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When Meaning Becomes Controversial
Critical Questions for Assessing Semantic Arguments

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article vise à développer les critères d'évaluation des arguments sémantiques. Cependant, bien que cette notion constitue le coeur de la dialectique ancienne et soit abordée dans plusieurs approches de l'analyse des arguments, les critères d'évaluation de ces arguments sont insuffisants. Cet article vise à résoudre ce problème en combinant les idées de la logique classique et contemporaine et en les testant par rapport à certaines controverses impliquant des définitions ou des classifications controversées. À travers des études de cas détaillées sur les usages argumentatifs impliquant les (re)définitions du racisme, de la guerre, de la paix et du féminisme, nous avons formulé et mis à l'épreuve huit critères d'évaluation qui peuvent être exprimés sous forme de questions critiques.

When Meaning Becomes Controversial. Critical Questions for Assessing Semantic Arguments

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Abstract: This paper aims to develop the criteria for assessing semantic arguments. However, while this notion constituted the core of ancient dialectics and is addressed in several approaches to argument analysis, the criteria for evaluating such arguments are insufficient. This paper intends to address this problem by combining the insights of classical and contemporary logic and testing them against some controversies involving controversial definitions or classifications. Through detailed case studies of the argumentative uses involving the (re)definitions of racism, war, peace, and feminism, we formulated and tested eight evaluation criteria that may be expressed as critical questions.

Résumé: Cet article vise à développer les critères d'évaluation des arguments sémantiques. Cependant, bien que cette notion constitue le cœur de la dialectique ancienne et soit abordée dans plusieurs approches de l'analyse des arguments, les critères d'évaluation de ces arguments sont insuffisants. Cet article vise à résoudre ce problème en combinant les idées de la logique classique et contemporaine et en les testant par rapport à certaines controverses impliquant des définitions ou des classifications controversées. À travers des études de cas détaillées sur les usages argumentatifs impliquant les (re)définitions du racisme, de la guerre, de la paix et du féminisme, nous avons formulé et mis à l'épreuve huit critères d'évaluation qui peuvent être exprimés sous forme de questions critiques.

Introduction

Communication – and *a fortiori* argumentation – essentially relies on a common code of communication between the interlocutors. This implies that in addition to syntactical (compositional) conventions and

pragmatic principles, they need to share the meaning of the words they use. This *lapalissade* becomes much less obvious when we look at the argumentative discussions, frequently caused by pseudo-agreements concerning what a specific term of a viewpoint means (Naess 2005[1953]). Moreover, the modification of (apparently) shared definitions is a common and powerful instrument of persuasion and manipulation used in legal, political, or everyday debates and in many arguments that we find in advertising, media, or our conversations.

Definitions, or more precisely definitory statements or premises, have been the core of traditional dialectical and rhetorical theories. Classical and medieval authors analyzed in detail the types of definitions and showed how our logical (dialectical) and rhetorical classificatory inferences can be challenged. This topic, however, has received little attention in the modern and contemporary theories, even though it constitutes a central aspect of some seminal works of argumentation theory (see for example, Kienpointner 1992; Pawlowski 1980; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Stevenson 1944).[1] The notions of "argument from classification," "argument from definition," and "semantic arguments" were developed for capturing the controversial conclusions grounded on unshared, doubtful, or manipulated definitory premises (Hastings 1962, pp. 36–52; Kienpointner 1992, pp. 250–52; Rigotti and Greco-Morasso 2019; Walton 1996, p. 54). However, the criteria for assessing when such arguments are weak or unacceptable, or when the attribution of a predicate to a state of affairs is problematic were little developed. No distinctions between the criteria for attributing a predicate to a logical argument were provided, nor were the differences between the types of definition acknowledged.

This paper intends to refine and develop the criteria for assessing classificatory and semantic arguments (terms that we will use interchangeably, despite some differences presented below) (Pruś 2021) by combining the teachings of the dialectical tradition and argumentation theory with specific case studies. The distinctions and the critical points that can be drawn and raised in such analyses using the classical and modern theoretical background will be represented in

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[1] This was done relatively recently, in several publications by Jakub Pruś dedicated to the concept and typology of semantic arguments (Pruś 2019, 2021, 2023).

terms of critical questions – namely defeasibility dimensions of an argument. These critical questions will be classified into categories and mapped as strategic steps for attacking or dialectically evaluating a classificatory (semantic) argument.

1. The Historical and Conceptual Background of Semantic Arguments

The notion of semantic argument was developed to capture one specific dimension of the interface between semantics and dialectics, namely the argumentative uses of definitions. In the history of dialectics, definitions – namely a type of representation of a word's meaning (identified with a concept) through its sufficient and necessary conditions, corresponding to the core of their lexical information (Jaszczolt 2023, pp. 19–22) – were conceived as the core of every dialectical argument. In particular, in the Middle Ages, dialectical inferences were analyzed as grounded on a specific (semantic) relation between the terms (Abaelardus 1970, p. 264; Stump 1989, p. 6). For example, the conclusion that "Socrates is mortal" is dialectically drawn from the premise that "Socrates is human" based on the definition of man as "animate rational mortal being," which is the semantic connection between the terms (called "*habitudo*" – Abaelardus 1970, pp. 263–4). A semantic *argument* is not merely an argument based on a semantic relationship; rather, it is an argument in which the semantic (or more specifically definitional) relationship is potentially controversial. The potentially disputed definition can be the conclusion or the premise of an argument. What matters is that the speaker is using, taking for granted, or advancing a definition that is not commonly shared. This concept is not new, as it is inherently related to different types of argumentative moves analyzed in the tradition as "persuasive definition" (in Stevenson's and Pawlowski's works), the definitional and dissociative arguments (Perelman), and classification arguments (Walton).

1.1. Persuasive Definitions

As mentioned above, the concept of a semantic argument is rather recent. However, the first reflection the influence of semantics on arguments, or persuasion in general, was already identified in the 1930s.

In the article *Persuasive Definition* published in 1938, Charles Stevenson introduced the notion of persuasive definition (PD), which was later developed in *Ethics and Language* (1944). PD is simply a definition that changes the reference of the emotionally laden term so it could be the predicate of a new class of objects. Stevenson also constructs another concept, namely persuasive quasi-definition (PQD), in which the sense of a term, and not its reference, is changed (Stevenson 1938, pp. 333–34; 1944, pp. 280–81). For example, one may broaden the reference of 'culture' (a positively laden word) with a redefinition: "Imaginative sensitivity." Therefore, an illiterate but original person can be called "cultured," which can be one's persuasive goal – to influence the reception of such a person, one redefines 'culture' so it extends its positive connotation to this person. An example provided by Stevenson is the following: "Blackguards are the most sincere and interesting people imaginable, for they have no conception of the bounds of human baseness" (1944, p. 281). The reference of the term 'blackguard' has not changed, yet being one is no longer so shameful but rather something peculiar, original, and fascinating. The results of Stevenson influenced philosophers and logicians, for it showed the importance, power, and trickiness of definitions – especially those used in public discourse and academic debate.

