Chapter 15
Modalities as Indicators in Argumentative Reconstruction
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15.1 The Semantics of the Modals and the Reconstruction of Arguments

This paper addresses the role of modal expressions as argumentative indicators and the importance of considering the semantics of modality in the reconstruction of argumentation. Modal expressions include modal verbs, such as the English may, can, must, should, will and many other lexical and grammatical devices. For instance, in English we find modal adjectives (possible, necessary, probable, likely, certain), adverbs (maybe, necessarily, certainly, probably, likely, perhaps) and nouns (possibility, necessity, but also less obvious ones like risk).

The present investigation builds on previous linguistic work on the semantics of modality (see Rocci, 1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007) which showed that modals can function as indicators of relations between discourse units in a text or dialogue, and that epistemic modals, in particular, can serve as signals of inferential, and hence argumentative, relations.

Here we consider what this analysis entails for the task of reconstructing the structure of argumentation. To do so we will first go back to Toulmin’s views on the relevance of modality for understanding the structure of arguments and, more precisely, to the views he states in the very first chapter of The Uses of Argument concerning modals and fields of arguments. We will argue that Toulmin is indeed after something which is crucial for the semantics of the modals and relevant for the reconstruction of arguments, but, at the same time, his analysis is problematic on important respects.

In the second part of the article we will present a view of modality, originating in linguistic research on formal semantics, which we believe can capture Toulmin’s insights but is not plagued by the same problems and thus can serve as the basis for a treatment of modals in their role of indicators of argumentation.

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Before entering the discussion of modality it is useful to spend a few words on the notion of an argumentative indicator, which we take from Pragma-Dialectics. Houtlosser (2002) defines the notion argumentative indicator as follows:

“argumentative indicators [...] point to speech acts that are instrumental in the various stages of dispute resolution. Argumentative indicators may make it clear that argumentation has been advanced and how this argumentation is structured” (pp. 169–170)

A first question which arises concerning potential argument indicators is to know when, under what conditions, a given expression can be said to be an indicator of argumentation. In the pragma-dialectical approach the notion is not restricted to expressions that always refer to arguments. van Eemeren, Houtlosser and Snoeck-Henkemans (2007, p. 1) say that an argumentative indicator is “a sign that a particular argumentative move might be in progress, but it does not constitute a decisive pointer”.

It is important here to observe that the non-conclusive nature of the indicator may depend on the polysemy of the linguistic structure involved (such as with the connective because, which can be used both in arguments and in explanations), but it can also depend on the fact that the indicator does not refer to the argumentative move itself but to some other semantic or pragmatic categories, which, for a variety of reasons, can happen to be often – not necessarily always – concomitant with that argument move. Many of the indicators discussed by van Eemeren et al. (2007) are, in fact, of the latter type. For instance, these authors (pp. 172–173) observe that the use of future tense markers (will, shall, be going to, etc.) is an indicator that some type of causal argumentation scheme is being used to support the standpoint. Contrary to the case of because mentioned above, the link between the future and the argument scheme in question is indirect and connected with different forms of causal reasoning in different ways. On the one hand, statements in the future tense are often predictions, and predictions are often justified causally by arguments from cause to effect – such as in (1). On the other hand, in (2) deliberation on future actions is often justified by the positive/negative nature of the (later) future consequences of these actions. In this second case both the standpoint (Stp) and the argument (Arg) refer to the future, and the inferential link goes from the evaluation of the effect to the evaluation of the cause:

(1) Arg: Storms have devastated the crops throughout the country. Stp: The price of vegetables will increase.
(2) Stp: Travelling with Mark is definitely a bad idea. Arg: He will annoy you to no end with his strange fixations about hygiene in hotel rooms.

We will come back to varieties of causal argumentation later in the paper. For now, let us establish a distinction between direct indicators – which are signs that, in some of their uses, refer to argumentative moves (e.g. the connective because) and indirect indicators, which refer to semantic or pragmatic categories correlated to argumentative moves. This distinction will help us dealing with the modals’ role as indicators.

A second question concerning indicators is what exactly does these expressions tell us about the argument being put forth. As observed by Houtlosser (2002, p. 169), in order to be able to evaluate an argument we need at least1 to reconstruct: