Presenting Arguments as Fictive Dialogue

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Abstract. Presentation of an argument can take many different forms ranging from a monologue to advanced graphics and diagrams. This paper investigates the presentation of one or more arguments in the form of a fictive dialogue. This technique was already employed by Plato, who used fictive conversations between Socrates and his contemporaries to put his arguments forward. Ever since, there have been influential authors – including Desiderius Erasmus, Sir Thomas More and Mark Twain – that have used dialogue in this way. In this paper, we define the notion of a fictive dialogue, motivate it as a topic for investigation, and present a qualitative and quantitative study of five fictive dialogues by well-known authors. We conclude by indicating how our preliminary and ongoing investigations may inform the development of systems that automatically generate argumentative fictive dialogue.

1 INTRODUCTION

Whereas traditional deductive logic focuses on arguments as formal structures in which each step towards the conclusion builds on the preceding steps, naturally occurring argument often involves multiple perspectives, opinions and claims that are in competition with each other. For students of argumentation theory, the dialectical underpinning of argument has become a common place, partly as a result of the pioneering work by Hamblin [4]. Legal reasoning, with its arguments and counterarguments, provides a good example of a domain where traditional deductive methods are inadequate, because they do not capture the dialectical dimension (e.g., [10]). Also, researchers in Natural Language Generation (NLG) have proposed that rhetorical structures underlying argument in monologue form can be derived from the speaker’s internal dialogue (e.g., [5]). Given the central role that dialogue plays in the understanding of argument, we believe that automated presentation of arguments as dialogue is a fruitful area of research.

Automated presentation of arguments as dialogue is an NLG task: given a representation of an argument (which could range from formulae in a logical calculus to natural language text), the aim is to automatically transform this representation to a dialogue presentation between two or more interlocutors. Apart from the dialectical underpinnings of argument, there are further reasons why dialogue is an attractive presentation medium. According to a number of empirical studies, for educational and persuasive purposes, presentation in dialogue form is more effective than monologue, for example:

- Craig et al. [2] found that dialogue stimulates students to write more in a free recall test and ask twice as many deep-level reasoning questions in a subsequent tutor-guided task on a different topic
- Lee et al. [7] report that there is more discussion between students and less banter after watching a dialogue
- Cox et al. [1] established that student learning is at least as good as with monologue, and
- Suzuki and Yamada [13], comparing dialogue between two life-like characters – a persuader and a persuadee agent in an online shopping scenario – with monologue, found that dialogue is more effective as a means for persuasion; in particular, dialogue increased the purchase likelihood when compared to monologue.

Additionally, presenting information in the form of a dialogue is a popular means for engaging and entertaining an audience, as witnessed by the widespread use of dialogue in commercials, news bulletins (between presenters), educational entertainment, and games. From an application-driven point of view, dialogue is eminently suitable for multimodal presentations involving two or more lifelike computer-animated characters [11].

In the remainder of this paper, we first provide a more precise characterization of the notion of a fictive dialogue. We then look at five instances of professionally authored fictive dialogue. Finally, we try to extract some lessons from the information gleaned from these human-authored dialogues for the automatic generation of such dialogues.

2 FICTIVE DIALOGUE

The term fictive dialogue is ambiguous: it can refer to both an object or an event. We make the two senses explicit by distinguishing between fictive dialogue, and fictive dialogue:

- A fictive dialogue, is a script, i.e., the text of a dialogue that was written by one or more authors.
- A fictive dialogue, is a performance by two or more actors who create the impression of being engaged a dialogue.

Often a fictive dialogue, is performed by actors on the basis of script (a fictive dialogue,), though actors may also improvise a fictive dialogue, on the spot. A fictive dialogue, does not involve real communication between the actors, rather the actors aim to create the impression in the audience that they are communicating and thus their verbal behaviour is intended primarily for the audience rather than each other. Similarly, fictive dialogue, is not a record of real communication, but rather an artefact created by its authors. Despite this absence of communication ‘within’ fictive dialogue, at another level it does, however, involve a communicative act. A fictive dialogue can be viewed as a communicative act that the originator (whether it be an author or actors in case of an improvised dialogue) directs at the
As with monologue, the communicative acts that are performed through a fictive dialogue can be grouped into different types. A main distinction is that between dramatic dialogue, where the purpose is to tell a story, and expository or information-delivering dialogue, where the purpose is to convey information to the audience. Argumentative fictive dialogue has as its primary purpose the transfer of information, an argument. However, dramatic elements are often introduced to convey an argument more vividly. Consider, for example, the following argument:

(1) It is impossible to form any opinion spontaneously different from the one that actually forms. It is formed automatically and instantly, without the person being able to control it. For suppose you try to change your opinion by reflecting upon it, you will find that it is not possible to change the opinion that way. The only way it can change is through outside influences.