The most notable development of Stevenson's intuition undoubtedly belongs to Tadeusz Pawlowski, who expanded the typology of PDs and investigated in detail the changes in the emotional value associated with the term after the introduction of a PD (1980, p. 61). Yet his results are not as well known among logicians and philosophers as perhaps they should be – only few refer to his works. Pawlowski distinguished three types of PDs:

a. PDs aimed at changing the extension of definition – e.g., one redefines 'racism' to classify some non-racist behavior as racist;

b. PDs aimed at changing the emotional value of the defined term (*definiendum*) – as in Pawlowski's example: "Everything the artist spits out is art" (1980, p. 63);

c. PDs given to exchange a given term with another term, which has a different emotional value – e.g., Gandhi's redefinition of the term "untouchables" to "Harijan" (Man of God), which has a far more positive sense (1980, pp. 59–65).

In more general terms, a definition is persuasive if "it is put forward to support one's claim in the discussion and there is an alternative definition of a given term" (Pruś and Aberdein 2022, p. 44). The concepts of PD, PQD, and its various modifications can be found in semantic arguments.

1.2. Dissociation and Arguments from Definition and Arguments to Definition

The second concept that had a significant influence on the development of semantic arguments is Perelman's distinction between arguments from definition and for definition. The Polish-Belgian philosopher, together with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *Le Traité de l'argumentation, la nouvelle rhétorique*, showed how definitions can support arguments (in their wording, we would say, a quasi-logical argument).

First, they distinguish between two types of argument related to definition: arguments for definition and arguments from (using) definition. As they claim:

> The argumentative character of definitions always presents two closely connected aspects which must nevertheless be distinguished, since they deal with two phases of the reasoning: definitions can be supported or validated by argument; they are arguments. (1969, p. 213)

This shows the two roles that a definition can play in an argument: it can either be the goal of the argument – if one advances arguments to establish a certain definition (if x has property F, then $D(x)$) and/or to include something to such definition (a has property F, therefore $D(a)$) – or it could serve as a premise to assign a new property to something (if x fits the definition D, then x has a property G, and $D(a)$, therefore a has a property G). The continuation of the second argument is to be found in the Argument from definition to verbal classification, which will be discussed at a later point. It is also worth noting that the first distinction between these two arguments related to definition was present in the writings of Peter of Spain, in which he presents two *loci*: *definitum-definitio* and *definitio-definitum* (Kienpointner 1992, pp. 250–2; Rigotti and Greco-Morasso 2019, p. 107).

Second, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca show how a definition can be supported when put forward during a discussion, that is, by its

consequences or etymology, which sheds some light on the further analysis of semantic arguments. Also important is the fact that they present the idea of dissociation or dissociative definitions, which are one of the ways of modifying the meaning of a term by putting forward a "precise" or "more correct" definition (1969, p. 444–50). It is one of the most prominent and successful argumentative strategies based on definition – one simply splits the meaning of a given term into two and then freely chooses the one he or she needs for the persuasion goal – e.g., "true courage" and "apparent courage" (1969, p. 418). The concept of dissociation as an argumentative strategy and dissociative definition was further developed by (Feng et al. 2021; Van Rees 2006, 2009).

It is also worth noting that Perelman was very suspicious of definitions, especially when used in a discussion, and it was he who was in favor of understanding definitions as arguments, for – as expressed by David Zarefsky – "to choose a definition is, in effect, to plead a cause, as if one were advancing a claim and offering support for it. But no explicit claim is offered and no support is provided" (2004, p. 618).

1.3. Classification Arguments

The third crucial concept for semantic arguments is the classification argument. Since a semantic argument is based on the modification of meaning, and meaning can not only be modified by defining but also through classifying, it has to include the classification arguments as well. Therefore, we need to refer here to two kinds of classification arguments: arguments from verbal classification and arguments from definition to verbal classification. These were presented by Arthur Hastings (1963, pp. 36–52) and further developed by Walton (Macagno and Walton 2008, 2014; Walton 2008; Walton and Macagno 2009; Walton et al. 2008).

A verbal classification is a combination of two properties together, so if something has one property (is classified as belonging to a certain class or from a linguistic perspective, is the subject of a given predicate), it also has another property (it can be classified to as belonging to another class or be subject of a different predicate)[2]. Such operation may be used in argument – a premise is called a classificatory

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[2] These types of argument are – sometimes also called "attribution arguments," for they attribute a new property to a given object (Pruś 2023).

premise, and together with the premise that assigns a certain property to the object, it allows us to conclude that another property can also be assigned to it. Hastings' formulation of this argumentation scheme (called Argument from Criteria to Verbal Classification) is the following (Hastings 1962, p. 36):

> Event or object *X* has characteristics *A, B, C...*
> If *X* has characteristics *A, B, C...* then *X* is *Q*.
> Therefore, event or object *X* is *Q*.

The scheme of such an argument follows (Walton 2006, p. 129; Walton et al. 2008, p. 319):

Individual Premise:	*A* possesses some property *F*.
Classificatory Premise:	For all *x*, if *x* possesses property *F*, then *x* can be classified as possessing property *G*.
Conclusion:	*A* possesses property *G*.

The argument from classification hides a fundamental problem underlying the attribution of a predicate to a subject, namely the type of relationship between *F* and *G*. A classification (or predication) can be based on an "analytic" reason, i.e, a definition or definitional principle that warrants the passage from "being *F*" and "being *G*." Or it can be grounded on an abductive type of reasoning, in which a specific property (*F*) is regarded as a sign of another (*G*). The problem is that the boundary between these two types of reasoning can be hard to trace in ordinary conversations. An example of this ambiguity can be the following:

(1) This restaurant charges £30 for a regular fry-up, and if you need to pay £30 for eggs and bacon, you know it is luxurious, isn't it? And since we cannot eat in luxurious restaurants every day, we'd better go somewhere else!

Here, we may identify the individual premise ("This restaurant charges £30 for a regular fry up"), a classificatory premise ("If a restaurant charges £30 for a regular fry up, then it is luxurious"), from which

follows the conclusion ("This restaurant is luxurious"). However, the "superficial" structure of this classification hides a deeper problem, namely the nature of the conditional premise. It is possible to reconstruct the argument in two different ways. The former is an abductive pattern (Walton et al. 2008, pp. 171–3), which can be represented as follows (Walton et al. 2008, p. 329):

Specific Premise:	It is true in this situation that this restaurant charges £30 for a regular fry up.
General Premise:	A restaurant is generally considered as *luxurious* when its sign, *charging unusually high prices for any kind of plate*, is true.
Conclusion	This restaurant is luxurious.

Here, the classificatory conclusion is the result of a commonly observed sign of luxury or rather a way that luxury is manifested. This type of argument presupposes a classification of a specific state of affairs (£30 charge for a fry-up) as an "unusually high price." The other possible way of reconstructing the argument is a classificatory argument that can be represented as follows:

Individual Premise:	This restaurant charges £30 for a regular fry up.
Classificatory Premise:	If a restaurant is *exclusive (expensive)*, then it can be classified as *luxurious*.
Conclusion:	This restaurant is luxurious.

In this second reconstruction, the speaker takes for granted that the classificatory premise represents the meaning of "luxurious." Also in this case, the argument presupposes that the individual premise falls under the classificatory one – a relationship that can be reconstructed as involving a classificatory (a £30 charge for a fry-up is an *expensive* price) and an abductive (charging an expensive price is a sign of being expensive) pattern of reasoning.

While both reconstructions are potentially possible, the former involves fewer premises and inferential steps and thus is preferred. This problem in the reconstruction of the argument shows how the concept of "classification" is extremely complex, as it can be the conclusion of an argument that is not *from classification*. Moreover, the notion of "classification" is in itself extremely blurred, as it hides the problems related to the semantic relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. For example, in the aforementioned argument, "being exclusive (expensive)" can be taken as a sufficient and necessary condition of "being luxurious," or only a sufficient condition thereof. In other words, the major premise of an argument from classification needs to be further specified to represent in detail how a conclusion is drawn from a premise.

