

Chapter 39

Effective communication. A Platonic case study

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As a contribution to the valedictory volume for John Nerbonne I present a case study of two thematically comparable passages in Plato for which I will make use of an analysis based on discourse cohesion and above all on the rhetorical and manipulative use of particles to show how a single discourse participant may convey two completely different views using the same linguistic means. The basic issue in both passages is the same: is the specialist the best and most convincing speaker on the specialism in question or is this the orator or, in modern terminology, the communication expert?

1 Introduction

There is nowadays growing awareness that specialists, however good they may be in their profession, are not always and in all situations the best communicators. This applies not only to communication to non-specialists, but also to mutual communication between specialists in various work-related situations.

This awareness plays an important role in health care. In Groningen this led to a close cooperation between the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Medical Sciences/University Medical Center Groningen: the creation of the Health Communication Platform¹ which develops many initiatives in health communication research and education. This research in the Faculty of Arts is inherently linguistic and is, therefore, embedded in the Centre of Language and Cognition Groningen, the research institute successfully directed by John Nerbonne as scientific director for many years (1999–2012).

Health communication may well be a popular theme nowadays, but it is in no way new. I'd like to take the reader back to classical antiquity, where the question whether communication about health issues can best be done by the skilled physician or by a

¹ Kennisplatform Gezondheidscommunicatie, see <http://www.rug.nl/research/platform-gezondheidscommunicatie/>.

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communication expert, an expert orator or reciter, is already discussed. Let us have a closer look at two passages of Plato, the philosopher, who lived from 427–347 BC. In many of his dialogues, Plato presents us the philosopher Socrates in discussion with the so-called Sophists, traveling scholars who offered their expertise to the public against payment of a tuition fee. In these two passages I will study by which linguistic means the moderator of the discussion, Socrates, moderates, and even manipulates, the debate and brings his interlocutor to accept a conclusion that he cannot deny, though it is not at all the conclusion he was dreaming of but rather the contrary (sections 3 and 4). As a general introduction, I'll first give a more general description of discourse cohesion and the framework used to describe ancient Greek particles (section 2).

2 Discourse cohesion in general²

The Platonic passages will be studied as discourse, i.e. as texts functioning within a specific communicative situation.³ Discourse coherence and cohesion are pivotal terms in discourse analysis. In ordinary language use we assume discourse to be coherent. The term coherence refers to the appearance of a discourse as a unified whole, instead of as a set of unrelated utterances simply placed together at random.⁴ The presence of coherence is subjective (both for the speaker and for the addressee), since it is the result of an interpretation process and it depends on evaluation. However, the presence of certain linguistic elements may help the addressee to arrive at the interpretation intended by the speaker. These linguistic or cohesive means explicitly mark the coherence of a discourse. It is generally agreed that cohesion consists of grammatical and lexical elements that mark connections between parts of a discourse.⁵

Although coherent discourse usually makes use of different cohesion devices to explicitly mark the coherence relations, it is possible that discourse displays coherence without cohesion devices, or vice versa, cf. e.g. (ex. taken from Tanskanen 2006: 16-7):

- (1) A: That's the telephone.
B: I'm in the bath.
A: O.K.

Although linguistic means to indicate the specific relation between the statements in (1) are absent, the addressee A can still infer a (subjective) interpretation about this relation in its context (probably concluding that B cannot answer the telephone).

² This section is an updated version of S. J. Bakker & Wakker (2009: xi-xiv) and Wakker (2009: 65-66).

³ By discourse I refer to the dynamic process of speech and writing in its situational context. Cf. Brown & Yule (1983: 23-5); Kroon (1995: 30 n. 50); Alfonso (2014: 35-38, 41-43); Christiansen (2014: 34).

⁴ See e.g. Taboada (2004: 1-4); Tanskanen (2006: 1, 7, 20); Alfonso (2014: 11-22); Gruber & Redeker (2014: 2-5).

