

## **Dialogue and Interpersonal Communication: How Informal Logic Can Enhance Our Understanding of the Dynamics of Close Relationships**

### **Diálogo y comunicación interpersonal: Cómo la lógica informal puede mejorar nuestro entendimiento de las dinámicas de las relaciones íntimas**

**Ioana A. Cionea**

Department of Communication, University of Maryland, College Park, United States  
icionea@umd.edu

**Received:** 02-06-2011 **Accepted:** 04-08-2011

**Abstract:** This essay proposes a practical application of Walton's dialogue framework to the realm of interpersonal communication. More specifically, the essay conceptualizes close relationships (e.g., friendships and romantic relationships) as meta-dialogues between partners. In this context, the dialogue framework and the six dialogue types proposed by Walton and Krabbe are explained in detail as is the notion of commitments. The essay also discusses the advantages of such an approach in understanding the dynamics of close relationships.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, close relationships, commitment, Krabbe, Walton.

**Resumen:** Este trabajo propone una aplicación práctica de la teoría del diálogo de Walton al campo de la comunicación interpersonal. Más específicamente, este trabajo conceptualiza las relaciones íntimas (por ejemplo, de amistad y románticas), como meta-diálogos entre socios. En este contexto, la teoría del diálogo y los seis tipos de diálogos propuesto por Walton y Krabbe son explicadas en detallas así como la noción de compromiso. Este trabajo también discute las ventajas de tal acercamiento para el entendimiento de las dinámicas de las relaciones íntimas.

**Palabras clave:** Diálogo, compromiso, Krabbe, relaciones íntimas, Walton.

## 1. Introduction

The dialogue framework proposed by Douglas Walton and Eric Krabbe in their book *Commitment in Dialogue: Basic Concepts of Interpersonal Reasoning* (1995) was meant to serve as a normative model for analyzing the arguments people make in their daily conversations with others. The authors proposed that there were several types of dialogues, each with their own rules and goals which formed the particular normative model for each dialogue type (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 65-67). Fundamental to the dialogue framework was the concept of commitment, an idea previously proposed by Hamblin in his *Fallacies* (1970), but which the two authors developed and redefined to be “the factor that defines [different types of dialogues] as normative contexts of argumentation” (Walton & Krabbe, p. 8).

Needless to say, this approach has given informal logicians an important tool for assessing arguments in everyday dialogue. But does the applicability of the dialogue framework stop there? Can we expand our notion of dialogue and use the idea of commitments to understand other types of interactions between people? In the following pages I propose that the dialogue framework is useful for understanding the dynamics of close relationships, such as romantic relationships and friendships. Such relationships are at the core of people’s lives, influencing their well-being and giving meaning to their lives (Berscheid & Peplau, p. 1). They have been the focus point of interpersonal research for decades due to their importance and complexity and are likely to remain a rich avenue for future research as knowledge of their intricate inner workings is still needed.

I start by explaining the basics of the dialogue framework, then move on to illustrate how the framework applies to close relationships, and finally what the main benefits of adopting this approach are for the study of close relationships. Ultimately, my proposal is meant to bring together informal logic and interpersonal communication concepts in an effort to highlight the advantages of an interdisciplinary lens for the study of close relationships.

### *The Dialogue Framework and the Meta-Dialogue of a Relationship*

In its simplest form, a dialogue is a conversation between two parties who take turns at exchanging verbal messages (Walton, *The New Dialectic*,

p. 29, *Types of Dialogue*, p. 133). This exchange is sequential, purposeful, and guided by conventions or rules that prescribe the appropriate moves. Arguments are common moves and they constitute the basis for evaluating whether a dialogue is progressing according to its normative goal (Walton *The New Dialectic*, p. 30).

A dialogue usually arises because people want to address an exigency in the situation. According to Walton and Krabbe, partners may have conflicting points of view, conflicting interests, may lack information, may need to make decisions, or may want to antagonize each other (p. 66). Whichever the case, these differences constitute the starting point of a dialogue. The main goal of the dialogue (or what participants ought to subscribe to if they are engaging in a particular dialogue type) can be to resolve the conflicts (verbally), to reach some sort of decision or even a provisional accommodation, to expand or spread one's knowledge, and to reach an agreement (deal) that would satisfy both parties (Walton & Krabbe, p. 66). Accordingly, there are six major types of dialogue: persuasion, inquiry, information seeking, negotiation, deliberation, and eristic.

