T1 and the topos underlying (50c) and (d) T2. In that case, the sequences in (51) and (52) will be licensed by T1, while those in (53) and (54) will be licensed by T2.

- (51) It’s warm. Let’s go to the beach.
- (52) It’s not warm. Let’s not go to the beach.
- (53) It’s warm. Let’s not go to the beach.
- (54) It’s not warm. Let’s go to the beach.

So, how do the notions of topos and topical form solve the problem that examples (47a) and (b) present for the argumentative operator *only*?

Recall that the curious thing about (47a) and (b) is that the presence of the argumentative operator *only* doesn’t seem to make a difference to the argumentative potential of its host utterance, since both (47a) and (b) are acceptable, just like their operator-free counterparts (46a) and (b).

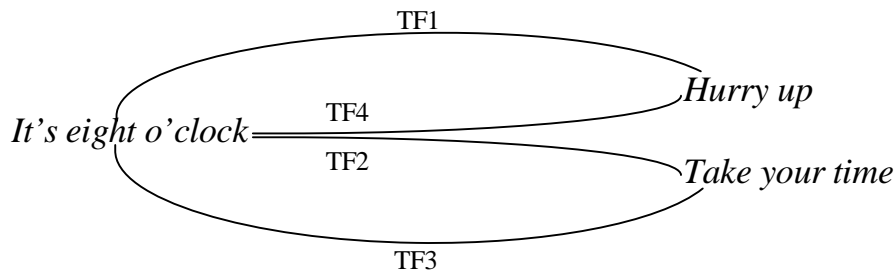
- (46) a. Hurry up: it’s eight o’clock.
- b. Take your time: it’s eight o’clock.
- (47) a. Hurry up: it’s only eight o’clock.
- b. Take your time: it’s only eight o’clock.

Let us first look at the different topical forms underlying the sequences in (46) and (47). They are given as TF1-TF4 in (55).

- (55) TF1: The more time one has, the more one needs to hurry.
- TF2: The less time one has, the less one needs to hurry.
- TF3: The more time one has, the less one needs to hurry.
- TF4: The less time one has, the more one needs to hurry.

The interesting thing now is that (46) and (47) cannot both be licensed by the same set of topical forms. (46a) can be licensed by TF1 or TF4 and (46b) by TF2 or TF3. In other words, the argument *it’s eight o’clock* can lead to the conclusion *hurry up* via two different routes and the same goes for the conclusion *take your time*. This is illustrated in (56).

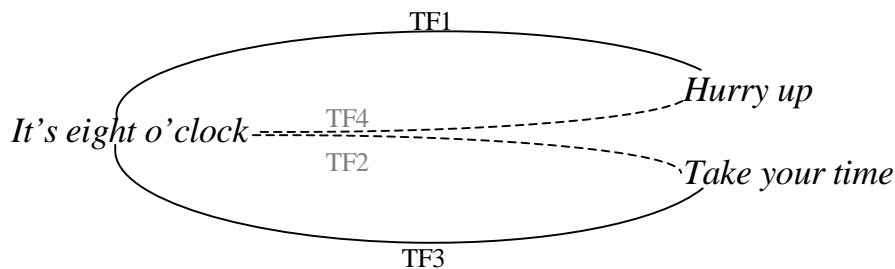
(56)



(adapted from Moeschler & Reboul 1994: 319)

The case of (47), however, is different. (47a) can only be licensed by TF1 and (47b) only by TF3. Thus, as illustrated in (57), the presence of the argumentative operator may not restrict the class of conclusions reached but it does restrict the route taken to reach those conclusions.

(57)



(adapted from Moeschler & Reboul 1994: 319)

### 4.3 Topical fields

The introduction of topical forms means that A & D (e.g. 1989) no longer want to capture the meaning of utterances in terms of asserted and presupposed contents assigned to deep structures. Rather they see the meaning of the deep structure as "the set of topoi whose application is said to be valid when uttered" (A & D 1989: 80). They (1989:81) describe linguistic predicates as bundles of topoi and they introduce the notion of topical field for networks of topoi.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the meaning of a predicate like *work*, for

<sup>21</sup> As they put it: "A sort of topical field is then substituted for the usual lexical field" (A & D 1989: 81). I assume that what is meant by "the usual lexical field" is the neo-Saussurean notion, discussed, for

example, is given by a bundle of topoi involving gradations of work. Some topoi that could be part of the meaning of *work* are given in (58).

- (58) a. The more work, the more success.  
 b. The less work, the more relaxation.  
 c. The more work, the more fatigue.  
 d. The less work, the more happiness.<sup>22</sup>

Another way of looking at this would be to say that gradations of work are linked, via different topoi, with a series of other gradations, e.g. of success, relaxation, fatigue and happiness. These gradations, in turn, are themselves linked to different gradations still. For instance, gradations of happiness could be linked with gradations of health, appetite, etc. This network of gradations, linked via an infinite number of topoi, is what A & D (1989: 81) mean by a topical field.

It is interesting to note at this point that A & D (1989: 82) “in no way claim that all individuals of the same linguistic community share the same topical field, nor even that a given individual always uses the same one.” This seems to raise the question as to whether any linguistic predicate can ever have a meaning stable across a linguistic community (and even for the same individual across time). Unfortunately, A & D do not discuss this point.

Obviously, these developments of AT bring with them accounts of examples, like (2), that are quite different from the accounts given in earlier AT.