The argument conveyed by this short text can be presented in the form of a fictive dialogue. This is exactly what Mark Twain does in his dialogue titled What is Man?, which we examine in Section 3. Below, Y.M. stands for Young Man and O.M. stands for Old man.

(2) Y.M. This is too much. You think I could have formed no opinion but that one?
O.M. Spontaneously? No. And you did not form that one; your machinery did it for you—automatically and instantly, without reflection or the need of it.
Y.M. Suppose I had reflected? How then?
O.M. Suppose you try?
Y.M. (After a quarter of an hour.) I have reflected.
O.M. You mean you have tried to change your opinion—as an experiment?
Y.M. Yes.
O.M. With success?
Y.M. No. It remains the same; it is impossible to change it.
O.M. I am sorry, but you see, yourself, that your mind is merely a machine, nothing more. You have no command over it, it has no command over itself—it is worked solely from the outside. That is the law of its make; it is the law of all machines.

Note that Twain mixes some drama into the argument to liven it up: he carefully creates a climax by spreading the ‘experiment’, from its initiation to its conclusion, out over several turns – e.g., the outcome of the experiment takes four turns: ‘You mean you have tried […]. Yes. With success? No.’. Bearing this in mind, the emphasis in this paper is on expository dialogue: argumentative fictive dialogue is primarily a means for information delivery; the purpose is to present the audience/readership with an argument. Whereas dramatic dialogue has been the subject of a number of academic studies (e.g., [5]) and popular guides on script writing (e.g., [3]), to our knowledge, no work has been undertaken on expository dialogue in general and argumentative fictive dialogue. In the next section, we make a beginning with addressing this gap by analysing five dialogues along a number of dimensions.

3 FIVE DIALOGUES

In order to make a beginning with examining the genre of argumentative fictive dialogue, we selected five dialogues that span the entire period from Plato’s original dialogues to the 20th century:

1. Plato (c. 387-380 B.C.) Meno.4
2. Desiderius Erasmus (1523; English translation of 1557). A Merry Dialogue Declaringe the Properties of Shrowde Shrews and Honest Wives.5
3. Mark Twain (1906). What is man?6

Our aim is to raise a number of qualitative questions that provide us with more insight into human-authored fictive dialogues:

- What is the nature of the argument: is it adversarial or cooperative?
- What are the roles played by the interlocutors?
- Do the dialogues have a dramatic as well as an expository element?

At the same time, we aim to collect quantitative information on the dialogues, and determine whether there are any meaningful relations between the qualitative and quantitative characterizations. Note that for the first two dialogues, the quantitative information only approximates that of the original dialogues, since we used translations. The quantitative measures that we looked into are:

- How many roles are there in each of the dialogues?
- How many turns does each interlocutor have?
- What is the distribution of the length of turns among the interlocutors?

Before we look at each of the dialogues separately, let us first present their profile regarding the total number of turns that each involves and the distribution of turns among interlocutors. As can be seen from Figure 2, the shortest dialogue in our set consists of just 87 turns, whereas the longest one takes no less than almost a tenfold of that: 817 turns.

3 Of course, for example, Plato’s dialogues have been studied by philosophers, but primarily to uncover Plato’s doctrines, rather than qualitative and quantitative linguistic properties of the dialogues he authored.
4 Source: http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/1menol0.txt
5 Source: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14282/14282-h/14282-h.htm
6 Source: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/70
7 Source: Australasian Journal of Philosophy Vol. 48, No. 2; August, 1970
8 Source: The Tao is Silent, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.
Generally, interlocutors split the number of turns equally among each other as a result of alternating turns: in Twain’s dialogue it is 407:411, Erasmus’s dialogue has 56:56, Lewis and Lewis’s dialogue has 43:45, and Smullyan’s dialogue has 108:112. The small differences arise because the dialogues are typically split into a number of parts. For each part, the interlocutors will either have exactly the same number of turns, \(ABAB\ldots AB\), or one interlocutor will have one more turn than the other, \(ABAB\ldots ABA\). The only apparent divergence from this pattern occurs in Plato’s dialogue, see Figure 3.