Persuasion is a conflict of opinion whose primary goal is to reach a stable agreement. To accomplish this goal, at least one of the partners has to change his or her point of view. Inquiry stems from an open problem with the goal of accumulating facts and demonstrating the truth of a conclusion. Information seeking is a dialogue in which one participant has more information than the other participant, so the goal is to spread this information. Negotiation is also a conflict of opinion but its main goal is to reach a settlement. Each partner is interested in maximizing his or her benefits. The bargaining that occurs is self-interested and is directed at finding a compromise that would satisfy both parties. Deliberation stems from an open, practical problem and the goal is to reach a decision about how to act. Finally, eristic dialogue is a conflict of opinion in which the primary goal is to reach an accommodation or a temporary agreement in the relationship. It includes verbal exchanges and quarrels in which the participants are primarily interested in winning but can also have a cathartic and constructive effect as it allows partners to voice their frustrations, which can be beneficial (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 79-81). As the authors noted, these types of dialogue can overlap, generating a mixed or complex dialogue, in which participants switch from one dialogue type to another within the same verbal

exchange (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 65). In fact, these latter mixed dialogues are probably the ones most frequently encountered in natural, everyday argumentation.

The above framework aids in the understanding of close relationships in two main ways. First, at a general, abstract level, close relationships can be understood as on-going meta-dialogues between partners. Second, at a specific level, the conversations that occur within close relationships can be mapped according to the types of dialogues outlined above. Such an analysis reveals the normative structure partners ought to follow for accomplishing a particular goal and the illicit shifts that derail so many relational conversations into unproductive, hurtful quarrels. The following paragraphs detail both these ideas.

Close relationships can be construed as on-going meta-dialogues between partners. In a relationship, the recurrent exchanges between the two partners create a system of messages and meanings that accumulate over time. These repeated dialogues define the relationship, nuance it and give it its characteristics and also provide the anchoring point for partners' understanding of the nature of their relationship. For example, think of two friends who usually argue about politics or sports. Their recurrent arguments become a defining feature of their friendship, making it unique and serving as a way of characterizing this particular friendship. Close relationships then become the over-arching synthesis of the dialogues that occur within them between the two partners.

As meta-dialogues, close relationships have goals of their own and rules that govern them as well. For example, the goal of some marriages is to solidify the love partners have for each other and make each other happy. But marriages also happen based on other goals, such as to obtain political power (e.g., marriages between heirs of European monarchies) and to increase one's social status (e.g., marrying one from a higher caste). Given the length of close relationships as compared to dialogues, it is reasonable to assume that the goals of a close relationship may change over time, with or without the explicit acknowledgment of the two partners. In other words, a close relationship such as dating someone may start with the goal of making the other partner happy but may gradually become all about antagonizing the other person (which will probably lead to the relationship's dissolution).

Along with goals, close relationships have rules of their own which pre-

scribe how partners ought to behave, what they ought to say and do, and the appropriate or accepted behaviors within the relationship. These rules become defining features of the relationship because they delineate the parameters within which partners may act. For example, one of the prescriptive rules commonly upheld by married partners is monogamy. The rule prescribes the appropriate behavior while in a marriage (i.e., no sexual and/or emotional involvement with other persons) and therefore serves as a defining feature of the relationship. Deviations from relational rules are fallacious moves within the meta-dialogue, illicit shifts that derail the relationship from its course. For example, an extra marital affair questions the love and loyalty a partner has for the other and endangers the continuation of the relationship. Furthermore, such deviations are usually accompanied by sanctions which specify the punishment one is to incur for engaging in the fallacious move. For example, marriages frequently dissolve if one partner engages in an extra marital affair; thus the sanction for the violation of the monogamy rule is the dissolution of the relationship.

Within close relationships, the recurrent dialogues that occur between partners can be mapped according to the dialogue types proposed by Walton and Krabbe. Not every conversation between partners is a dialogue, but those in which arguments are presented in a purposeful manner lend themselves to such classifications. Moreover, mapping such dialogues according to the initial situation and goal they intend to satisfy may increase the likelihood of productive outcomes, hence better dialogues between partners. Dialogues frequently derail from their course as one (or both) of the partners makes an illicit shift. For example, think of an argument between a husband and a wife about who should do the cooking on a specific night. At one point, the wife replies that the husband never does the cooking; the husband, in turn, replies that the wife never washes the dishes. All of a sudden the dialogue degenerates into a quarrel as both partners have derailed from the initial goal of reaching an agreement about who should cook dinner. Such instances are common in everyday dialogues and understanding when such shifts occur and how they affect the overall dialogue may prove useful for pedagogical and therapeutic purposes. Hopefully, people can learn to conduct more productive dialogues and counselors and therapists can teach couples how to avoid destructive communication patterns, such as quarrels, in their relationships.