- (2) Peter is as tall as Mary.

On their revised account of (2)<sup>23</sup>, Anscombe & Ducrot (1989: 83-85) analyse the deep structure underlying the utterance as requiring that Peter and Mary should be located at the same degree of the initial gradation of tallness in all topoi that link tallness with other gradations, like for instance ‘the taller, the better at basketball’, ‘the taller, the more

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example in Lyons (1977: 250-261), i.e. a structured collection of lexemes which cover a conceptual field, e.g. that of colours or ‘knowledge and understanding’.

<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, not only these topoi are linked with work, but also their opposites, i.e. ‘the less work, the more success’, ‘the more work, the more relaxation’, ‘the less work, the more fatigue’, etc. This makes the AT conception of meaning seem somewhat bizarre, as the meaning of the predicate work contains contradictory parts. What is more, the information given by the topoi looks much more like world knowledge than linguistic knowledge and it is not clear that world knowledge should or could be part of linguistic meaning.

<sup>23</sup> Presumably, the same would hold for (1).

clumsy', etc. In other words, it is part of the meaning of (2) that any conclusion that can be drawn from Mary's location on the scale of tallness can also be drawn from Peter's location on the same scale and vice versa.

Probably the most important aspect of the move from asserted and presupposed contents to topical fields is the fact that it is also a move from a semantics with some truth-conditional (i.e. asserted contents) and some non-truth-conditional elements (i.e. argumentative presupposed contents) to one which is wholly non-truth-conditional. As will be seen in the next section, this move is highly questionable and creates some very serious problems for AT.

#### 4.4 New definitions of central AT notions

The introduction of topoi and topical form to replace the idea that the meaning of utterances can be captured in terms of the conclusions for which they can be used as arguments means that the definitions of the central notions of AT, such as argumentative orientation and argumentative force, given in previous sections can no longer be correct. It is therefore remarkable that nowhere in A & D's work (as much of it as is available to me at least) have I been able to find any explicit reformulations of the basic AT definitions. Because it seems important to have at least some idea of how A & D would (or could) now define the notions of argumentative orientation and argumentative strength, I will attempt a guess on the basis of their slightly revised definitions discussed in 3.5.

Where in A & D (1983: 167) they said two utterances would have opposite argumentative orientations if they didn't attribute the same property to the same object to any degree whatsoever, it seems possible that they'd now say that two utterances have opposite argumentative orientations if they are linked to topoi with different initial gradations and, maybe, converse second gradations, like for example T and T' in (59).

(59) T: The nicer the weather, the more pleasant a walk.

T': The more work one has to do, the less pleasant a walk.

Now, T could be seen as underlying the first conjunct in (60) and T' the second, and indeed, since *but* can felicitously link the two conjuncts in (60), they would have been said to have opposite argumentative orientations on A & D's old definitions.

(60) The weather is nice, but I have a lot of work to do.

It's a little less hard to see how the notion of argumentative strength would be defined now. In A & D (1983: 166), they say that an utterance  $u_2$  will be argumentatively stronger than utterance  $u_1$  if they both attribute the same property to the same object and if  $u_2$  does so to a greater degree than  $u_1$ . The only way I can see in which this could be translated into terms of topical forms is that  $u_2$  will be argumentatively stronger than  $u_1$  if  $u_2$  places its object higher than  $u_1$  on the initial gradation of all topoi linked with the utterances. Thus, (61b) will be stronger than (61a), because the former places its object (i.e. the weather) higher on the gradation of niceness than the latter.

- (61) a. The weather is nice.  
 b. The weather is very nice.

## **5 The end of informational contents**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As mentioned above, Anscombe & Ducrot (1989) constitutes a move away from the earlier AT position where argumentative contents were seen as an integral part of the semantic structure of the deep structures underlying utterances, but not the only kind of content; informational or truth-conditional (asserted or factual) contents were also part of the semantic structure of utterances. In their own words, A & D (1989: 77/79) move from a position of considering “argumentation as a component of meaning” to one of “radical argumentativism”. As will be seen shortly, this move has some very far-reaching and ultimately, I believe, undesirable implications. However, first of all, let us look at the justification A & D (1983, 1989), and especially Ducrot (1993), give for this move.

### **5.2 Ascriptivism**

The idea that the argumentative function of language, and thus the argumentative aspects of linguistic meaning, should be seen as primary first seems to emerge in chapter 7 of A & D (1983). In this chapter, A & D (1983: 169) say that, even though so far their accounts had made it look as though they saw language as having two separate functions, namely an informative one and an argumentative one, they really want to work towards a position where the argumentative function of language, and with it argumentative meaning, is primary and the informative function of language secondary. In that sort of an account, any informational (or truth-conditional) meaning would be derived from an underlying argumentative meaning. The wish to give such an account



seems to stem from the view that many utterances, like for example those in (62)-(64) below, which look as if they are purely informative, i.e. as if they describe some objective state of affairs or other, do not, in fact, describe any such state of affairs.

- (62) Peter is intelligent.
- (63) This hotel is good.
- (64) This act is voluntary.

