Book Review


I am really pleased to review this rigorous, balanced, and intriguing book about the principles of argumentative analysis, as I am persuaded that it offers both to students and to scholars an authoritative, clear and stimulating introduction to the field of argumentation theory from the point of view of a linguist. The author, in fact, is not a philosopher (as is common to scholars in argumentation theory) but a traditional linguist, and has written extensively and authoritatively on syntax, semantics, lexicography, classical philology, logic and semantics, textual linguistics and dialogue. Thus, in his latest book he has had an opportunity to put all these threads together and to write on argumentation with the unusual experience of a scholar who is well trained in all areas of linguistics. As usual, Stati, in this book, proves to be an excellent communicator and guides students and scholars in his peregrinations through human knowledge and in particular through the art of persuasion. Considering that he is also a text-linguist, it is not surprising that Stati should attempt to isolate the characterizing features of an argumentative discourse. He does that by pointing out that an argumentative discourse has as its main aim the persuasion of an addressee (the speaker attempts to persuade the hearer that p is true or reasonable); that it is based on a logic made out of deductions, inductive reasonings, anaphoric links, etc.; that it has a conative nature, in that it modifies the behaviour of the addressee; it is a complex speech act (a macro speech act) consisting of two partial (complex or simple) speech acts; it is substantially polemic; it is dialogic; it is doxastic.

I am not completely persuaded that an argumentative discourse should be polemic, while I must agree that it customarily is.

Stati is quite right in extricating the notion of persuasion from the notion of truth. At various points he notices that a true proposition may not be presented persuasively or that a false proposition may be presented persuasively. A considerable space of the book is in fact devoted to the analysis of well-know fallacies.

Stati distinguishes between argumentation and demonstration. Demonstration is clearly more impersonal, is valid at all times (and for all (rational) people), it is founded on axioms, while argumentation is a more personal mode of discourse, it is founded on opinions, it allows for the negotiations of the conclusions and it has the character of probability (rather than of necessity).

A striking feature of the volume is the interest shown for argumentation not only in so far as it applies to assertions, but also in so far as it
applies to non-assertive speech acts. From this point of view, especially commands and directives in generals need to be justified, as they impose obligations on the hearers and, thus, are potentially face-threatening. By justifying a directive, not only does one soften up the force of the speech act and liberates it from its face-threatening potential, but one also provides reasons that motivate the hearer to engage in the response that speech act prompts or elicits. Practical reasonings are at the heart of human conduct and thus it is not unreasonable to apply argumentation theory to speech acts other than assertions, as not only opinions need to be motivated. Human conduct needs to be motivated too and many cases of non-assertive speech acts make leverage on potential envisaged benefits for the hearer or the speaker and on the presupposition that the hearer finds desirable what the speaker finds desirable.

Stati makes an inventory of argumentative roles (pp. 54–55). He believes that a discourse can be analysed as units that correspond to argumentative roles. A discourse such as Mary is intelligent. She can make complex calculations can be analysed as consisting of a thesis and a support role (which Stati calls ‘ruolo di appoggio’). In fact, the utterance She can make complex calculations is obviously a piece of information that supports the thesis Mary is intelligent. Although Stati also discusses a number of lexical features (mainly connectives or adverbs) associated with certain argumentative roles, he claims that the task of identifying each argumentative role is mainly inferential. Going back to the previous discourse Mary is intelligent. She can make complex calculation, we have to ask ourselves what it is that prevents us from interpreting Mary is intelligent as a support role. Presumably, we reason along the following lines. ‘She can make calculations’ is a factual piece of information. Instead, ‘Mary is intelligent’ is something that can be disputed. What is disputable is more likely to be the thesis. I believe that Stati’s considerations open up an interesting avenue of research, that of the pragmatic interpretation of argumentative roles. It is possible that there are default rules of interpretations, such as “Interpret as ‘thesis’ what is in initial position”. Presumably these considerations have to be deepened further.

Stati distinguishes between the thesis and the target. Although, prima facie this distinction might appear confusing, as the ‘thesis’ is clearly the target of a support role, there is a rationale for it, as it allows for the possibility of macro-links. It is not unusual that a support role needs to be defended further and, therefore, it will become the target of another support role. The thesis can only be defined functionally as a position uttered with the aim to persuade the hearer to accept it. In this way, the thesis is sufficiently differentiated from the support roles, as it is reasonable to use as support roles pieces of information that are less controversial.

A whole chapter is devoted to the lexicon used in argumentation. A number of connectives and adverbs are analysed. For example, according