## 2. Commitments in Dialogue

Besides dialogue types, a central concept in the dialogue framework is the idea of commitment. As Walton and Krabbe defined it, a commitment is “a decisive moral choice that involves a person in a definite course of action” (p. 14). As the authors noted, commitments do not represent intentions to follow a course of action or involvement in a course of action (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 14-15), nor are they beliefs or motives for doing something (Walton *Types of Dialogue*, p. 146). Commitments are yes or no decisions whereas involvement in a course of action can be a matter of degree (Walton & Krabbe, p. 15). In a close relationship there are specific relational commitments, which are decisions that pertain to some aspects of the relationship, such as a commitment to honoring one’s spouse, respecting the other person. These are the ones on which the following explanations will focus.

There are several types of commitments. Action commitments refer to a person’s commitment to a course of action (Walton & Krabbe, p. 15), such as X is committed to making dinner or X is committed to cleaning the house. Such commitments delineate what a person is bound to, which also means that there is an associated imperative that corresponds to each commitment bond. For example, X is committed to cleaning the house means that X is bound to clean the house and therefore someone can put forward an imperative statement such as “X, clean the house!” (Walton & Krabbe, p. 16). A propositional commitment is a specific type of action commitment. It refers to the fact that, when X is committed to proposition P, all of X’s available strategies center on proposition P and these strategies are dialogical (Walton & Krabbe, p. 23).

In close relationships there is a special category of action commitments that derive from what I shall call emotional bonds. The very nature of close relationships presupposes an affective dimension from which action commitments derive. We expect our significant others to love us, to support us, to encourage us when we’re down, and we expect them to act upon these bonds by doing something to show their love (e.g., cook dinner, bring flowers, offer a shoulder to cry on). Thus, when in a close relationship, one can incur a commitment simply by entering the relationship. Walton and Krabbe acknowledged this option as one of the possible ways in which a commit-

ment is incurred (p. 34). The content of these commitments (what one is expected to do) varies based on the nature of the relationship (friendships may presuppose fewer or different commitments than romantic relationships) and on the social and cultural norms that define the relationship. In other words, cultures and societies determine in part what is expected of people in close relationships and entering such a relationship implies subscribing to those norms and thereby incurring the associated commitments. Furthermore, once a commitment is incurred, one's relational partner can issue a corresponding associated imperative. Asking for an action that corresponds to the commitment is a legitimate expectation. The cliché imperative that comes out during a fight is something like "If you loved me, you would do Y" which essentially asks one's partner to act upon the emotional bond and engage in a specific course of action.

Propositional commitments are also of special interest. If a while back you mentioned to your friends that you liked mint chocolate, you may be receiving a lot of mint chocolate boxes for the holidays, even if your taste has changed in between. Given that close relationships are usually longer than a dialogue between two people, we can expect that people will retract or withdraw their commitments. As Walton and Krabbe explained, sometimes retracting a commitment may be more difficult than at other times, depending on the depth with which the commitment is held; more deeply held commitments are harder to retract than lightly held ones and such retractions may not be possible without some explaining, perhaps criticism or even some sanctions (p. 36). It is one thing to say "I don't like your pasta anymore" versus "I don't love you anymore." The latter retraction tends to be more problematic than the former.

Walton and Krabbe also discussed objects of commitments as indicators of what a person needs to do (or abstain from doing) so that he or she lives up to the commitment (p. 17). In close relationships, the objects of commitment are extended to include the other person and the relationship itself. Moreover, in some cases, the commitment to the other person or the relationship must receive priority over one's commitments to oneself so as to avoid an incompatibility or a conflicting situation. For example, attending your significant other's birthday party ought to take precedence over going to a football game with friends, even if this latter activity is what you would rather do.

Another aspect that is relevant for the present discussion is the strength of a commitment. Commitments have different strengths, meaning there are stronger and weaker commitments. This differentiation does not mean that some commitments are only partial, but that people are committed to certain things more deeply than they are committed to others (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 21). For example, X may be committed to keeping promises, but this commitment may not be as strong as the commitment to not tell a lie. So, the strength of a commitment captures how deeply one is committed to something. In close relationships, the commitment to the other person and to the relationship usually gains more strength as the relationship progresses. In successful relationships (e.g., happy marriages) these commitments gain more and more strength and are also usually prioritized over other commitments. For example, one common expectation that dating partners have is that their partner will choose to spend free time with them rather than with someone else (Metts & Cupach, p. 246). Weaker commitments to one's relationship or the other person suggest the relationship is not a serious one. Similarly, the strength of one's commitment to a friend differentiates a casual friend from a best friend.

The cumulative set of commitments a person has incurred forms his or her commitment store. One can imagine commitment stores as repositories or message banks in which a person's agreement or disagreement on an issue has been stored at any point in a dialogue (Walton, *The New Dialectic*, p. 40). For example, one may be committed to preparing a meal, preparing a specific menu, and keeping promises. Commitment stores are dialogue-specific, meaning that a commitment store exists in respect to a particular dialogue, with a particular person, at a particular time and it contains all the commitments one has incurred in that dialogue.

When extended to close relationships, commitment stores can be imagined as repositories of the messages exchanged in a specific dialogue between partners. But there is also a relational commitment store which sums up all the commitments accumulated throughout the relationship with that partner from the continuous exchanges between the two partners. These commitments may be choices and decisions partners have made regarding the relationship (e.g., to get married), the other person (e.g., the attitudes and feelings held towards the other person), and matters that have occurred within the relationship over time (e.g., positions taken through-



out the relationship regarding specific issues). Accumulated over time, these commitments form a repository that serves as an anchoring point for interpreting, evaluating, and making judgments about the relational partner and the relationship. For example, let's say that the commitment to monogamy while in a married relationship is stored in a couple's relational commitment store. Partners are then expected to act according to this commitment and their behaviors are judged against this commitment. Were one of the partners to be seen flirting with a third party, the behavior would be evaluated as a violation of this commitment. Commitment stores in close relationships are important precisely due to this function of storing commitments. As a relationship progresses, these stores become larger and larger, offering a rich repository that can characterize and nuance the relationship.

Commitment stores have a light side and a dark side (Walton & Krabbe, p. 125). Light-side commitment stores are explicit, openly visible to both partners, and known by both partners, so they should be able to identify the commitments within such stores. Dark-side commitment stores are not clearly articulated or expressed. A partner may guess or have a pretty good idea but not know exactly what the other partner's dark-side commitments are. It is possible that the latter partner does not know them himself or herself. As Walton explained, commitments are usually veiled in the dialogues people have in everyday argumentation (*Commitment*, pp. 96-97). For example, one may be committed to X but this commitment is stored in the dark side of one's commitment store and it does not become apparent until X is in conflict with another commitment. In close relationships, such commitments are important because partners discover them gradually as the relationship progresses. They enrich the knowledge of one's partner but can sometimes jeopardize the relationship (e.g., deal-breakers such as not wanting children or valuing one's career more than one's family).

The discussion of dialogue and commitments also invites the discussion of fallacies. More recent definitions of fallacies (e.g., van Eemeren, 2001) conceptualize them as wrong moves made during an argumentative discourse instead of the definition Hamblin provided, which took into account the validity of the argument presented in a fallacy (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, p. 1). Fallacies are wrong in the sense that they deviate from the rules of dialogue (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, p. 2), which specify how the

dialogue ought to be conducted and what are the appropriate moves. Fallacies are important because they shift the dialogue, sometimes in an appropriate manner but often times in an illicit manner (Walton, *Commitment*, p. 95, p. 99). The following section details the relevance of these aspects to close relationships.

### **3. So What? The Advantages of Using the Dialogue Framework**

The dialogue framework adds several unique advantages to the study of close relationships. It challenges those in close relationships to establish and clarify a set of rules by which their relationship ought to unfold. As previously mentioned, the dialogue of a relationship ought to proceed according to some normative rules, which makes it possible to identify fallacious moves. Fallacies are deviations from the rules of a relationship, wrong moves in the relational dialogue. Identifying these moments when shifts in the dialogue occur is important so that participants can learn to avoid incorrect moves. Also, a dialogue has a maieutic function in that it can reveal fallacies and hidden commitments in one's argument (Walton *Commitment*, p. 101). Committing a fallacy may serve as a means to reveal additional commitments and also improve the relationship as it offers partners the chance to learn more about how they feel. Take the case, for example, of relational transgressions. Transgressions are violations of rules or expectations partners have about the appropriate behavior in a relationship (Cupach & Metts, p. 70). So, they are fallacies in the dialogue of a close relationship because they violate the rules according to which the relationship ought to unfold. These rules may be explicit insofar as participants have verbally discussed them. But often times in close relationships these rules are implicit. Partners assume the other person shares the same rule and may find out this is not the case when their partners commit a fallacy by violating the presumably shared rule. For example, is seeing someone else while dating another person acceptable? Some people may say yes whereas others may say no. In a dating relationship, if the two partners have different rules about this aspect, a relational transgression may occur. Such an event will give partners the chance to clarify and establish their relational rules.

In addition, the dialogue framework draws attention to the importance of identifying and categorizing one's commitments. Walton and Krabbe explained that commitments are in a relationship of priority when one commitment is given priority over another (p. 48). Quandaries arise when commitments clash in a given situation. Such situations can be solved by reconsidering the priority given to commitments and re-arranging them so that the clash ceases (Walton & Krabbe, pp. 53-54). Relational partners have the chance to gain knowledge about each other by identifying which commitments are stored in their relational commitment store and how these commitments are prioritized. In close relationships, partners may reconsider their commitments frequently and re-arrange them to avoid incompatibilities in their relationship. Studying the order and relationship between commitments can offer a method for uncovering the source of many relational conflicts. For example, when the girlfriend accuses her boyfriend that he'd rather spend time watching football than hanging out with her, she is essentially pointing towards a skewed order of priorities: football is more important than spending time with one's girlfriend. Such an understanding of the causes of conflict can also pinpoint to solutions for situations of quandaries and help partners work towards conflict resolution.

Another advantage of mapping close relationships according to the dialogue framework is that the dialogue types proposed by Walton and Krabbe can be used as tools for analyzing people's interactions. In previous research about married couples' conflicts Gottman conducted several longitudinal studies to identify key predictors of relational dissolution. He tested a cascading model in which four processes predicted marital dissolution: complain/criticize, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, pp. 110-111). Gottman analyzed the turns in conversations that partners took by slicing up lengthy (e.g., 45 minutes) conversations. His results suggest that the outcomes of people's close relationships are predictable over the years when studied in this manner (Gottman, p. 409).

The dialogue framework offers the same kind of tool. The framework is normative, but I propose it be applied practically to map people's argumentative dialogues. Such an application can reveal what dialogue types people rely on in their close relationships when dealing with a variety of issues. For examples, do friends or romantic partners rely on negotiations

or deliberative dialogues when trying to decide issues that pertain to their relationship? Are quarrels some degenerated forms of dialogue that prevail in close relationships? Such an empirical endeavor can yield information that can not only predict people's behaviors but also aid improve their relationships. Out of the six dialogue types the eristic dialogue (particularly the quarrel) is considered a destructive one (Walton, *Types of Dialogue*, p. 136). Yet people quarrel all the time in everyday arguments. Does this mean that we are essentially engaging in destructive dialogues all the time? Applying the dialogue framework to everyday argumentative dialogue can teach people when and how to engage in more constructive exchanges, when shifts from one dialogue type to another are appropriate, and how to reach effective conclusions while arguing with others.

I have argued in this essay for an empirical application of the normative dialogue framework to the realm of close relationships. I have offered a new way of thinking about relationships as meta-dialogues and described the ways in which central concepts, such as commitments and dialogue types, would be applied to close relationships. Finally, I have highlighted a few advantages of this approach. The results of such a project would enhance informal logic's application to everyday argumentation, offer more in-depth predictions about dialogues in close relationships and learning tools for better dialogues with our significant others.

### Works cited

- Berscheid, Ellen and Letitia Anne Peplau. "The Emerging Science of Relationships." In Harold H. Kelly et al. (Eds.), *Close Relationships* (pp. 1-19). New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1983.
- Cupach, William R., and Sandra Metts, S. *Facework*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.
- Hamblin, Charles L. *Fallacies*. London: Methuen & Co., 1970.
- Gottman, John M. *What Predicts Divorce*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994.
- Eemeren, Frans H van. "Fallacies." In Frans H. van Eemeren (Ed.), *Crucial Concepts in Argumentation Theory* (pp. 135-164). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001.
- Eemeren, Frans H van and Peter Houtlosser. "More about Fallacies as Derailments of Strategic Maneuvering: The Case of *Tu Quoque*." IL@25 Confer-

- ence. University of Windsor, Windsor, Canada. 14-17 May 2003. Conference Presentation.
- Metts, Sandra and William R. Cupach. "Responses to Relational Transgressions: Hurt, Anger, and Sometimes Forgiveness." In Brian H. Spitzberg and R. William Cupach (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 243-274). Cupach. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007.
- Walton, Douglas. "Commitment, Types of Dialogue, and Fallacies." *Informal Logic* XIV 2&3 (1993): 93-103.
- Walton, Douglas. *The New Dialectic: Conversational Contexts of Argument*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Walton, Douglas. "Types of Dialogue, Dialectical Shifts and Fallacies." In Frans H. van Eemeren et al. (Eds.), *Argumentation Illuminated* (pp. 133-147). Amsterdam: SicSat, 1992.
- Walton, Douglas and Eric Krabbe. *Commitment in Dialogue: Basic Concepts of Interpersonal Reasoning*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.