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Building an argument

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BUILDING AN ARGUMENT

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When using sources one considers necessary for the study of a certain issue and building a point of view we should take into account not only the problems related to the content, but also several methodological aspects.

1. Terms and their meanings

A term is a word or group of words that refer to one or more objects, either real or ideal.

Within the language, a linguistic expression corresponds to a term, for instance “that student who is reading in the library”.

In the field of reality, an object or a class of objects corresponds to a term, in our example it is a concrete physical being, who has an identity and who is now reading in the library.

The objects designated by terms can be:

- **Real** objects – those that can be seen, heard, smelt, etc.;
- **Imaginary** objects – those that are the fruit of our imagination, such as Romeo and Juliet who do not physically exist, but who could;
- **Ideal** objects – those that do not physically exist, but could not either, such as “the ideal man” or “the ideal state” or “perfect equilibrium on the offer-demand market”.

We usually do not think about all these aspects. We use “words” and we do not pay attention to the fact that they express more than we think they do. However, terms are important when building and maintaining a point of view. This role is further emphasised by the elements shortly presented next.

a. The meaning of terms helps us transmit our ideas; we shall be able to do this as long as the meaning of the terms we use is clear and the same for all interlocutors.

For instance, let's consider the term *gender*; we can often see that its use can lead to misunderstandings. When undefined, it may lead interlocutors to think that it refers to the grammatical category (masculine, feminine, neuter). It may also be understood as someone's way of being or as a class of objects different from the others due to specific characteristics etc. It is thus necessary to clarify what meaning we attach to a specific term we use so that our interlocutor may receive the message we want to share.

b. The place occupied by terms within sentences helps as stress their importance. It is true that we are taught in school to put the subject first, then the predicate, followed by other words determined by them. When we want to convince others, however, as is the case when we maintain a point of view, the order of terms is important.



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c. The way we choose the terms, namely the options we have to indicate an object. When we “choose our words”, we express more than what they indicate directly. For instance:

- classmate / chick;
- man / husband;
- I have finished my essay / I am done with my essay;
- gender difference / gender inequality / gender disequilibrium.

2. Relations between terms

Relations between terms are also important. Broadly speaking, there are two types of relations that can be established between terms, namely:

a. Relations of consistency when their spheres have at least one common element. For instance, if we think of the terms “person of female sex” and “child” we can say that they are in a relation of consistency, respectively of **intersection**, because some persons of female sex are at the age of childhood and some children are of female sex. Other times, a term’s sphere is completely included in the sphere of another term. We then say that there is a relation of **subordination** between them. For instance, “person of female sex” and “mother”: all mothers are of female sex, but there are persons of the same sex as them who are not mothers.

b. Relations of opposition when the spheres of the two terms have no element in common. For instance, “woman” and “man” are in a relation of opposition because, at the same time and under the same relation, no woman is a man and vice versa.

Concretely, there are a few aspects when we build a point of view.

- The terms we use must have the same meaning throughout our construction. We have seen examples of situations when an ambiguous use of terms prevents the transmittal of the desired message. Let’s add another example. If we use the expression *The leader is of opposite gender*, then the term *gender* has the meaning of *sex*, which is not the same with the usual meaning of the term *gender*.
- If there is a relation of consistency between two terms, then they cannot be used as if they were completely different. Like the terms *gender disequilibrium* and *gender discrimination*. Every discrimination is a *disequilibrium*, but not vice versa. These are normal differences and it would be abnormal to try to eliminate them. They do not lead to discriminations. The two terms can neither be used as synonyms, nor as completely different words. We shall have to specify, either directly or contextually, when it is a discrimination and when it is just a difference. Similarly, let’s consider *acts of bravery* and *girls’ behaviour*. There are bravery acts made by girls (and ones that are not done by them) and there are girls’ behaviours that are brave (as

some are not). This is a relation of intersection, meaning that we can find a concrete human act that we simultaneously consider to be brave and to be part of girls' behaviour. If we considered *acts of bravery* and *boys' behaviour*, what relation would there be between terms? A wrong approach, quite common under different forms, maintains that boys are brave and thus all acts of bravery are part of boys' behaviour. But not all boys' acts are ones of bravery, which means that the two terms are not subordinated. They intersect because, as we have seen in the case of girls, some of the acts of bravery are made by boys and some are not; and some boys have a brave behaviour and others do not.

It is interesting to note that such a no differentiated use of language may form or transmit gender prejudices. In the analysed case, bravery identified with a manly behaviour produces/keeps the prejudice that only boys are brave and that girls are not characterised by such a quality. The brave ones are an exception or, at best, have a manly behaviour.