Figure 2. Number of turns in each of the five dialogues by Plato, Erasmus, Twain, Lewis and Lewis, and Smullyan

Plato’s \textit{Meno} is different in that it has four interlocutors. The pattern is, however, still one of alternating turns. The person taking turns throughout the dialogue is Socrates. He has three interlocutors (Meno, Boy, and Anytus) – Plato has conversations with one at a time, hence in Figure 3 half of the turns are Plato’s.

3.1 Meno (Plato)

In this dialogue, the concept of virtue is examined. Its principal interlocutors are Socrates and Meno, a young man from one of Thessaly’s leading families. Meno is interested in the question whether virtue can be taught, is the result of practice, or neither. Socrates challenges Meno to first tell him what he thinks virtue is. Meno makes several attempts, but every time Socrates points out that his characterizations do not provide a proper definition of virtue. Socrates’s arguments draw on analogies – for example, he criticizes Meno for trying to define virtue by describing individual virtues. Socrates likens this to characterizing the nature of bees by listing several kinds of bee, and gets Meno to agree that it does not result in a satisfactory definition.

The discussion then moves on to how an inquiry, such as the current one, can lead to knowledge: Socrates puts forward the claim that any learning that takes place occurs through recollection of knowledge that the interlocutors already possessed. He then supports this claim by having a conversation with Meno’s slave boy in which he purports to demonstrate that without teaching the boy, he can make him recollect some facts of elementary geometry: ‘Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions; and now he fancies that he knows how long a line is necessary in order to produce a figure of eight square feet; does he not? Yes.’

Finally, the discussion returns to the question whether virtue can be taught, and Socrates proposes to proceed by hypothesis, in particular, the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge. Eventually, he concludes against this and proposes virtue may rather be a gift from the gods, the gift of right opinion: ‘But if not by knowledge, the only alternative which remains is that statesmen must have guided states by right opinion, which is in politics what divination is in religion; for diviners and also prophets say many things truly, but they know not what they say.’

We established that in all five dialogues considered here, the interlocutors take alternating turns. This does, however, not give us the full picture of how dominant each of the interlocutors is. For this purpose, information on the length of turns for each interlocutor is useful, where length as the number of words that a turn consists of. In Figure 4, we provide information on this for each interlocutor in Plato’s \textit{Meno}. We have grouped turns of certain length together: 0–5, 6–10, 11–20, 21–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–100, 101–200, 201–300, 301–400, 401–500, 501–600, 601–700. In order to fit all information in one bar chart, the groupings get larger (at 11, 51 and 101), starting with 0–5 and ending with 601–700. For each interlocutor, the chart depicts what percentage of an interlocutor’s turns fall into a certain grouping.

Figure 3. Distribution of turns in Plato’s \textit{Meno} over the four interlocutors (Socrates, Meno, Boy and Anytus)

Figure 4. Percentage of turns grouped by length of turns for Plato’s \textit{Meno} dialogue

From Figure 4 it is apparent that Socrates is the dominant speaker. The majority of turns for each of Anytus, Boy and Meno are in the 0–5 group. Socrates, in contrast, peaks at 11-20 and his turns spread out more equally among the groups, with a substantial proportion of his turns in the 51-100 group, and some even in the group of turns with between 301 and 400 words.

These data give a very different view of the dialogue than the one that Socrates wants us to accept. We already pointed out that Socrates tries to suggest that his role in the dialogue is one of helping the other interlocutor recollect knowledge. This is, however, not quite the story that our quantitative data tell us. If we zoom in on our data for the boy, this becomes even more apparent: 63% of the boy’s turns are of length 1, 21% of length 2, 6% of length 3, 6% of length 4, and, finally, 4% of length 6. Examining the boy’s turns even more closely, each falls into one of three categories: an affirmation of an assertion that
was formulated as a question (e.g., ‘And are there not these four di-
visions in the figure, each of which is equal to the figure of four feet?
– True.’), an answer a

WH-question (e.g., ‘But how much? – Four
times as much.’), and the response ‘I do not understand’. Now, 73%
of the boy’s turns are affirmations (‘I do’, ‘there are’, ‘It ought’, ‘that
is evident’, ‘very good’, ‘certainly, Socrates’, etc.), 25% are answers
to genuine wh-questions, and there is one instance of the response ‘I
do not know’. These data call into question the rather strong claim
that Socrates seeks confirmation for at the end of this interaction:

(3) Socr: And that is the line which the learned
call the diagonal. And if this is the
proper name, then you, Meno’s slave,
are prepared to affirm that the double
space is the square of the diagonal?
Boy: Certainly, Socrates.
Socr: What do you say of him, Meno? Were not all
these answers given out of his own head?
Meno: Yes, they were all his own.