The argument from definition to verbal classification (or more precisely from definition to attribution) was developed to provide this specification when the premise is intended to be definitional. The argumentation scheme is the following (Walton and Macagno 2009):

Definition Premise:	A fits definition D.
Classificatory Premise:	For all x, if x fits definition D, and D is the definition of G, then x can be classified as G.
Conclusion:	A has property G.

For example, the aforementioned argument (1) can be reconstructed based on a definition of 'luxurious' as "exclusive (expensive)," which fails to correspond to the commonly shared definition, or at least corresponds to a rough etymological definition supporting an equivalence between the two *signifiants*. Thus, the argument from definition leads to a further problem, namely determining the type of definition that warrants the conclusion.

2. Semantic Arguments

The notion of a semantic argument was formulated by the Polish logician, Hołówka, in the 1990s, but the concept that we know today was described by Pruś (Pruś 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023) who defined it as follows:

> "Semantic argument is a form of argument in which a proponent modifies the meaning of a term, or introduces a new meaning, in order to support his or her persuasive goal (2019, p. 60)."

If we assume that there is no other way to modify the meaning of the term than by definition or classification, then it is clear that a semantic argument has to include either a definition premise or a classificatory premise. Therefore, to put it more simply, a semantic argument is an argument based on the modification of meaning (Pruś 2020, p. 65). This essentially divides semantic arguments into those using PD and those using classification, which results in two basic schemes for semantic arguments. Such schemes correspond to the two *loci* from definition described by Peter of Spain), and include all types of arguments based on modified/fixed meaning.[3] Thus, in addition to the scheme from classification mentioned above, the semantic arguments can lead to a definitional conclusion based on the following pattern:

Definitional Premise:	*x* fits the definition of *D* if and only if *x* has a property *F* (such definition is controversial in the given context).
Individual Premise:	*a* has a property *F*.
Conclusion:	*a* fits the definition of *D*.

For example, in (1) above, it is possible to claim that a £30 charge for a fry-up fits the definition of "expensive" because it is a price much above the average, and the definition of "expensive" is "to be a price above the average."

The semantic arguments can be represented as follows (Pruś 2021, p. 505):

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[3] As illustrated in Figure 1, these two basic types of semantic argument can overlap; a typical case is when arguments from definition to verbal classification are based on persuasive definitions. As shown later, these two argument types are very often combined in a more complex argumentative structure: first, the speaker develops a PD to include (or exclude) a given object into (from) the extension of the *definiendum*, and then attributes a new property to the object based on the classification.
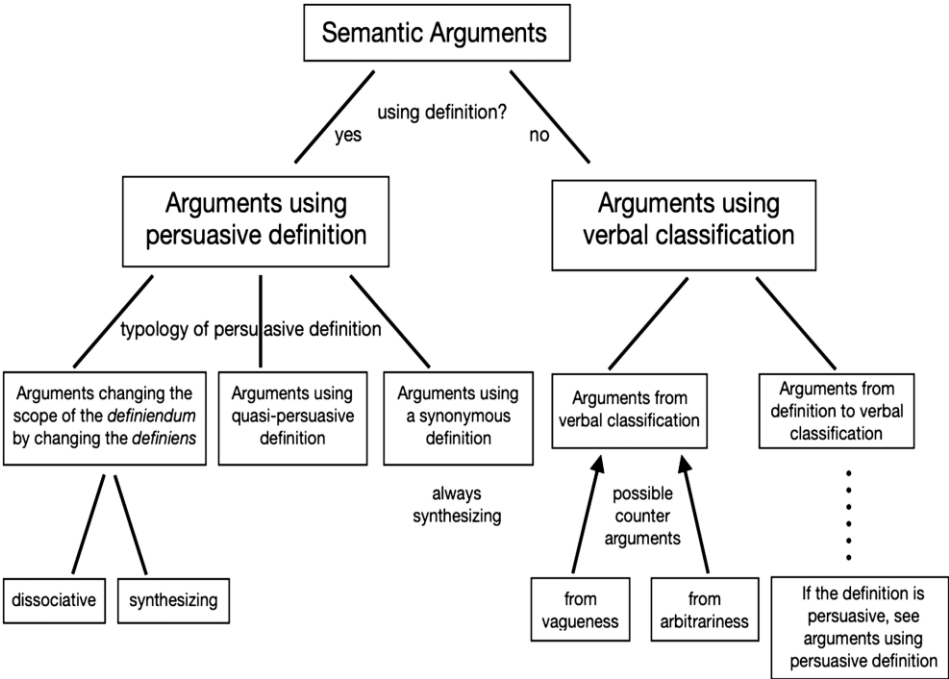
Figure 1: Classification of Semantic Arguments

In the dialectical, rhetorical, and logical traditions, different types of definition have been described. For instance, Victorinus in his *Liber de Definitionibus* surveyed 15 types of definitions, while the modern accounts of Robinson (1950) and Leonard (1967) list 18 and 57 different types (see Hurley and Watson 2018, chap. 2.4 for the contemporary treatment of definitional "techniques"). These methods of defining are not equivalent; on the contrary, their logical and semantic properties are very different (Macagno and Walton 2014, chap. 3).

The first broad category of definitional arguments is represented by the so-called "proper" or "essential" definitions, namely the ones that establish a convertible relationship between *definiens* and *definiendum* that explains what *definiendum* means – or, at a cognitive level, what the corresponding "concept" is commonly taken to be (Jaszczolt 2023, p. 22). In the Aristotelian tradition, definitions are instruments for clarifying what an expression is taken to mean, as words can be used with different meanings, which can lead to equivocation or misunderstanding (Aristotle, *Topics*, 106a 9-1). Definitions were

divided into two categories: the essential ones, namely the ones aimed at describing what the definiendum means and establishing an equivalence between this description and the word meaning; and the "definitory" statements, which are used to provide some kind of equivalence, even though they do not account for a word meaning, but rather a (specific or generalized) state of affairs referred to, a specific property thereof, or a viewpoint thereon.

The category of essential definitions included the etymological definition ("cartoon from *cartone*, that is, heavy paper"), the definition by genus and difference ("man is a rational animal"), the definition by definite description (man is a being that laughs), and the definition by integral parts ("car is made up of an engine, four wheels …"). The definition by genus and difference was considered the only proper definition, or rather the most powerful from a logical and semantic point of view. The genus-difference definition is the logical-semantic predecessor of the modern componential analysis, based on the basic premise that "word meanings are made up of atomic elements or components" (Evans 2009, p. 5). However, in the genus-difference definition the "atomic components" comply with logical and not only semantic criteria, as the genus needs to be predicable of the *definiendum* (and not vice-versa) and other species (namely more specific concepts) falling under it, and it is specified by the difference. Thus, it provides two types of inferential relations: the inferences related to the bidirectional conditional of the definition, and the ones related to the genus. For example, considering the classical definition of "man" the following inferences from the genus can be drawn: if a man is a rational animate being, then (a) what is a man is also an animate being, (b) a rational animate being can be a man, and (c) if a man has a given characteristic, then an animate being has that given characteristic.