⁵ The distinction coherence vs. cohesion is based on the fundamental work of Halliday & Hasan (1976). See Alfonso (2014) and Christiansen (2014) for a recent overview of the literature.

Thus, coherence is felt to be present.⁶ In many cases, however, the relation is made explicit, either by intonation or by the use of cohesive devices such as discourse markers or particles.⁷ Thus speaker B may say *But I'm in the bath*, indicating by the discourse marker *but* that there is some adversativity between the two utterances. Exactly which element is contradicted or corrected is inferable from and therefore dependent on the context: in this case it is not the fact that the phone rang or needs to be picked up, but the presupposed element of A's implied request that speaker B is to pick up the phone. This implication is corrected by (the implications of) B's utterance. When *but* or some similar discourse marker is present, the adversative relation is immediately clear to the hearer. In this way, a discourse marker can ease the cognitive effort of a hearer. The discourse marker helps to block unwanted alternative interpretations. In other words, in normal language use discourse markers make relations explicit, rather than creating them.

In (rather rare and marked) cases, we see the contrary: despite the presence of clear cohesive means, the coherence of the discourse in question is difficult, if not impossible, to establish, cf. (2):

- (2) Courses ended last week. Each *week* has seven days. Each *day* I feed my cat. *It* has four legs, *and it* is in the garden. *The latter* has six letters.
(example from Tanskanen 2006: 16, slightly modified)

Cohesive elements (anaphoric reference, repetition, coordination) are in italics. Despite their presence, this piece of discourse does not form a coherent unified whole.

Though particles belong to the most important cohesion devices they are very difficult to describe: they usually fall outside the syntactic structure of the clause in which they occur, and their semantics is elusive. A pragmatic discourse approach is more rewarding.⁸ Instead of a *referential* meaning (contributing to the representation of an event, a situation, an action etc), particles have a *functional* meaning, which has to do with the placing of the described state of affairs in the communicative (textual and non-textual) context.⁹ From the point of view of the addressee, particles may be considered a kind of road signs in the text which help him keep track of the structure of the text or find out the communicative purpose or expectations of the speaker. From the perspective of the speaker, particles may be described as a means of placing the unit they have in their scope into a wider perspective, which may be the surrounding context (and its implications) or the interactional situation the text

⁶ Cf. the cooperative principle of Grice (1975: 45-58), stating that discourse participants should make their contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the discourse in question. The fact that the addressee comes to this conclusion may be seen as a conventional implicature, i.e. as an inference the addressee can make from the presumption that speakers are seeking to provide useful information.

⁷ Kroon (1995: 36) explains that particles belong to the larger category of discourse markers, which indicate how a text unit is integrated into the discourse context. See also Blakemore (1992: 136), Christiansen (2014: 161), Gruber & Redeker (2014: 6).

⁸ See e.g. Levinson (1983: 100), Abraham (1986: 87-100), Kroon (1992: 53-8, 114; 1995: 34-57). As to ancient Greek, see e.g. Rijksbaron (1997), S. J. Bakker & Wakker (2009), Koier (2013), Drummen (2015).

⁹ See, for instance, Kroon (1992: 55-6; 1995: 41, 61-2), Wakker (2009).

forms part of. The speaker may also use particles as a means of trying to influence the interpretation by the addressee.

Central to a pragmatic approach are three further observations: first, every discourse can be analysed at at least three levels: the representational, the presentational or text structuring, and the *interactional* level.¹⁰ At each level particles may occur. Most particles are primarily linked to one of the levels, but may also function secondarily at another level, as the Greek examples will show.

Second, discourse is usually structured hierarchically. One may discern various layers in discourse, for instance, *embedding* and *embedded* sequences. The starting point of an embedded sequence (also called PUSH) and the point where a speaker returns to the embedding sequence (POP) are very often marked by particles and other relators.

Third, particles are often used in an ironic or rhetorical way, rather than in a literal way. Reinterpretation (often in a conventionalized way) by the addressee is necessary in such cases, if the literal interpretation clearly cannot be meant by the speaker in the given context. Often a speaker uses a particle to influence the addressee's interpretation. Thus *it seems* or *maybe* (or *pou* in ancient Greek) may be used as a disclaimer, as an indication that the speaker is not sure about his statement, and thus gives the addressee the possibility to disagree with the speaker's statement (without disturbing the conversation or their mutual relationship), but when added to something evidently true *maybe* may be used ironically as underlining the truth of the statement (because it is evident that the addressee cannot but agree). As a consequence it also functions in this way if the statement is not self evident; it would, however, be a rough interruption of the argumentation if the addressee were to question the truth of the statement (rhetorical or manipulative use).

I will show how the combination of the above three observations makes the process of using and interpreting particles in their context subtle and complicated, but also essential for effective communication.

Within the above framework the main particles used in these two Platonic passages may be described as in Table 1.¹¹

3 Plato Ion

The first passage belongs to a brief dialogue¹² called *Ion*. Ion is a rhapsode, a professional singer and reciter of epic poetry who also lectures on Homer. He is the proud winner of a recent rhapsode contest. This leads to a discussion about the question whether the rhapsode gives his performance thanks to his skill and knowledge (his *technè*) or by virtue of divine possession or inspiration. Ion considers himself a skillful professional. During the discussion, Ion has first to admit that if he is an expert, he

¹⁰ These distinctions are based upon Kroon (1995).

¹¹ For a justification of these values see E. J. Bakker (1993), Sicking & van Ophuijsen (1993), Sicking (1997), Wakker (1997; 2009), Koier (2013: 271-328) and Drummen (2015), who each mention further relevant literature.

¹² Plato, *Ion* 536e1-538b6. There is discussion about the date of composition and the authenticity of the *Ion*. For a clear overview of the discussion, see Rijksbaron (2007: 1-14).

Table 1: Function of cohesive devices (particles).

Cohesive device (particle)	Discourse level at which the particle primarily functions	Basic semantic value of the connection	Explicit relation with previous text	Relevance discourse unit	Commitment avowed by S	Commitment presupposed in A (by S)
<i>gár</i>	presentational	explanation	yes	PUSH (explanation, elaboration)	neutral	neutral
<i>oûn</i>	presentational	next important point	yes	POP-particle: important point	neutral	neutral
<i>oukoûn</i> (introducing a rhetorical question)	presentational + interactional (i.e. here: attitudinal)	next important question	yes	POP-particle: important question	suggesting positive answer	positive
<i>toînun</i>	presentational + attitudinal	next highly important point; you must note	yes	POP-particle: highly important point	high: 'you take it from me that'	low
<i>ára</i>	attitudinal	given the preceding: we cannot but accept (even if it is surprising)	yes	on the basis of the preceding (concluding)	low	low
<i>pou</i>	attitudinal	perhaps/it seems	neutral	no	(feigned) uncertainty about truth	neutral
<i>dèpou</i>	attitudinal	as we both see (<i>dè</i> = δῆ) it seems (<i>pou</i>) > evidently	yes	neutral	high (evidently it seems)	high (it seems)
<i>dé</i> (= δέ)	presentational	next new item	yes and no; discontinuity within larger text unit	neutral	neutral	neutral

will be an expert not only in Homer but also in other poets and in poetry as a whole. Ion wonders, however, why he has this great ability, acknowledged by everyone, concerning Homer only. Socrates now explains that his ability does not depend on skill