A & D (1983: 169-174) maintain that the assumption that, for example (62), is a description which predicates the objective property 'intelligent' of Peter is wrong. This, they say, would presuppose that there is a state of affairs in the world which would make (62) true or false, and that there is an objective concept 'intelligent'. A & D believe that there is no such concept, or, if there is a scientific concept, for example based on the notion of IQ, that concept would not capture the meaning of the natural language word *intelligent*. Instead, A & D (1983: 170) want to follow in the footsteps of 'ascriptivists', like Hare (1952), who would account for the meaning of (62) by saying that it is used to praise Peter, the meaning of (63) by saying that it is used to recommend the hotel, and the meaning of (64) by saying that it is used to attribute responsibility for the act to the agent.

A & D (1983: 172)'s account, though in the same spirit as the ascriptivist view, is slightly different. They suggest that utterances like (62)-(64) should be accounted for in purely argumentative terms. That is, according to them, the meaning of (63), for example, should be captured by saying that the utterance can be used as an argument in favour of a conclusion *r*, with *r* being something like 'favourable view of the hotel'<sup>24</sup>. There are two potential problems with this, both of which have been used as arguments against ascriptivism (see e.g. Searle 1969: 136-141; Geach 1972: 250-269).

The first problem is that it is very easily possible to utter something like (63) without recommending the hotel. Thus, (65) is perfectly acceptable.

- (65) This hotel is good, but I don't recommend it.

A & D (1983: 172) avoid this problem by saying that it is the meaning of (63) that it **can** be used as an argument for a favourable view of the hotel, which does not mean that it actually always has to lead to that kind of conclusion. In fact, they argue that the very

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<sup>24</sup> This shows that A & D started thinking about abandoning informational contents before they'd introduced the notions of topoi and topical forms, at a time when they still defined the central AT notions in terms of conclusions, rather than topoi.

presence of *but* in (65) indicates that the two conjuncts are arguments for opposite conclusions<sup>25</sup> and that this supports their view.

The second, graver, problem is that utterances like (63) can be used in syllogisms, like the one in (66).

- (66) a. If this hotel is good, it is expensive.  
 b. This hotel is good.  
 c. Therefore, it is expensive. (A & D 1983: 172)

The problematic point here is the conditional in (66a). It seems unlikely that the meaning of the antecedent here can be captured by saying that it is an argument for a favourable view of the hotel (or that it is used to recommend the hotel). However, if the meaning of the antecedent is different from that of (66b), the argument can't go through. Anscombe & Ducrot (1983: 173) offer a solution involving the notion of 'delocutivity' (*délocutivité*). An expression  $E_2$  is derived from an expression  $E_1$  via delocutivity if the form of  $E_2$  is based on that of  $E_1$  but the meaning of  $E_2$  is based, not on the encoded meaning of  $E_1$  (i.e. its semantic value), but on some pragmatic value connected with the utterance of  $E_1$ .

A & D now maintain that there is an  $E_2$ : *X is good* which attributes a certain property to  $X$  and which is derived, via delocutivity, from an  $E_1$ : *X is good* which has as its meaning that it is an argument for a favourable view of  $X$ . According to them, a general law of discourse states that any utterance which is used to argue for something presents itself as being justified by a property of the object with which the argumentation is concerned. After all, A & D believe, if one takes the trouble to argue for a favourable view of an object, then this object must have certain properties which justify the argument. It is this 'pragmatic' aspect of the utterance of  $E_1$ : *X is good* that gets transferred to the expression  $E_2$ : *X is good*. The idea is now that syllogisms, like the one in (66), contain expression  $E_2$ , which does attribute a property to an object, and not  $E_1$ , from which  $E_2$  is derived. Before moving on, let me point out some difficulties with this account.

A major worry, which will no doubt have struck the reader, is that the delocutivity account of *is good* is completely counterintuitive. It seems odd, to say the least, that the *is good* that attributes a property to objects is derived from the *is good* that is an argument for a favourable view, rather than the other way around. From a more theoretical point of view, there are two ways of construing A & D's account. The first is

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<sup>25</sup> see fn. 24

that they are saying that *is good* has just one meaning (i.e. that it has a unitary semantics), namely that the utterance is an argument for a favourable view of its object(s), and that the delocutive meaning has to be derived (pragmatically) on certain occasions. The problem with this is that the delocutive meaning will have to be derived on many occasions. What is more, it isn't clear how the meaning of *good* in utterances like (67) could be accounted for.

(67) Good hotels are hard to come by.

It seems obvious that it isn't part of the meaning of (67) that it is an argument for a favourable view of the hotel, but it isn't clear how a hearer could work out on the basis of (67) that *good* here attributes a certain property to an object if that isn't part of the meaning of *good*.

The second way of construing A & D's delocutivity account is that it amounts to the postulation of an ambiguity in *is good*. However, this is completely unnecessary, because, if the meaning of *is good* were assumed to be that it attributes certain positive properties to objects, it would fall out quite naturally that an utterance containing such an attribution is often an argument for a favourable view of the objects. Admittedly, there is still a question about what property exactly it is that *is good* does attribute – a possible answer to this will be discussed in the final section.

In spite of the fact that A & D (1983, ch. 7) say they want to move towards a completely non-truth-conditional semantics, which is based on the view that no meaning is primarily descriptive or informational, they (1983: 169) admit that there are a number of utterances, like for example (68)-(70), which seem to be irreducibly informative, and for which they can't account in purely argumentative terms.

(68) The table is square.

(69) The tablecloth is red.

(70) Peter has arrived.