The other types of "essential" definitions also attempt to capture a word's meaning. However, their logical and semantic properties are different. The definition by etymology is a description of the *definiendum* through the meaning of the words from which it derived. Thus, the *definiens* captures what the *signifiant* used to mean, which *can* shed light on what it can mean, even though it is not necessarily equivalent to it. The definition by material parts describes the *definiens* through the composition of its physical components and ideally the way they are assembled ("a house is the combination of four walls, a

roof…"). In this case, the problem lies in the negation of one of the parts (a wall has been destroyed), which does not necessarily result in the negation of the definiens (a house can have three walls and still be a house). Finally, the definition by definite description depends on the type of property (uniquely identifying attribute) that is used for describing the *definiendum*. If the property concerns its meaning or is necessarily attributed to it (such as *laughing*, which is a possible attribute only of *man*), the description can be convertible, even though it does not explain what a word means. In contrast, if the property allows the identification of the meaning through the description of an instance or individual (man is the being who is always complaining), then it is not convertible with the *definiendum*, nor does it explain its meaning.

Other types of definitory statements are definitions only because they advance an equivalence but fail to describe the meaning and establish a biconditional relationship between *definiens* and *definiendum*. For example, the operational definition (Rößler 1998) provides an equivalence between what a word refers to (for example, "length") through an operation or an instrument ("what can be measured through a meter") (Bridgman 1927, p. 5). It can be compared to the definition by cause, which identifies the (material, formal, efficient, or final) cause of what is meant (a thunder is a clash between clouds). The definition by negation ("man is what is not a beast") merely excludes the alternative within a binary paradigm; however, it fails to explain what the *definiendum* means and its convertibility depends on taking for granted the paradigm of this opposition (if something is not a beast, it can be a tree, etc.). Other classical types of definition include the definition by species ("a house is either a villa, a condo, an apartment, a detached house…"), which lists all the possible sub-categories of a concept without describing it, and the definition by example ("a man is one like Donald Trump" or "a man is a being such as *a*, *b*, *c*…"). Finally, definitions by metaphor ("freedom is imagination") provide only an equivalence in the broad sense, as what is described is not the meaning, but how a concept is perceived.

3. Five Case Studies of Semantic Arguments: An Attempt at Evaluation

To formulate the criteria for assessing semantic arguments, we will analyze some examples of such arguments and our intuitive assessment thereof based on critical thinking skills. The critical dimensions of the assessment of these distinct instances of semantic arguments will be then systematized in Section 4 in a specific and justified list of critical questions.

3.1. The Formal Aspects of Definitions – Redefinition of Racism in Football

In a document authored by UEFA (Union of European Football Association), the following definition of racism is advanced in answer to the question "what is racism?" (UEFA and FARE 2003, p. 8): "Racism is the belief of the superiority of a particular race, religion, or ethnic group."
This definition, which proposes an equivalence through the identification of the genus and its differences, can raise some formal issues. The first and most evident is its failure to identify an actual difference – as the inclusion of "religion" as a difference would make the *definiendum* overlap to some excesses of "religious devotion" or "exclusivism." The second concern is about its relationship with the commonly accepted definitions (reported in dictionaries, which record the common usage), starting with the etymological one that suggests that this concept refers to race specifically, not to religion. The most famous dictionaries of English, namely Oxford Reference, Merriam Webster, and Britannica, indicate that racism is a belief that race determines human capacities which implies the superiority of one race over the other. (Racism, Merriam-Webster, 2023) Some authors further note that there is a second, broader understanding of this term that indicates a behaviour, consisting in the devaluation of aspects of character or personality as characterizing specific people,(Racism, Oxford Reference, 2023) or in the engagement in or perpetration of race-based discrimination (Discrimination, Britannica, 2023a) .

This second meaning refers to racism as a kind of discrimination, and it is also a very common understanding of this term – so a racist is not only a person who accepts certain propositions about race, but also one who acts according to them, i.e., discriminates against others based on their race (resp. ethnicity). To delineate the second understanding of racism, it is sometimes referred to as "systemic racism" and

"interpersonal racism" or simply "racial discrimination." Despite these minor differences between the definitions (belief vs. behaviour/attitude), no references to religion are made.

Since this is a redefinition used for a specific argumentative purpose (discourage specific actions), it can be classified as a persuasive definition. This redefinitional move, however, needs to be grounded on some reasons – either commonly accepted or acceptable, or explicitly provided (Walton 2001). In this case, since no arguments are given, it is necessary to find the underlying grounds for some problems with the commonly accepted definition (e.g., it is no longer adequate, there are some misunderstandings due to the current meaning, or there is a new object or class of objects which needs to be distinguished). Here, however, we already have specific terms for discrimination: racial discrimination (sometimes referred to as racism) and religious discrimination. So, there is no misunderstanding due to the current meaning, thus no reason for changing it. Moreover, the broader definition introduces more confusion as it collapses two separate terms into one.

Thus the (re)definition of racism formulated by UEFA can be evaluated negatively for three reasons. First, from a formal point of view, it is incorrect due to its obscurity (Aristotle *Topics*, IV, 3), as it fails to distinguish different concepts causing confusion. Second, it fails to capture the meaning of the *definiendum* by providing a difference that results in a meaning broader than the commonly accepted one (Quintilianus, *Institutio Oratoria*, VII, 3, 21–2), without providing reasons for this new usage (Walton 2001). Finally, the definition can be challenged because it can lead to unacceptable consequences (Tarello 1980, p. 369), such as punishing players who pray or publicly display their faith (e.g., by making the sign of the cross or other religious signs when entering the pitch or citing a religious text) as potentially manifesting belief in the superiority of one specific religion (UEFA, 2019). Since the criteria for classifying individual behavior as a "belief of religious superiority" are extremely blurred, it can lead to unwanted and even discriminatory consequences (some manifestations of faith would be more acceptable than others).

3.2. Types of Definition – Choosing the Best Definition of "Peace"

One of the most controversial definitions in human history concerns the meaning of "peace." Obama summarized this philosophical, ethical, religious, and political problem when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009():

> So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths – that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.

In his speech, he distinguished the notion of peace as the "absence of war" from the one that is conciliable with a "just war," namely a conflict justified when waged as a last resort or in self-defense, fought through a proportional use of force and trying to spare civilians from violence. The conflict of definitions of war was raised in recent philosophical discussions concerning the criteria for classifying a statesman as a "peacemaker" or "warmonger" (Harold 2013), using the following example from the Lord of the Rings:

> "We will have peace," said Théoden at last and with an effort … "we will have peace when you and all your works have perished – and the works of your master to whom you deliver us." (Tolkien 1970, p. 234)

Given in response to a proposal of peace by a defeated and defenseless enemy (Saruman), this statement seems to be far from a peaceful comment. However, those with even a passing familiarity with Tolkien's novel will realize that Saruman is "a warmonger fallen on hard times, who then cynically uses the language of peace to further his ends" (Harold 2013, p. 7). Saruman is the one who plots, betrays, incites, and supports the great conflict between the countries, while Théoden is the one who wants to defend his kingdom against the invasions. In this context – and similar ones in the real world – how to distinguish between a lover of peace and a warmonger? The key is, of course, the definitions of peace and war.