or knowledge, but on inspiration, ultimately inspired by the Muses themselves. As a magnet exerts power over a chain of iron rings, so the Muses' inspiration extends from poet to rhapsode to audience. Next (536e1-539d52), Ion is forced to admit that judgements about chariot driving, medical and other specialized issues mentioned by Homer are better left to the respective specialists than to the rhapsode. This brings Socrates to his concluding question: what is the object of the art of a rhapsode. After several unfelicitous answers of Ion, Socrates finally asks (540c): "Well, will the rhapsode know better than the doctor what sort of thing to tell a statesman when he is ill?" Ion cannot but reply that this is not the case and that clearly a doctor knows best. At the end, the only thing left for Ion is the following: instead of a proud expert Ion is to be characterized as (only) a divinely inspired reciter. Let us have a closer look at the argumentation and linguistic means used to lead the interlocutor to the desired result in 536e1-538b6.¹³ The argumentation develops via the so-called Socratic method of argumentation, which consists of disciplined and systematic questioning, by which Socrates follows out the logical implications of thought. Before going to a next step of the questioning/argumentation Socrates always checks whether his interlocutor agrees. Particles are playing an essential role, and, as we will see, not every new step takes the same place in the argumentation, both objectively and subjectively in Socrates' view.

- (1) [536e] *Socr:* ..., but first answer me this: on what thing in Homer's story do you speak well? For (*ou gar dēpou*) not on all of them you do, I presume. *Ion:* I assure you, Socrates, on all without a single exception. *Socr:* (*ou dēpou*) Not, I presume, on those things of which you have in fact no knowledge, but which Homer tells. *Ion:* And what sort of things are they, which Homer tells, but of which I have no knowledge? [537a] *Socr:* (*ou*) Does Homer not speak a good deal about arts (*méntoi*), in a good many places? For instance, about chariot-driving: if I can recall the lines, I will quote them to you. *Ion:* No, I will recite them, for I can remember. (537a8-b5: recital of *Hom.II.* 23.335ff) *Socr:* Enough. As to those lines then, Ion, will a doctor or a charioteer be the better judge [537c] whether Homer speaks them correctly or not? *Ion:* A charioteer, of course/I presume (*dēpou*). *Socr:* Because he has this art, or for some other reason? *Ion:* No, because it is his art. *Socr:* [537d1] (*oukoûn*) To every art then has been apportioned by the god a power of knowing a particular business, isn't it? (*ou gar pou*) For, I think, what we know by the art of piloting we cannot also know by that of medicine. *Ion:* (*ou dēta*) No, indeed. *Socr:* And what we know by medicine, we cannot by carpentry also? *Ion:* (*ou dēta*) No, indeed. *Socr:* (*oukoûn*) And this rule then holds for all the arts, that what we know by one of them we cannot know by another, isn't it? But (*dé*) before you answer that, just tell me this: do you agree that one art is of one sort, and another of another? *Ion:* Yes. *Socr:* (*âra*) Do you argue this as I do, and call one

¹³ My translations are an adapted version of W. R. M. Lamb (1925), *Plato. Plato in Twelve Volumes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/London: William Heinemann Ltd., see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection?collection=Perseus:collection:Greco-Roman>. Especially the translations of the cohesion devices are mine.

art different from another when one is a knowledge of one kind of thing, and another a knowledge of another kind? [537e] *Ion*: Yes. *Socr*: (**gar pou**) Since, I suppose, if it were a knowledge of the same things—how could we say that one was different from another, when both could give us the same knowledge? Just as I know that there are five of these fingers, and you equally know the same fact about them; and if I should ask you whether both you and I know this same fact by the same art of numeration, or by different arts, you would reply, I presume (**dèpou**), that it was by the same? *Ion*: Yes. [538a] *Socr*: (**toinun**) Then tell me now, what I was just going to ask you, whether you think this rule holds for all the arts—that by the same art we must know the same things, and by a different art things that are not the same; but if the art is other, the things we know by it must be different also. *Ion*: I think it is so, Socrates. *Socr*: (**oukoûn**) Then he who has not a particular art will be incapable of knowing aright the words or works of that art, isn't it? [538b] *Ion*: True. *Socr*: (**oun**) Then will you or a charioteer be the better judge of whether Homer speaks well or not in the lines that you quoted? *Ion*: A charioteer. *Socr*: (**gar pou**) Because, I suppose, you are a rhapsode and not a charioteer. *Ion*: Yes. *Socr*: And (**dé**) the rhapsode's art is different from the charioteer's? *Ion*: Yes. *Socr*: (**ára**) Then if it is different, it is also a knowledge of different things. [538b6] *Ion*: Yes.