A & D (1983: 169)

As a matter of fact, it's less than obvious that (68)-(70) are radically different from (62)-(64). What counts as square and what as red varies across circumstances, purposes and individuals, so that the property communicated by utterances such as (68) and (69) is no more fixed or objective than the properties communicated by *intelligent*, *good* and *voluntary*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See fn. 33.

### 5.3 Radical argumentativism

**5.3.1 Examples.** Ducrot (1993: 88) goes further than A & D (1983) in his rejection of truth-conditional meaning. He maintains that no part of meaning is purely objective, i.e. not touched by any, as Ducrot puts it, “pragmatic intentions” (*intentions pragmatiques*). Note, though, that the examples Ducrot (1993: 89) uses are very close to (62)-(64), the examples used by A & D (1983) to show that some utterances could be accounted for in purely argumentative terms, but not to (68)-(70), the examples A & D (1983) give of purely informative utterances. In other words, Ducrot does not address the examples that one would expect to be addressed by someone making the ‘no objectivity’ claim. The first set of Ducrot’s examples are given in (71) and (72).

(71) The film was interesting.

(72) The meeting was pleasant.

As with (62)-(64), the argument is that there simply are no objective properties ‘interesting’ or ‘pleasant’ and that, therefore, it is impossible to capture the meaning of (71) and (72) in truth-conditional terms. From this, Ducrot (1993: 89) concludes that the meaning of these two utterances must be given in purely argumentative terms. As will be discussed below, I don’t believe that the move from the assumption that the meaning of a certain expression is not an objective (fixed, determinate) concept to the assumption that it must be non-truth-conditional (or, at least, that there is no state of affairs corresponding to the concept conveyed by the expression on a given occasion) is legitimate. Nor do I believe that the move from the assumption that the meaning of a certain expression is non-truth-conditional to the assumption that it must be argumentative is acceptable. Nevertheless, the point that there is no single objective property ‘interesting’ or single property ‘pleasant’ is valid and any account of the meaning of words like *interesting* and *pleasant* will have to take this into account.

Ducrot’s next two examples, also intended to demonstrate the impossibility of giving truth conditions to utterances, require a greater leap of the imagination. The first one of these is given in (73), uttered by a parent to a child who is getting a bit too close to a dog.

(73) Don’t touch: it’s dirty.

Ducrot (1993: 89) is interested in the indicative *it’s dirty*. He claims that the meaning of this is not, as one might expect, that it gives a description of the dog, but rather that it is an argument for not touching it. Ducrot starts by saying that for the child, *it’s dirty* can’t

be a description of the dog, because the child doesn't know anything about the adjective *dirty*, other than that it is used as a justification for orders not to touch, not to eat, or, more generally, to stay away from things. He admits that the parent uttering (73), will see *it's dirty* as a description of the dog which is part of an argument with the conclusion *don't touch*. However, Ducrot believes that this is an illusion, because the parents would find it difficult to define dirtiness in terms which don't allude to the fact that it justifies forbidding things.

The final example Ducrot (1993: 89) uses is (74), which should be imagined as uttered by a speaker who is trying to get the hearer to do something.

(74) Be reasonable.

Ducrot believes that (74) is not a case of a proposition (*the hearer is reasonable*) being uttered with directive illocutionary force as the standard speech act account would have it (e.g. Searle 1979). According to Ducrot, the semantic value of the adjective *reasonable* consists in the fact that it presents an act as one that must be performed. In other words, for Ducrot (1993: 89-90), the meaning of *reasonable* is purely argumentative; the word does not encode a propositional constituent. His justification is that he can't see what propositional constituent that could be.

Ducrot's accounts of *is dirty* in (73) and *be reasonable* in (74) are both incredibly counterintuitive. I, for one, have no difficulty at all in thinking of a definition of dirtiness which has absolutely nothing to do with forbidding things. In fact, a quick glance at any dictionary of English (or French, or any other language with a word corresponding to *dirty*) will show that there are numerous definitions of dirtiness which don't have anything to do with forbidding things. Similarly, I can see reasonably easily what fragment of a proposition *reasonable* could encode (and, again, I'm sure most dictionaries would be on my side). Furthermore, if the meaning of *be reasonable* is described exhaustively by saying that it describes acts as ones that must be performed, what is the meaning of an utterance like (75)?

(75) Susan has always tried to be reasonable.

To return to Ducrot, after using the examples discussed above to argue against a truth-based semantics, he goes on to state how a purely argumentative semantics could work. For this, he uses the notion of *topos* introduced above, and the notion of *polyphony*, which will be discussed briefly here.

**5.3.2 Polyphony.** Polyphony is a central notion of AT. It is based on the idea that the views of more than one person can be behind a text or utterance. This idea was first explored in literary criticism, e.g. by Bakhtin. According to Ducrot (1984: 173), his own work is an extension of Bakhtin's from literary criticism into linguistics. In what follows, a brief description of polyphony in linguistics will be given, along with some of its applications in AT. I will also mention some criticisms of Ducrot's linguistic theory of polyphony.

According to Ducrot (1993: 90), the meaning of an utterance consists in a characterisation of its own uttering. This uttering is characterised as the confrontation of different 'voices' or 'points of view', which interact with each other. The idea is that the (usually unique) speaker (*locuteur*) doing the uttering stages a dialogue inside her own monologue between different points of view (*énonciateurs*). It is important to note that neither *locuteur* nor *énonciateurs* are construed as real people. Rather, Moeschler & Reboul (1994: 326) stress that they are theoretical constructs, although actual people can get to be identified with *locuteurs* and *énonciateurs*. This notion that every utterance is a manifestation of different interacting points of view is what is referred to, in AT, by the term 'polyphony'<sup>27</sup>.