Obama and Théoden challenge the classical definition of war provided by Thomas Hobbes as "a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known," by whose contrary peace is defined (peace is "all other time") (Hobbes 1958 [1651], pp. 106–7). According to this definition, Saruman is a lover of peace, since he aims

to avoid further conflict, and Théoden is a warmonger since he wants to continue it. Similarly, Obama was a warmonger, as he was the commander in chief of two wars. This definition conflicts with the one developed first by Aquinas and then by Dietrich von Hildebrand. According to Aquinas, peace is the "work of justice" indirectly, in so far as justice removes the obstacles to peace, but it is the work of charity directly, since charity, according to its very nature, causes peace. St. Thomas conceives love as "a unitive force" as Dionysius says and peace is the union of the appetite's inclinations (Aquinas 1987, II-II q.29 a.3 ad2). This positive definition (in contrast with Hobbes' negative one) describes "peace" as a combination of two virtues – justice and charity – whose meanings are potentially controversial.

To dissipate the vagueness of the terms used in Aquinas' definition, von Hildebrand provided seven characteristics of peace, which is taken to refer not only to a condition between groups or states but also an "internal" one (von Hildebrand 1990, pp. 339–65). Two of these features are particularly relevant to the aforementioned examples. First, according to Hildebrand a "man of peace" distinguishes between real, objective harm, which is a violation of someone's rights, from subjectively offended feelings, like those of pride. Thus, a man of peace can forgive the wrongs of the second kind, but should always react to the former (e.g., by defending the weaker). Second, Hildebrand observes that the man of peace does not seek a quarrel or confrontation for pleasure or his or her benefit, but only when it comes into conflict with higher purposes (e.g., defending the weaker).

The crucial issue is determining the criteria for assessing these definitions. As in the previous case, it is possible to analyze them based on formal criteria and the argument from consequences. Starting with the latter, it is possible to observe that according to Hobbes' definition, Saruman would be a peacemaker and Obama a warmonger. However, while in a fictional example the consequences are commonly shared as negative (Saruman is the "bad" and Théoden the "good"), in a real-life context (such as the Obama case) the value judgment is more complex than the definition itself (were the wars just? How can we assess the effects of a war?). The formal criterion based on the extension is more useful, as Hobbes' negative definition would fail to distinguish between peace and ceasefire or truce – a temporary agreement to stop a fight

(obscurity). However, this limitation would be easily avoided by qualifying the absence of war (permanent).

The classical theory of definition provides a further and more basic criterion of assessment, namely the "essence" principle or more simply the types of definition. Hobbes' definition is purely negative, and for this reason, it fails to capture the meaning of the *definiendum*, especially in a context in which the paradigm of "war" is not commonly shared as binary, as the concept of "just war" provides four alternatives (just war, just peace, unjust war, unjust peace). The "negative definition" is formally incorrect because it is not based on "prior terms," namely more basic concepts, and instead requires the opposite in the same category (Aristotle 1991, p. 4). In contrast, Aquinas' *definiens* provides a genus (union) and a difference (based on justice), to which he added an efficient cause (love/charity). This definition can be considered as formally flawed ("union," "justice," and "charity" are vague, and thus the definition is obscure); however, it can be considered as a definition, while the former is only a definitional statement (a definition in the sense that advances a kind of equivalence, without expressing the meaning).

Finally, the distinction between classifications based on definitions and the ones grounded on signs provides a further element of analysis. Hobbes defines the contradictory (or contrary, depending on the socially accepted paradigm) of "peace" as "a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known," which fails 1) to specify the commonly accepted genus (peace is not a tract of time, as a *war* can be "fierce" or "unjust" but *time* cannot) (Aristotle 1991, 120b 12- 123a 27), and 2) to identify a semantic feature of the *definiendum*. The *definiens* provides merely a vague sign of war ("will" to contend by battle) combined with an argument from popularity. Here, the possible indication of a possible cause of war (public display/awareness of the intention to fight), used as a definitory element, is only a sign based on how war is often manifested and perceived.

3.3. Definitions and Arguments from Authorities – PGA Tour and the Case of Casey Martin

The redefinition of racism by the UEFA concerns the meaning of a non-technical word, namely one that does not belong to a specific human activity. In contrast, some terms characterize specific areas (such as the

legal, the medical, or the political ones) governed by specific authorities and constitute a "technical vocabulary." This vocabulary is an integral part of the rules that constitute such an activity. In these cases, the common logical criterion of the excessive broadness or narrowness of a definition (Hurley and Watson 2018, p. 118) can be hard to apply, as the "common usage" that can provide evidence of how the *definiendum* is used may be not available. How to check whether a definition is too broad or narrow when the *definiendum* is part of a rule that constitutes the activity itself? Here, the problem of the authority to define emerges clearly (Schiappa 2001, 2003).

To illustrate this point, we consider the problem of the redefinition of "golf" (Schiappa 2001). Casey Martin is a professional, who suffers from a circulatory disorder, which makes it difficult for him to walk long distances. In 1997 he requested the use of a golf cart as an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to participate in Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour events. The PGA Tour, at that time, had a rule that required golfers to walk the course during tournaments. The PGA denied Martin's request, arguing that walking was an integral part of the game and that allowing him to use a cart would provide an unfair advantage. Eventually, in 2001, the case went to the Supreme Court of the United States, and despite the final result (the court ruled in favor of Casey Martin) it involved a highly interesting discussion touching on a very philosophical problem: "Does using the golf cart change the fundamental nature of playing golf? How can we know the essence of golf? Who should determine what playing golf really is?". And since two appellate courts have reached two different conclusions on whether using the golf cart changes the essence of playing golf, it seems that this case has a significant meaning from a philosophical point of view.

The redefinition (or better, definition, since no definition was explicitly provided until then) of "golf" is argumentative for two reasons: it is the core of a semantic argument leading to the application of a rule to a specific case (Walton et al. 2008, p. 71), and it needs to be based on reasons as it is controversial. The peculiar nature of this definitional conflict lies in the reasons given. Schiappa classified the arguments developed by the judges as "essentialist" and "nominalist" (Schiappa 2001, pp. 171–80). Justice J.P. Stevens argued, "From early on, the essence of the game has been shot-making – using clubs to

progress from the teeing ground to a hole some distance away with as few strokes as possible." In contrast, Justice A. Scalia presented a nominalist approach to the definition of golf ("the rules are the rules") and concluded that "it should be left up to the ruling body of the sport to decide what is or is not golf" (Schiappa 2001, pp. 172–3).

This conflict of opinions shows how the extension criterion used for determining the acceptability of a definition can be thought of as an argument from popular opinion (what is commonly accepted as an instance of "golf"), which can be rejected when the definition of a technical term is at stake. Here, the problem of determining the authority of usage mirrors the problem of establishing who has authority over a given activity – whether the (appointed, recognized, self-proclaimed) institutional authority or the possible agents involved in it (the people)?. Schiappa summarizes the conflict between these two types of authoritative arguments through two questions: "Who has the power to define X? Who should have such authority?" (Schiappa 2001, p. 178). However, a more complex issue underlies the determination of who has the authority to define or establish the "extension" of a concept.

The conflict of authorities emerges clearly in the legal context, where the conflict between "ordinary" and "technical" meaning is one of the most controversial matters (Slocum 2016; Summers and Marshall 1992). In particular, unless an explicit "technical" or statutory definition is found in the text, the latter should be interpreted according to the meaning that "its words would communicate to ordinary people" (Tobia 2018, p. 728). However, the problem only begins with the identification of the authority. While a technical definition can be interpreted and enriched based on different types of legal arguments,[4] the identification of what a term ordinarily means is more complex. The most common backings for these arguments from popular opinion are the expert authority of dictionaries, which reflect the common and shared use of the term (Slocum 2016, chap. 3), and the interpretations based on different instances of a word use within a corpus (Smith and Peterson 2022; Tobia 2018).