This passage starts with an open question explained by a second question introduced by the particle combination *ou gar dèpou*. Questions introduced by the negation *ou* are questions eliciting a positive answer (if the interlocutor intends to be cooperative). This steering question is marked by *gar*, a push particle, here introducing an explanation why the previous question is a relevant one. *Dèpou* is an attitudinal particle marking that the speaker presents his utterance as evident (*dè*), but at the same time leaves room for doubt of the addressee (*pou*). This combination can be used in a neutral or literal sense (as here), but when added to a really evident statement it emphasizes the truth and the *pou* part is only seemingly expressing doubt (ironic use). After *Ion*'s proud claim that he can speak well about everything, Socrates uses, again, *ou dèpou*, now in a more suggestive way in view of the previous part of the dialogue. *Ion* replies (non preferred reaction) with a counter question, thus showing that he is not ready for the next step. Socrates answers by a suggestive question introduced by *ou*¹⁴ and giving an example. *Ion* eagerly offers to cite the lines in Homer referred to by Socrates. In 537c Socrates resumes his argumentation with a seemingly harmless and obvious question. *Ion* underlines his answer with the 'ironic' use of *dèpou*. They agree about the explanation (*technè*). After the example Socrates generalizes, in his characteristic way, by an *oukoûn*-question. *Oukoûn* is the combination of a yes-eliciting question (*ouk*) and a next step to a now important question (*oûn*). It is, hence, a POP particle, and, as often, after an example, it introduces the general rule. With *ou gar pou* Socrates offers another example as explanation. *Pou* is added to this evident statement to express, here only feigned, uncertainty. *Ion* fully agrees, marking the answer as self evident (*dèta*). The same holds for the second question.

¹⁴ After *about arts méntoi* is added, by which Socrates reinforces the truth value of the assertion implied by his question, cf. Rijksbaron (2007: 193-4).

With *oukoûn* (537d1) Socrates introduces the general rule. Before Ion is able to react, Socrates introduces a sidetrack or second line of argument, marked by *dé*, the most common Greek particle that marks a next new item (presentational particle), here the new question whether the *technai* differ and imply knowledge of different things, with which Ion agrees. Socrates continues with a question introduced by *âra*, the neutral marker of a yes/no-question. Ion gives an affirmative answer. With *gâr pou* (537e1) Socrates introduces an elaborating rhetorical question with ironical *pou* and sketches Ion's supposed reaction to an example, the self-evidentiality of which is marked by ironical *dèpou*. Ion agrees. In 538a we return to the main line of the argumentation (left in 537d2), which is at the same time the generalization of the example in 537d. Here Socrates marks with *toínun* that he will put forward a highly important point, a point that Ion must take notice of ("you take it from me that"). Ion consents. Socrates continues to his next step with an *oukoûn*-rhetorical question and after Ion's consent Socrates next (*oûn*) applies this to the Homeric lines cited before, explaining (*gâr pou*) this statement they agree upon with two questions, linked by *dé*. Socrates concludes this argumentation with an *âra*-statement: if it is different, it is also knowledge of different things. Given the previous argumentation, this conclusion must be accepted. In this way Ion is forced (after some more examples) that his statement that the rhapsode knows everything (536e1) is false.

The conclusion of this passage (536e1-538b6) is clear: only the expert is able to talk with his expertise and knowledge about the area of his expertise. In short, in our terms, the doctor can communicate on health issues in a more expert way than the rhetor, rhapsode or, to use modern terminology, the communication expert.

4 Plato Gorgias

In his dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates enters into discussion with the famous orator and sophist Gorgias about the nature of rhetoric. In one passage (459a1-c5) the theme is the issue whether it is true that in a public of non-experts the orator persuades his audience with more ease than the expert. Let us have a closer look at this passage, which shows us the same technique of how Socrates leads and even manipulates the argumentation.