- If there is no connection between two terms, then there is a relation of opposition between them and they must be used as such. The most common mistake in this case is to work according to the part-whole model. If an organisation is made up of members, this does not mean that there is a relation of subordination between the terms *organisation* and *member*. Logically speaking, they are opposed, meaning that there is no concrete object that can simultaneously be an organisation and a member of the organisation.

Let's suppose that someone says:

I am not interested in these problems! They confuse me more than they help me. I could maintain a point of view better when I did not know them. Now I have to think whether there is an intersection or opposition or who knows what!

Knowing a few technical details cannot confuse anyone. We naturally use our mother tongue, meaning that more often than not we use it correctly without deducing from ruled how to use words. There are situations when we doubt; when we do not know whether it is right or wrong; when we feel that there is something wrong but we do not know what it is. These are the cases when knowing the rules helps.

We normally verify ourselves after we have built a point of view or planned an action. We try to see whether the presentation expresses what we wanted to say or do. We give it to someone who does not know what it is about and ask them to read it and say what it is about. The verification, the revision, ensuring correctness cannot be made without linguistic rules, but even more so without the rules of logic.



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3. Why must we pay attention to formal correctness?

Building a correct argumentation

Generally speaking, we want to convince a jury, a target group, an employer with our points of view. In order to do this, we build argumentations.

There are several elements present in an argumentation:

- an idea to be maintained, which is the **conclusion** of an intervention;
- the arguments put forward to maintain it, or the **premises** that are the basis of the conclusion.

When we want to convince someone that our point of view deserves to be maintained we build an argument. The need for an argumentation comes either when we doubt our own convictions, or when others have doubts about the truth (utility, importance, necessity) of what we maintain. Affirming or asserting an opinion is maintaining it. Every time we maintain an opinion we have to be ready to make an argumentation. When we offer an argument, there must be an obvious connection between it and the given opinion. The argument must give a meaning to the subject, it must be *relevant*. If a point of view maintains that it is necessary to diminish and gradually eliminate gender discriminations, it will not bring as an argument the fact that this would be in the advantage of women. Such an argument would not be relevant even if that sentence expresses something true.

An argument may sometimes be relevant, but insufficient. In such cases, more arguments which are each, taken separately, insufficient, may complement each other. Together, they may become convincing. If a point of view maintains for instance the necessity of making a guide for gender issues, one of the reasons for doing this could be that such a guide is currently missing. This argument, although true, is insufficient. It needs to be backed by others, such as the fact that this kind of guide could help those interested in this issues write better and more easily their point of view, but also that in this way gender discriminations and disequilibria could be gradually removed from social, political and administrative domains, thus contributing to achieving the equality of chances between women and men. Each argument must be significant, credible, so that, taken together, they can give the opinion its necessary strength.

In some cases, a single argument may be even stronger than the opinion it backs, because we usually subscribe to a general argument. If a point of view concerning the encouragement of high school girls' participating in political activities in their region brings forth the argument of the necessity of their being educated so that they may participate in the political life of their country, this single reason would suffice. It is a *strong* and *relevant* argument. Of course, the adequacy of the argument does not transform the point of view into a successful action. Arguing for its necessity and putting it into practice are two relatively different aspects, but it cannot be denied that the process of acknowledging its necessity (by correctly elaborating a point of view) is an important condition for the success of an action.

Good arguments, correctly elaborated, are always strong and relevant. Their strength may either come from separate action, or from the interaction with other arguments.



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Staying away from mistakes

Ignoring the rules succinctly presented above may lead to incorrect argumentative constructions. Such errors are called sophisms.

Generally speaking, a *sophism* designates expressing a wrong idea or wrongly expressing an idea. In a restricted sense, in logics, a *sophism* means an error willingly committed to determine a person to believe something – something wrong or untrue.

When logical mistakes are made unwillingly, they are called *paralogisms*. In this case, the incorrect argumentation is not made with a particular, doubtful purpose in mind (to determine someone to adopt a position known to be inadequate or even wrong).

Here are a few examples of incorrect argumentations. They do not necessarily use untrue sentences. The argumentative procedures are erroneous, though.

- If all men are brave, then John is not a man because he is afraid of the dentist.
- If all people have the right to social assistance and all people are mammals, then all mammals have the right to social assistance.
- If all the members of our organisation are careful of gender issues, then all people careful of such issues have joined our organisation.
- If some activists are not careful of gender issues, then some of the people who are not careful of such issues are not activists.
- Your opinion on gender issues is very good because you have attended courses on this subject.
- The need for the decisional levels of the state to know about gender issues is a need of the social “organism”.
- Nowadays, people talk a lot about gender and gender discriminations. They should talk less about these as, because of this, the number of cases of gender discriminations has increased.
- If this Parliament is a democratic one, then it is made up only of democrats.