Thus, the critical question concerning the external sources on which a definition is defended hides the more complex issue of analyzing the

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[4] E.g. intention of the legislator, argument from absurdity, teleological argument, the systematic argument, etc (see Tarello 1980; MacCormick and Summers 1991).

grounds on which the authorities' opinions are based. A definition can be based either on the argument from popular opinion (Walton et al. 2008, pp. 122–24) or from institutional authority (Walton and Koszowy 2015). In the first case, it is necessary to establish why this is the meaning that is (or was) commonly shared, which leads to other types of grounds, such as the argument from expert opinion (expertise of dictionaries) (Walton et al. 2008, p. 13) or the interpretation of a word use within a specific selected corpus (generalized to the whole word use) (Walton et al. 2008, p. 171). In the latter case, the problem lies in establishing whether the "technical" or stipulative definition should preferred to the ordinary one (Tiersma 1999), and in case it should, what its exact meaning is.

3.4. Emotive Meaning – The Definition of "Feminism"

One of the most heated debates nowadays concerns the different views about feminism. This paper does not intend to take into account the complexity of the phenomenon and the discussion itself, or defend any particular view, but merely raise awareness concerning the risks related to the use of semantic arguments. In the feminism debate, a crucial source of misunderstandings is that this concept has different meanings (definitions), and the interlocutors often presume that one specific definition is shared by the hearer. To illustrate this case of "pseudo-agreement" (Naess 2005b [1953]), we examine the following line of reasoning made by the British actress and feminist activist, Emma Watson (Nuñez, 2015):

> Men think it's a women's word. But what it means is that you believe in equality, and if you stand for equality, then you're a feminist. Sorry to tell you. You're a feminist. You're a feminist. That's it.

This argument can be developed by drawing further inferences as Gal Gadot (an Israeli actress and feminist activist) did by stating that not being a feminist is being sexist (Valente, 2017):

> People always ask me, 'Are you a feminist?' And I find the question surprising, because I think, 'Yes, of course. Every

woman, every man, everyone should be a feminist. Because whoever is not a feminist is a sexist.'

These two statements, made by two influential women who are advancing feminist causes globally, involve a use of semantic arguments that can result in possible pseudo-agreements or pseudo-disagreements due to their argumentative structure. The first issue concerns the nature of the definition premise, as both claims are based on a specific meaning of feminism that is, however, left implicit. The classificatory argument is grounded on a definition by negation that can be reconstructed as follows:

Definition Premise:	Feminism is what is not chauvinism/sexism.
Individual Premise:	John does not declare himself as a feminist.
Conclusion:	Therefore, John is a sexist/chauvinist.

This definition is in turn defended based on the definitions of "chauvinism/sexism" and "feminism," which can be only reconstructed from the text, and in particular their claimed incompatible nature. The definition by negation thus hides the problem of determining what feminism (and chauvinism) is, which is the source of the disagreements. The definition by negation can be reconstructed through the presumedly shared definition of feminism as follows:

Definition$_1$ Premise:	Feminism is a belief that women and men should have the same rights.
Definition$_2$ Premise:	Chauvinism/sexism is a belief that women and men should not have the same rights.
Conclusion:	Whoever is not a feminist is a sexist.

From a purely logical perspective, the strategy of defining by negation leaves room for attacks (and thus possible disagreements) concerning the nature of the opposition – the incompatibility can be claimed to be between contraries and not contradictory terms. This attack is made possible by the unstated underlying definition of "sexism" believing that men deserve more rights than women (in certain aspects of human

activities) does not mean necessarily that the two sexes should not have equal rights (in most/the rest of human activities).

The second source of potential misunderstanding (and thus disagreement) concerns the complex relationship between a definition$_1$ (and the classificatory argument) and the further evaluative conclusions that can be drawn from a classification. In this example, a hearer can disagree with the aforementioned statements, not because of the implicit definition (rejecting feminism as defending equal rights between sexes, which is commonly shared)(Feminism, Brittanica, 2023b), but rather because of its consequences, namely a political, activist, or even anti-male position (Hannam 2014, pp. 160–61). These further conclusions do not concern the definition but are anyhow related thereto: they constitute its "emotive meaning" (Stevenson 1937, 1944), which can be more powerful and dangerous in discussions than the definition itself.

"Feminism" has acquired, due to its past usage, an "emotive" meaning that can be hardly ignored in dialogues – especially when different views or political ideals clash. From a purely argumentative point of view, the dissociation between the "descriptive" and the "emotive" meaning of "feminism" can be explained by considering the development of this concept. The definition of "feminism" (Thompson 1994) is commonly associated with the so-called "first wave," which covers the struggle for the political rights of women from the 1850s to the 1920s (Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution). The Second Wave is usually dated from the 1960s to 1980s and was focused on broader equality, both in education and the workplace, and also started to question "female" roles used by men to oppress women and promote women's right to choose. The Third Wave refers to the period from the 1990s until the present. It criticized the Second Wave for ignoring the differences between women on racial, ethnic, class, or religious aspects, and emphasized the gender struggle. Thus, the defense of equal rights for men and women (gender egalitarians or First Wave feminists) has become distinct from the modern understanding of feminism, which tends to refer to Third Wave feminism.

This evolution of the political movement and the meaning of "feminism" can explain the different development of the definition and the evaluative inferences associated with this term. The dictionary definition of feminism (which presumably reports the commonly shared

used) corresponds to the definition of First Wave feminism; however, the feminist movement that is taking place at present (and thus that this term is being used for classifying) coincides with Third Wave feminism (contemporary feminism, or simply, feminism). Disagreements can arise due to the shared evaluation of the distinct political movements, which are however not mirrored by a definitional dispute. For example, speakers may disagree with third-wave feminism (see Hannam 2014), but still use the "descriptive" meaning of feminism that refers to the First Wave definition – which they may endorse or evaluate in an extremely positive way. Thus, the concepts are different, as First Wave and Third Wave feminism are not the same; however, when this distinction is not brought to light, the disagreement becomes much harder to detect.

This conflict between two dimensions of meaning brings to light the problem of determining what concept has been defined, and more importantly what concept is commonly associated with the *definiendum*. As pointed out above, definitions need to mirror what the *definiendum* means; however, this determination in the case of feminism needs to be grounded on specific reasons. The negative "emotive meaning" of feminism shows that it is controversial and rejected by people supporting gender equality, thus providing evidence that there is a conflict between the meaning provided by the dictionaries and the common usage. For this reason, the authority of dictionaries, which (at least some of them) refer to the First Wave of feminism definition, conflicts with the common understanding of the term (associated with the Third Wave concept). However, the ordinary arguer's lack of evidence allows the use of authority (dictionaries) without even considering the possible alternative arguments (authorities of other linguistic resources; definitions based on explanations of the current popular uses).

This definitional issue shows two crucial aspects of semantic arguments. First, the presence of an emotive meaning in conflict with the alleged or proposed definition is a sign of potential disagreement relative to the concept defined. Second, the problem of authority in semantic arguments does not only concern the institutional vs. the epistemic dimension of authority, but the types of authorities invoked in support of a definitional claim. Is the authority invoked the only type of authority that can establish the meaning of the *definiendum*?