The following are some of the linguistic phenomena which, according to Ducrot (1984), exhibit the points of view of more than one (theoretical) individual (or of someone other than the individual who is actually doing the uttering): direct and indirect reported speech, ironical utterances, utterances containing *but* and negative utterances. The most obvious of these are cases of reported speech, be it direct reported speech, as in (76a), indirect reported speech, as in (76b), or free direct reported speech, as in (76c).

- (76) What did Mary say?
- a. She said: "I like you".
  - b. She said she liked me.
  - c. I like you.

(76a) and (b) clearly represent the points of view of both the actual speaker (say, Peter) and Mary. (76c), although physically uttered by Peter, actually represents Mary's point of view.

On Ducrot (1984: 210-213)'s account, if (77) is uttered ironically, it will represent not the actual speaker's view, but somebody else's (whether that person actually uttered the

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of polyphony see also Moeschler & Reboul (1994: 323-347), Nyan (1998: 60-63) and Žagar (1999).

words or not and whether there actually is a specific person whose view is being expressed or not)<sup>28</sup>.

(77) Life is beautiful.

In an utterance containing *but*, the presence of two different points of view makes itself felt in a different way. Remember that A & D analyse *but* as indicating that the two conjuncts have opposite argumentative orientations. Thus, *Peter is rich* will have opposite argumentative orientation to *I like him* in (78).

(78) Peter is rich but I like him.

Remember also that, at least in earlier AT, two utterances were said to have opposite argumentative orientations if they were arguments for opposite conclusions. In (78), *Peter is rich* could, for example, be an argument for *I don't like Peter*, whereas *I like him* clearly is an argument for *I like Peter*. Now, the point is that one and the same person (or theoretical individual) can't argue for *I like Peter* and *I don't like Peter* at one and the same time<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, negation is the simplest example of polyphony, according to Ducrot. The idea is that every utterance containing a negation involves the presentation of at least two points of view: the positive counterpart of the utterance and the negative utterance itself. Thus, (79), taken from Nyan (1998: 60), will be analysed as comprising the two viewpoints in (80a) and (b).

(79) Ludwig isn't an ordinary dog.

(80) a. Ludwig is an ordinary dog.

b. Ludwig isn't an ordinary dog.

In most cases, the speaker will be seen as identifying with the viewpoint in (80b), but in cases of irony, for example, the speaker will be seen as identifying with (80a). This might be seen as a good way of accounting for the intuition that utterances containing negations always also make immediately accessible their positive counterparts.

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<sup>28</sup> Ducrot's account of irony is based on Sperber & Wilson (1978).

<sup>29</sup> I am here deliberately reverting back to the 'old' AT definition of argumentative orientation, since neither Nyan (1998) nor Moeschler & Reboul (1994) give an account of *but* using the notions of topoi and topical form.

The biggest problem with Ducrot's linguistic notion of polyphony, as pointed out by Moeschler & Reboul (1994: 332-333), is that it leads to an incredible proliferation of theoretical entities: Not only can each utterance comprise a multitude of *énonciateurs* and more than one *locuteur* on a basic level, but Ducrot (1984: 224) also conceives of cases where first-level *énonciateurs* are manipulated by higher-level *énonciateurs*. What's more, this proliferation of theoretical entities wouldn't be necessary if, instead, a notion were developed of real people representing other (real) people's thoughts and utterances (or, indeed, thoughts and utterances which are not attributed to anybody in particular)<sup>30</sup>.

**5.3.3 Some radical consequences of radical argumentativism.** Overall, the picture Ducrot (1993) paints is the following. All linguistic meaning can be captured in purely argumentative terms. That is, every utterance can be described as a collection of topoi, which constitute different points of view, and there is nothing about language as such that is informative, i.e. language is not cut out to be used to describe states of affairs. As Ducrot (1993: 96) points out, this gives rise to some important questions.

The first question Ducrot mentions is this: if language really does not say anything true or false about the world, how come speakers believe that they are using language to give true descriptions of the world (at least sometimes)? Ducrot (1993: 97)'s answer to this question is that speakers' (and hearers') impression that language is informative is an illusion.

The second question he raises is: given that linguists use language to describe how language works and given that that language (as assumed by Ducrot) cannot say anything about the world, how can linguists ever say anything true about language? Ducrot (1993: 97) first notes that this question is too important and too far-reaching in its implications for it to be answered in a few words. He then considers the possible answer that linguists should try to construct a metalanguage which is descriptive in nature (a logical language, such as the predicate calculus, for example). After stating that this is what all linguists, including himself in the present paper, are trying to do, he says that he feels that it is an impossible task. Finally, he concludes that linguistics should be seen, not as a scientific discipline, but as an essentially critical one and that the aim of semantics should not be to try and describe the actual meaning of utterances but to destroy the illusion that utterances convey information about things. In his own words:

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<sup>30</sup> cf. Sperber & Wilson (1995: 224-231)'s notion of interpretive use.