- (2) [459a] *Socr*: You were saying just now, I tell you (*toi*), that even in the matter of health the orator will be more convincing than the doctor. *Gorgias*: Yes, indeed, (*kai gâr*) I was, at least to the crowd. *Socr*: (*oukoûn*) And "to the crowd" means "to the ignorant"? For surely (*ou gâr dèpou*), to those who know, he will not be more convincing than the doctor. *Gorgias*: You are right. *Socr*: (*oukoûn*) And if he is to be more convincing than the doctor, he thus becomes more convincing than he who knows, isn't it? *Gorgias*: Certainly. *Socr*: Though not himself a doctor, you agree (*è gar*)? [459b] *Gorgias*: Yes. *Socr*: But he who is not a doctor is surely (*dèpou*) without knowledge of that whereof the doctor has knowledge. *Gorgias*: Clearly. *Socr*: He who does not know will, so it appears (*âra*), be more convincing to those who do not know than he who

knows, supposing the orator to be more convincing than the doctor. Is that, or something else, the consequence? *Gorgias*: In this case it does follow. *Socr*: (*oukoûn*) Then the case is the same in all the other arts for the orator and his rhetoric: there is no need to know [459c] the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know. *Gorgias*: (*oukoûn*) Is it not then a great convenience, Socrates, to make oneself a match for the professionals by learning just this single art and omitting all the others? *Socr*: We shall look into presently, if our argument so requires: (*dé*) for the moment let us consider first...

Socrates starts this part of the dialogue by picking up a previous statement (456b6-c2), by which Gorgias imagined the orator and physician as rival candidates for a medical appointment. Socrates marks his statement as particularly interesting for Gorgias by *toi*. Gorgias agrees, explaining and elaborating his statement (*kai gár*). After Socrates' check whether he understands it correctly (with *oukoûn*, explained by the self evident *dèpou*), he proceeds to the next step, introduced by *oukoûn* and agreed upon by Gorgias. Socrates then adds two further questions, marked by *è gár*¹⁵ and emphasizing/ironical *dèpou*. Socrates next proceeds to the conclusion based on the previous statements (*ára*). After Gorgias' agreement Socrates proceeds to his more general conclusion, characteristically introduced by *oukoûn*. Gorgias remarkably (non preferred reaction) replies by a rhetorical question introduced by *oukoûn*, but implying he agrees and evaluating it as a great asset. Socrates puts this theme aside and switches with *dé* to the theme he is interested in now, thus taking again the lead in the discussion.

In an earlier passage (456b1-5) Gorgias already illustrated this conclusion on the basis of his own experience: "many and many a time have I gone with my brother or other doctors to visit one of their patients, and found him unwilling either to take medicine or submit to the surgeon's knife or cautery; and when the doctor failed to persuade him I succeeded, by no other art than that of rhetoric."

In our terminology, the conclusion in this dialogue (which suits its theme) is that the communication expert is more convincing and persuasive among non-experts than the doctor/physician.

5 Concluding remarks

We discussed two dialogues with a comparable topic, but leading to two opposite conclusions. In both cases it is Socrates who takes the initiative and leads his interlocutor by subtle use of particles. The argumentation proceeds step by step. Particles often mark the new step and indicate its status in the argumentation after agreement

¹⁵ The particle *è* added to a statement indicates that the speaker considers the statement as inevitably true, see Wakker (1997). Added to a question the speaker asks the addressee, whether he confirms the truth. See Drummen (2015: 133-7).

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has been assured concerning the previous step. The results in both passages are internally conflicting, but suit the topic, the structure of the argumentation and the characters of the interlocutors.

Another conclusion may be drawn and applied to current issues: specialist and communication expert should work together, the one possessing professional knowledge (see *Ion*), the other knowledge about effective communication (see *Gorgias*). In both cases, however, great attention must be paid to the way particles help to structure messages and lead the interlocutor(s) or audience to the result aimed at in the given conversation.

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