3.5. No Vehicles in the Park

The last aspect of the analysis of a semantic argument is the interpretation of a definition. A clear example is the famous legal example of the rule that forbids one to take a vehicle into the public park ("All vehicles are prohibited from Lincoln Park") (Hart 1958, p. 607). Is an electric bike forbidden? What about an electric wheelchair, a toy car, or an ambulance? They are all commonly considered as "vehicles;" however, prohibiting them would result in serious consequences – such as discrimination or threat to public health. What is a "vehicle" then?

This example brings to light two fundamental criteria for analyzing a definition: the meaning of the *definiendum*, and the type of definition that can be used for a specific purpose. A commonly accepted linguistic distinction is drawn between "types" and "tokens" (Lyons 1977; Schiffer 2016). In particular, in pragmatics it is commonly accepted that the a-contextual meaning resulting from composition needs to be pragmatically processed to be verifiable, namely, to result in a proposition
(Bezuidenhout 1997; Carston 2005, pp. 116–18; Horn 1995, p. 1145; Levinson 2000, pp. 171–74; Recanati 2004, chap. 3; Sperber and Wilson 1995, pp. 176–83). The enriched meanings resulting from this processing, depending on the theory, have been labeled as "explicatures," "enrichments," or "default (generalized) implicatures." What is crucial is that the "literal meaning" of the aforementioned prohibition ("All 'motorized; or possibly conceivable; or …' vehicles are prohibited from Lincoln Park") is, in fact, the result of pragmatic processing, based on a context imagined to be the "common" one (Kecskes 2013, p. 141). Thus, the problem of classification (and definition) concerns the specific concept that is mentioned in the legal statement, considering the specific context (Endicott 2000, p. 53) – the knowledge and regulations concerning a public park. This context leads to a pragmatic specification of the semantic representation of the statement by considering more carefully other co-textual and contextual information (Horn 1995, p. 1147):

> [what is relevant here is] whether the potential violation is excused by an implicit qualifier, viz. "All unauthorized vehicles are prohibited from Lincoln Park," with the understanding that the context (of law

or of common sense) will determine how the implicit material is to be interpreted.

Thus, the first step is to determine exactly what the *definiens* is, and whether its meaning is implicitly specified or restricted (in this case, the problem would be more related to what is "unauthorized" than what is a "vehicle").

The second issue is the type of definition used. As mentioned above, different types of definition and definitional statements can be used to provide an equivalence. The differences between these types of definition concern primarily the type of equivalence advanced, but also the use or function the definition has been provided for. The aforementioned legal case clearly illustrates this point. To understand the aforementioned legal statement and determine whether the object at stake (an electric wheelchair, a toy car, or an electric scooter) is or can be classified as a "vehicle" we need to have a look at the shared definition of a vehicle. The United Nations defined this concept as follows:

> "Power-driven vehicle" any self-propelled vehicle designed and constructed to be used on the road and having at least two wheels. (UN 2015, 13)

This definition, however, can be extremely problematic to use for classificatory purposes, as it involves two properties – being designed and constructed to be used on the road – that are extremely hard to determine. Has a toy car for toddlers been designed and constructed for running on the road? How is it possible to determine it? What about an electric wheelchair or an electric scooter? Determining the intention for which a vehicle has been constructed can be extremely hard, or simply circular (the intention corresponds to the compliance with the road regulations of the countries where the vehicle is used). Determining whether the vehicle can be adapted to road use leads to the analysis of the elements necessary for such a use – such as brakes, front and rear lighting, and a horn (bell), as required of other vehicles (bicycles or scooters) in road traffic. However, this is merely an interpretation (enrichment) of the definition, which results in a definitory statement aimed at defining (by parts) what "to be usable on the road" means.

Thus, the vague definition is first interpreted (enriched) and then specified through a different type of definition, which can be more easily used for classificatory purposes.

This case shows that two further criteria need to be considered in the assessment of a definition: What is the *definiens*, exactly? What definition is more suitable to the purposes of the definition? The definition of a vehicle (and of a power-driven vehicle) is not formally problematic, is coherent with usage, has no unacceptable consequences, there are no alternative definitions, and the UN has the authority to define it. However, what matters here is its use in classifying specific entities as "vehicles" according to this regulation. Is this definition the most useful for this purpose? Moreover, does the *definiens* provide an equivalence with the *definiendum*, namely with the specific token expressed by the statement?

4. Critical Questions for Assessing Semantic Arguments

The aforementioned cases show some critical aspects of the semantic arguments, which can be combined into a set of critical questions that can be used for evaluation purposes. In particular, in the case studies we have noticed that the potential defeasibility of semantic arguments does not concern only formal aspects of the definition (Case 1 – see Section 0) or its different propositional structures (Case 2 – see Section 0), but also the problem of its backing (the issue of authority raised in Case 3 – Sections 0 and 0), its relationship with the evaluative inferences that the *definiendum* triggers (Section 0), and the uses and purposes of the definition (Section 0).

4.1. Critical Questions – Argumentation Schemes

The literature on classificatory arguments provides already some general principles. In his account of the Argument from Criteria to Verbal Classification mentioned above, Hastings pointed out that the principle of classification needs to be shared by the audience for the argument to be acceptable. Moreover, he listed seven critical questions that can be asked to test the premises and the relationship between premises and conclusion (Hastings 1962, pp. 42–45):

CQ_I	What is the implicit definition being used?
CQ_{II}	Is the definition acceptable: are the criteria acceptable as a definition of the classification, label, adjectival category, etc.?
CQ_{III}	Are there exceptions or qualifications to the definition and criteria?
CQ_{IV}	Are other criteria necessary for an adequate definition?
CQ_V	Do the characteristics described meet the criteria?
CQ_{VI}	Are enough characteristics described to justify inclusion in this category?
CQ_{VII}	Could the event fit better into another category, or be classified differently on the basis of its characteristics?

These critical questions, however, do not address the basic concerns that the aforementioned cases raise, such as the problem of authority, the type of definition, and the formal criteria such as obscurity or prior terms.

The Argument from Verbal Classification developed later specifies two distinct criteria (Walton et al. 2008, p. 319):

- What evidence is there that *D* is an adequate definition, in light of other possible alternative definitions that might exclude a's having *G*?
- Is the verbal classification in the classification premise based merely on a stipulative or biased definition that is subject to doubt?

The first critical question is extremely broad, and encompasses the formal, extensional, and consequential criteria and the distinction between the types of definition. However, the reasons why a definition needs to be preferred to another are not specified. The second critical question is compatible with the concept of authority, but it fails to distinguish between the different types of authority and uses of authority that we have pointed out above as potentially problematic.

4.2. Specifying the Assessment Criteria for Semantic Arguments

The aforementioned cases suggest that the assessment of semantic arguments, namely the ones involving an existing or proposing a new definition, needs to be grounded on
3 different types of criteria: (I) the internal criteria for assessing the quality definition, which address the definitory or classificatory principle used (as shown in our case studies on the definition of "racism" and "peace," and "feminism"); (II) the external criteria which address circumstantial aspects of definition (as argued in our case studies on the definitions of "golf," "vehicle," and "feminism"); and (III) criteria for the individual premise.

Therefore, we propose three generic critical questions, which can be split into more specific sub-questions. In this way, the assessment is easily accessible, but still – as one investigates the next sub-questions to answer each of three generic questions – helps to assess each argument diligently.