3.2 A Merry Dialogue (Erasmus)

This dialogue features Eulalia and Xantippa, the latter named after
the wife of Socrates and prototype of shrews in literature. Eulalia
provides Xantippa with advice on how deal with her unfavourably
portrayed husband. As can be seen in Figure 5, Erasmus’s dialogue is
different from Plato’s in that in Erasmus’s dialogue the interlocutors
are more each others’ equals: the distribution of their turns over the
various length matches up quite neatly, though Eulalia has a slight
advantage when it comes to the extremely long turns (>100). Most
of the points in this dialogue are made by the interlocutors sharing
stories of wives. The dialogue contains very little direct argument (as
introduced by why-questions such as ‘Why say ye so. I pray you,
are you at oddes now.’). Erasmus does, however, seem to use the
dialogue as a whole to present and argue by example for his views
on how a wife should behave.

Figure 5. Percentage of turns grouped by length of turns for Erasmus’s
dialogue

3.3 What is Man? (Twain)

Twain’s dialogue between an Old Man and a Young Man concerns
the proposition proposed by the Old Man that man is merely a
machine and nothing more. The Old Man plays a similar role to
that of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. He leads the dialogue, intro-
ducing thought experiments, arguments and rebuttals of the Young
Man’s objections. The fact that the Old Man leads the dialogue is

reflected in the quantitative information regarding turn length in Fig-
ure 6: whereas about 40% of the Young Man’s turns are short ones
(0–5), only about 20% of the Old Man’s turns belong to this group.
Whereas they are roughly equal for groups 6–10, 11–20 and 21–30,
for all subsequent groups (from 41–50 to 601–700), the Old Man’s
proportion of turns is larger than the Young Man’s.

Figure 6. Percentage of turns grouped by length of turns for Twain’s What
is man? dialogue

3.4 Holes (Lewis and Lewis)

This dialogue pits a materialist nominalist (Argle) against a realist
(Bargle) regarding the existence of holes:

(4) Argle: I believe in nothing but concrete material objects.
Bargle: [...] Every time you get started on any such topic,
I know we are in for a long argument. [...] 
Bargle: A long evening’s work. Before we start, let me find
you a snack. Will you have some crackers and cheese?
Argle: Thank you. What splendid Gruyere.
Bargle: You know, there are remarkably many holes
in this piece.
Argle: There are.
Bargle: Got you!

Argle seems somewhat at a disadvantage in Figure 7, with a higher
proportion of short turns (0–5 and 11–20). However, Argle has an
edge over Bargle when we compare very long turns (101-200 and
201–300). In this dialogue, it is Argle who puts forward certain
claims – at first that ‘holes are fictions’ and later when made to
retreat on that point that ‘the hole-lining is the hole’ – and Bargle
questions these claims by presenting examples that appear to con-
tradict Argle’s claims. In this respect, the dialogue resembles Plato’s
Meno. The difference, however, is that Argle, as opposed to the char-
acter Meno, does get much more of a chance to put forward his po-
sition. Moreover, in this dialogue neither Argle nor Bargle gains a
clear upperhand at the end. The purpose of the dialogue is made ex-

dicent his argument has served us as an
illustration—novel, simple, and self-contained—of the nature of
our customary disputes. Argle: And yet the illustration has interest
in its own right. Your holes, had I been less successful, would have
punctured my nominalistic materialism with the greatest of ease.’
3.5 Is God a Taoist? (Smullyan)

God and a mortal discuss the problem of free will. The mortal asks God to be absolved of free will in order to avoid sinful behaviour, and God challenges the logic behind this request. The profile of this dialogue (Figure 8) resembles Plato’s Meno, with God playing the Socratic role, having a lower proportion of short and higher proportion of long turns in comparison with the mortal.

REFERENCES