Une deuxième issue possible est de fixer à la sémantique linguistique un objectif essentiellement *critique*:.[sic] Elle ne viserait pas à décrire ce que signifie *vraiment* le discours: elle viserait seulement à détruire l'illusion sans cesse renaissante selon laquelle le discours donnerait des informations sur les choses. Elle enseignerait avant tout à se *méfier* de la parole.

Ducrot (1993: 98, his emphasis)

## 6 Some pros and cons of AT, and a cognitive alternative

### 6.1 AT evaluated

So far in this paper I have sketched the beginnings of AT, its most important developments and the point it seems to have reached at present. At each stage, I have pointed out problems with A & D's accounts either in footnotes or in the body of the text. In this section, I would like to recapitulate some of the problems mentioned earlier and expand on those that have merely been hinted at. First, however, let me mention some of AT's strong points.

Without a doubt, a lot of good, analytical work has been done within the framework of AT and, in its earlier forms, it is based on some interesting observations. Argumentation Theory is obviously right, and certainly not alone, in noticing the existence and the importance of non-truth-conditional aspects of linguistic meaning, and in pointing out the existence of words whose meaning is essentially subjective, like *interesting*, *pleasant*, etc. Anscombe & Ducrot's work highlights some very interesting linguistic phenomena, such as the difference between *as tall as* and *the same height as* discussed above, the difference between *little* and *a little* discussed in A & D (1989: 82-83), and the difference between *he is 36* and *he is only 36* (Nyan 1998: 52). These are all phenomena a successful semantic theory will have to account for. A & D (e.g. 1976 & 1983)'s accounts of the meaning of *but* and *even* are particularly insightful. Finally, there is the idea, discussed for example by Žagar (1999:1-2), that utterances like (44) are not usually made just to let a hearer know what time it is, but also to communicate something else, for example any of (81a)-(d).

(44) It's eight o'clock.

- (81) a. Hurry up!  
b. Take your time!  
c. Turn on the radio!  
d. Go brush your teeth!

(from Žagar 1999: 2)

Clearly, this idea has been widely accepted by linguists and philosophers of language, at least since Grice. However, it is doubtful whether topical forms, which are part of the meaning of the deep structure underlying an utterance, are the right tool for explaining this phenomenon. Now, let me move on to some of my worries with AT.

As argumentation theorists would no doubt be the first to agree, in AT's earlier incarnations there were problems with specific definitions, especially those of argumentative potential, argumentative orientation and strength, when they were couched in terms of conclusions. Furthermore, at the stage where A & D accounted for the meaning of utterances by assigning asserted and presupposed content to their underlying deep structures there was a proliferation of mechanisms, laws and axioms whose existence wasn't always independently justified (for instance, the law governing the use of *even* discussed in section 3.4). Another worry at that stage in the theory's development was that the compositionality of the meaning of deep structures was only guaranteed to the level of core deep structures, whose meaning could not be decomposed further. In other words, the contribution made by individual lexical items that are not argumentative operators and the syntactic structure of the sentence are not addressed.

The intermediate step of introducing the notion of act of arguing solved some of those problems but also created some new ones, notably for A & D's account of the meaning of *but*. However, it is the last step in the development of AT, namely the introduction of topoi and topical forms along with abandoning any kind of informational, descriptive or truth-conditional contents, which has created the most serious problems for the theory. In particular, I will here discuss two problems with later AT.

The first is this: Given that the meaning of each utterance merely provides an entry point to a topical field and thus gives access to an infinite number of topoi, how can it be that any conclusions are ever reached? For example, an utterance like (82) gives access to a multitude of topoi, including T1: 'the warmer the weather, the nicer the beach', T2: 'the warmer the weather, the less pleasant the work', T3: 'the warmer the weather, the shorter the skirts', etc., and their opposites.

(82) It's hot.

How do A & D explain that, on any given occasion, competent hearers are usually able to figure out which conclusion(s) the speaker is intending him to draw (and, therefore, which topoi to use). Furthermore, how does the hearer know that it's the weather the speaker is talking about and not the food the hearer has just placed in front of her? And how does the hearer know that with the word *hot* the speaker meant to describe the temperature and not the spiciness of the food? Clearly, these are the questions a

pragmatic theory is traditionally expected to answer. However, A & D's integrated pragmatics does not seem to address, much less answer them. What is needed here is clearly a non-integrated pragmatics, a notion for which A & D do not seem to make any provision. At this point an argumentation theorist might protest: This criticism isn't fair, because A & D never set out to answer the questions above; AT is strictly a semantic theory. Let's assume that this is so, even though A & D do not explicitly state it anywhere. In that case, one would expect AT to meet the basic requirements of a semantic theory, such as compositionality. However, if the meaning of predicates is given by bundles of *topoi*, it is not clear how the compositionality requirement can be met. Furthermore, while AT does offer accounts of the meaning of predicates like *work* and argumentative operators like *but*, it is not clear how the meaning of other linguistic elements, such as referential expressions, quantifiers, tense, etc., would be characterised in AT. However, these are small worries compared with the second problem I want to discuss here.

In a nutshell, a theory which ends up saying that language cannot be used to describe the world, be it the actual or some other possible world, and doesn't have a good explanation of why it is that people nevertheless not only believe that language is used to convey information but are also prepared to act on information they have been given by purely linguistic means, simply cannot be adequate. After all, people act on purely linguistically conveyed information all the time. For example, I go to the station for 11 o'clock because my friend has told me that her train arrives at eleven, and she is quite likely to have gone to the station at a certain time at her end because someone told her there'd be a train then. More generally, and more importantly, there are many things we only know today because someone wrote them down or told them to someone else. If our impression that we are conveying information using language is just an illusion, it must be an illusion so strong and widespread that every single human in the world not only believes in it but also regularly acts on it. As mentioned above, the step from recognising the existence of non-truth-conditional meaning to abandoning the notion that language is used to represent the world is not supported with enough evidence. What is more, even if the meaning communicated by most words is subjective, this does not mean that the notion of truth conditions has to be abandoned altogether.

These two problems with later AT show that the theory is let down by its failure to make a principled distinction between semantics and pragmatics and by its resolutely anti-cognitive stance. I'd now like to look at how a cognitive theory with a clear semantics/pragmatics distinction can solve problems concerning linguistic subjectivity without discarding the notion of truth conditions or the idea that people use language to convey information about the world, while at the same time acknowledging that this is not all language is used for.

## 6.2 Relevance Theory, linguistic subjectivity and truth conditions

The cognitive approach to semantics and pragmatics taken by Sperber & Wilson (1986)'s Relevance Theory (RT), reconciles the notion of truth conditions and the idea of subjective aspects of meaning, even if truth conditions are applied to mental representations rather than linguistic expressions. The first ingredient needed for such an account is a clear, cognitive, semantics/pragmatics distinction.

On the RT view, utterance interpretation involves two distinct cognitive processes: decoding and inference. On encountering an utterance, a hearer first decodes the meaning of the words and their syntactic relations, which leads to an incomplete conceptual (i.e. mental) representation. He then uses his inferential abilities guided by the communicative principle of relevance (see Sperber & Wilson 1995: 266-278) to recover a fully propositional representation, i.e. the proposition expressed, along with a range of purely implicitly communicated assumptions. On this view, anything that is encoded by the linguistic expression of an utterance falls into the realm of semantics. This includes the kind of meaning dealt with by A & D's integrated "pragmatics". In RT, pragmatics is concerned with any aspect of inferentially recovered meaning. This includes inferentially recovered elements of the proposition expressed.<sup>31</sup>

It is an important part of the RT view that the linguistically encoded meaning of all utterances radically underdetermines what the speaker actually intends to communicate.<sup>32</sup> This is where there is room for subjectivity in linguistic meaning. There are two ways in which Relevance Theory could account for an example like (71).<sup>33</sup>

(71) The film was interesting.

On any relevance theoretic account, (71) would be seen as encoding an incomplete conceptual representation. That is, as it stands, the representation encoded by (71) is

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the RT semantics/pragmatics distinction in relation to other construals of the distinction see Carston (1998: 38-50) and Carston (1999).

<sup>32</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the role of underdeterminacy in RT see Carston (1998, ch. 2).

<sup>33</sup> In fact, RT would account along similar lines for the meaning of *red* and *square* in (68) and (69), in which A & D (1983: 169) detected no traces of subjectivity.

(68) The table is square.

(69) The tablecloth is red.

merely a template for a fully propositional (mental) representation. In other words, what is encoded by the words in (71) is a radical underspecification of the proposition expressed (which, on the RT view, is a conceptual representation) – for example, the referent of the film and the temporal reference of the past tense have to be supplied pragmatically. However, when it comes to the question what exactly the word *interesting* encodes, there are two possibilities.

The first possibility is to say that *interesting* encodes a concept which will have to be narrowed down and/or expanded, according to the context. This would mean that the concept that appears in the mental representation (thought) of a speaker uttering (71) (and in that of a hearer who has understood the utterance<sup>34</sup>) is not the same as the concept encoded by the word *interesting*; they are rather what Carston (1996, 1998) calls ‘ad hoc’ concepts, pragmatically constructed by the hearer in the process of interpretation.

The second possibility is that *interesting* does not encode a full concept at all, but rather what Sperber & Wilson (1998: 184/5) have termed a ‘pro-concept’. This would mean that the semantic contribution of *interesting* in any utterance must be contextually specified. The difference between the two possible accounts is that, on the first one, *interesting* does have a literal (conceptual) meaning, which will get enriched or loosened depending on the context. On the second account, on the other hand, *interesting* does not have a literal, determinate meaning: rather, as in the case of pronouns, its meaning on any given occasion has to be contextually determined. For the purposes of this paper, it seems unimportant which one of these possibilities is chosen. The point is that, on either account, once the hearer has narrowed down or filled in the concept encoded by *interesting*, there will be an aspect of a state of affairs that is represented by the ad hoc concept or contextually determined value of the pro-concept. In other words, it will be possible to specify the truth conditions of the mental representation entertained by the hearer after he has processed an utterance of (71), it’s just that the concept INTERESTING\*, where the asterisk indicates that the concept in question is ad hoc or a completed pro-concept, featuring in the hearer’s mental representation is not (exactly) what’s encoded by the word *interesting*. In this way, Relevance Theory provides a framework for handling subjective aspects of meaning without having to make the unacceptable claim that language cannot be used to convey information about the world.

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<sup>34</sup> NB. There is no claim that the concept entertained by the hearer has to be identical to that entertained by the speaker for communication to be successful. In fact, Sperber & Wilson (1998: 197/8) note that a duplication of meanings is not necessary for successful communication. Often, all that is required is a sufficient degree of similarity.

At this point, something should be said about the role of truth conditions in Relevance Theory. Even though what has been said so far in this section might make one think that RT is a truth-conditional theory of linguistic semantics, this is actually not the case. The central claim of a traditional truth-conditional semantics is that linguistic meaning can be captured in terms of truth conditions. This entails the view that words directly correspond with (aspects of) states of affairs in the world. This is not the relevance-theoretic view: virtually no sentence in a natural language encodes a determinate truth condition. In RT, most words are seen as corresponding with mental representations of (aspects of) states of affairs, not with the states of affairs themselves. These mental representations are what is meant by ‘concept’ in RT; words which correspond to such representations encode concepts. However, not all words are seen as encoding concepts; some words encode computational information concerning the manipulation of concepts rather than concepts themselves. These words are referred to as encoding procedural information.

In RT, the notion of truth conditions comes in at the level of mental representations. These (or, at least, many of them), represent states of affairs and can, therefore, be given truth conditions. Thus, words encoding concepts, i.e. mental representations, could be said to have indirectly truth-conditional meaning<sup>35</sup>. Words encoding procedural meaning, on the other hand, cannot be said to have truth-conditional meaning even in an indirect sense. What they do is constrain or direct the hearer’s pragmatic inferencing<sup>36</sup>. Many of the expressions AT deals with (and which were instrumental in leading A & D to abandon a truth-conditional semantics), like for instance *but* and *even*, would be seen, within a relevance theoretic framework, as encoding procedural rather than conceptual information.

Finally, I would like to say something about those aspects of utterance interpretation that argumentation theorists have captured in terms of topoi and the conclusions they license. RT would absolutely agree that utterances like (44) are not usually made just to inform the hearer of the time and that, indeed, speakers are likely to want to convey something additional, e.g. any of (81a)-(d).

(44) It’s eight o’clock.

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<sup>35</sup> In fact, Deirdre Wilson (personal communication) reminded me that in Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) and Wilson & Sperber (1993), the term ‘truth-conditional’ is used as a shorthand for my ‘indirectly truth-conditional’. For further discussion of the role of a truth-conditional semantics in RT see Carston (1999).

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed account of the conceptual/procedural distinction see e.g. Blakemore (1987, 1997), Wilson & Sperber (1993), Rouchota (1998) and Iten (1998).

- (81) a. Hurry up!  
b. Take your time!  
c. Turn on the radio!  
d. Go brush your teeth!

However, where AT explains this phenomenon with the help of scalar topoi, which are part of the meaning of (44), licensing the conclusions in (81), RT has a different, cognitive, explanation. On the RT view, the concepts encoded by the utterance in (44) give the hearer access to contextual assumptions, e.g. those in (83), which, combined with the information encoded by (44), will yield something like the ‘conclusions’ in (81).

- (83) If it’s eight o’clock, the speaker will want me to hurry.  
If it’s eight o’clock, I can take my time.  
At eight o’clock there’s a good science programme on the radio.  
If it’s eight o’clock, I should brush my teeth.<sup>37</sup>

Obviously, the assumptions in (83) are quite similar to the topoi which are likely to license the move from (44) to the conclusions in (81). However, while AT’s topoi are necessarily scalar and are seen as part of the (semantic) meaning of (44), RT’s contextual assumptions are typically non-scalar and derived purely pragmatically.<sup>38</sup> While AT doesn’t seem to have an explanation for why hearers reach particular conclusions (rather than any other conclusions, for which there would also be licensing topoi) on particular occasions, RT does have an explanation for why a hearer will access a given contextual assumption on a given occasion. In a nutshell, the presumption of optimal relevance that every utterance communicates licenses the hearer to form interpretive hypotheses in order of accessibility (which includes the accessing of contextual assumptions) and to stop processing when the interpretation meets his expectation of relevance (i.e. a particular yield of cognitive effects for the processing effort expended). For a full account of how the hearer chooses contextual assumptions

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<sup>37</sup>In reality, of course, there will be more than just one contextual assumption involved in the derivation of each conclusion in (81). For instance, the hearer might well arrive at ‘If it’s eight o’clock, I should brush my teeth’ via the following assumptions: ‘I should be in bed by 8.15’, ‘I should brush my teeth before I go to bed’, ‘If I brush my teeth any later than 8 o’clock, I won’t be in bed by 8.15’, etc.

<sup>38</sup>As a matter of fact, it would be interesting to investigate whether A & D are right in assuming that contextual information is essentially scalar in nature. This point was suggested to me by Deirdre Wilson (personal communication).

and arrives at the intended interpretation see Sperber & Wilson (1986: 163-171;1995: 266-278).

## 7 Conclusion

As mentioned above, AT draws attention to a number of interesting and important points about language, notably the existence of non-truth-conditional linguistic meaning and the fact that many expressions don't have any completely objective meaning. However, the conclusions A & D draw from these observations are not justified, especially Ducrot (1993)'s extreme conclusion that language cannot be used to say anything true or false about the world.

I believe that a cognitive theory, which has a clear semantics/pragmatics distinction, allows for subjective aspects of meaning, and incorporates notions of representational and computational linguistic meaning, is a more adequate framework within which to account for the phenomena observed by Anscombe & Ducrot. A reformulation of some of the promising accounts of specific linguistic expressions given by argumentation theorists in such a cognitive theoretic framework, such as Relevance Theory, would seem highly desirable.

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