I.   *Is the definition internally correct?* This critical question consists in assessing how the definition has been determined (see the definition of "feminism" in Section 0) and its type (see the definition of "peace" in Section 0), purpose (see the definition of "vehicle" in Section 0), and form (see the definition of "racism" in Section 0)

II.   I*s the definition externally correct?* This critical question consists in assessing the consequences and adequacy of a definition (see the definition of "feminism" in Section 0 and "vehicle" in 0), and the authority on which its shared denotation is based (see the definition of "golf" in Section 0)

III.   Is the individual premise acceptable?

The specific aspects of these three criteria are discussed in detail below.

I. Internal Criteria

When identifying semantic arguments, the first step is to look at the definition or classification in terms of its meaning, type, purpose, and form.

I.1. Determination of the definition

As pointed out above and illustrated in our case study on the definition of "feminism" (Section 0), the literature on classificatory schemes and semantic arguments distinguishes the use of an implicit (re)definition from its expression and defense. Thus, the first issue to consider is whether the definition is explicit or implicit, and in this latter case what it is and how to reconstruct it. In both cases, it is also necessary to understand whether the generalization used for classification is a definition or a sign, as the two schemes are distinct and need to be evaluated according to distinct criteria. Thus, the first point to make can be summarized in two critical questions:

CQ$_1$: Does the speaker use an explicit or implicit principle of classification? Is the classificatory argument based on a sign or a definitory statement?

I.2. Determination of the definiendum

The second point to make is to determine what the *definiendum* is. As shown in the "no vehicles in the park" case (Section 0), a statement needs to be contextually enriched before being assessed. Thus, the use of word needs to be specified according to the context and speaker's intention, providing the specific concept that is or needs to be defined. This criterion can be expressed as follows:

CQ$_2$: What is the *definiendum* exactly in this specific context?

This criterion also captures the problem that the case of the definition of "feminism" brought to light (Section 0), namely the existence of distinct concepts associated with the same *signifiant*. This question can be made more specific by a sub-question aimed at detecting the discrepancy between the *definiens* and the common understanding of the *definiendum*:

CQ$_{2.1}$: "Has the *definiendum* an emotive meaning? Does it trigger inferences incompatible with the *definiens*?"

I.3. Type and purpose of the definition

In case a definition or definitory statement has been used (CQ_1), we need to consider the differences between the different types of *definiens*, as shown in the different ways of defining "peace" in Section 0. Some definitions are stronger than others from a logical and semantic point of view. Moreover, some definitions are more suited to a specific purpose than others, as shown in the legal case study (Section 0). For this reason, we need the following critical questions to capture these differences:

CQ_3: What type of definitory statement has been used? Is it suited to the purpose of the definition?

I.4. Formal criteria

The cases of the definition of "peace" and "racism" (Sections 0 and 0), bring to light how the formal criteria can be useful for providing a *prima facie* case against or for a definition. The classical literature on definition provides several formal criteria, which can be summarized in the following broad critical questions (Walton and Macagno 2009):

CQ_4: Does the definitory statement express the meaning of the *definiendum* or merely provide a criterion for classifying entities? Is the definitory statement formally flawless?

In particular, the formal criterion of obscurity (CQ_4) is useful when a redefinition is used, as it may introduce ambiguity by failing to distinguish between two distinct concepts. For example, the definition of "First Wave feminism," presented as the definition of "feminism," refers to "gender equality" (gender egalitarianism). Therefore, further redefinitions need to consider the possible problem of introducing ambiguity and generating misunderstanding. The "racism" case shows a similar problem: the new definition not only included racial discrimination but also religious discrimination, confusing two distinct notions.

II. External criteria

The second step in the assessment of classificatory arguments consists of the external, circumstantial aspect of definition or classification,

namely its consequences, the values and interests involved, its adequacy, and the authority on which the definition or the common usage is grounded.

II.1. Consequences

One of the most intuitive criteria for the evaluation of a new definition is the analysis of the possible consequences that it implies, as shown in Section 0. Does it lead to absurdities? Is it self-contradicting? Or perhaps it causes some unacceptable consequences in the real world? It can be simply stated as follows:

CQ$_5$: Are the consequences of the definition acceptable?

This criterion can be divided into a few specific questions, since (as we have shown in the feminism case in Section 0) the consequences might be related to a negative sense of the used terms (sense) or may come from the denotation and conflict with the interests, values, or make further persuasion. Thus, following Edward Schiappa (2003, p. 177) and Pawlowski, we may ask the following sub-questions:

CQ$_{5.1}$: What interests and values are advanced by competing meanings?
CQ$_{5.2}$: Whose interests and values are being served by a particular meaning, and do we want to identify with those interests?
CQ$_{5.3}$: Does the definition support a specific viewpoint?

II.2. Coherence with usage and authority arguments

Coherence with usage is the most natural criterion implied to evaluate definitions and redefinitions. Two distinct issues are related to this point. First, semantic arguments can change the "accepted" meaning, but some advance a definition based on justified reasons, while others do not. Therefore, the first aspect to consider in the evaluation of a semantic argument is whether a reason is advanced in support of a definition. The second and more problematic aspect is the coherence with usage, which merely hides different types of arguments. We have seen in the case of the definition of "golf" (Section 0) how dictionaries, corpus linguistics studies, or arguments from popularity are used in support of a specific "usage."

CQ₆: Is any reason advanced in support of the definition or redefinition? What backing is provided in support of the "common usage" of the *definiendum*? Is the given reason stronger than its alternatives?

II.3. Authority

The last external criterion refers to the types of authority that may have the power to establish the meaning of the *definiendum*. Sometimes (such as in the golf example in Section 0) there is an institutional authority that can have the power to define the *definiendum*. However, such an authority can be challenged. The corresponding critical question can be expressed as follows:

CQ₇: Is there an authority that has the power to define *X*? Is its definitory authority stronger than common usage? Are there other authorities that may define *X*?

This criterion refers mainly to cases in which the redefinition is introduced transparently, is coherent with usage (at least partially), and does not lead to any negative consequences, but was proposed by a party that is not in any position to fix the meaning. We also referred to this criterion in the case of the definition of feminism to show that no feminist movement cannot regulate how feminism should be understood by society since this term is already present in the public debate (of course, they may define how they understand feminism or what is feminism in their mission statement).

III. The Individual Premise

These 7 criteria can be used for assessing the semantic modification which is always present in semantic arguments. However, as one may note, there are also other premises (at least two) in such arguments, i.e., there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration while assessing the argument. As it was shown, every semantic argument also includes the individual premise which attributes a certain property to the given object – which is present in the definition or classification. Therefore, we also need to ask the following question:

CQ$_8$: Does *a* have a property *F*, which qualifies it to definition *D* (arguments based on persuasive definition) or which classifies it as having property *G* (classification arguments?)

Usually, these are two convergent premises supporting the conclusion. Of course, semantic arguments may include more premises, but they always include these two. Sometimes the critical point is not a definition/classification, but the attribution to something a given property (in individual premise). For example, the well-known case "No Vehicles in the Park" leads us to a fixed and accepted definition of "vehicle" (e.g. by the United Nations), which specifies that one crucial element is being constructed to be used on the road. This definitional requirement opens a discussion on the features of the entity that is classified, for example an electric scooter.

Overall, the critical questions can be conceived as a general strategy for assessing semantic arguments. Figure 1 shows how they can be used as a sequence of steps for determining the acceptability of a definitional or classificatory conclusion.
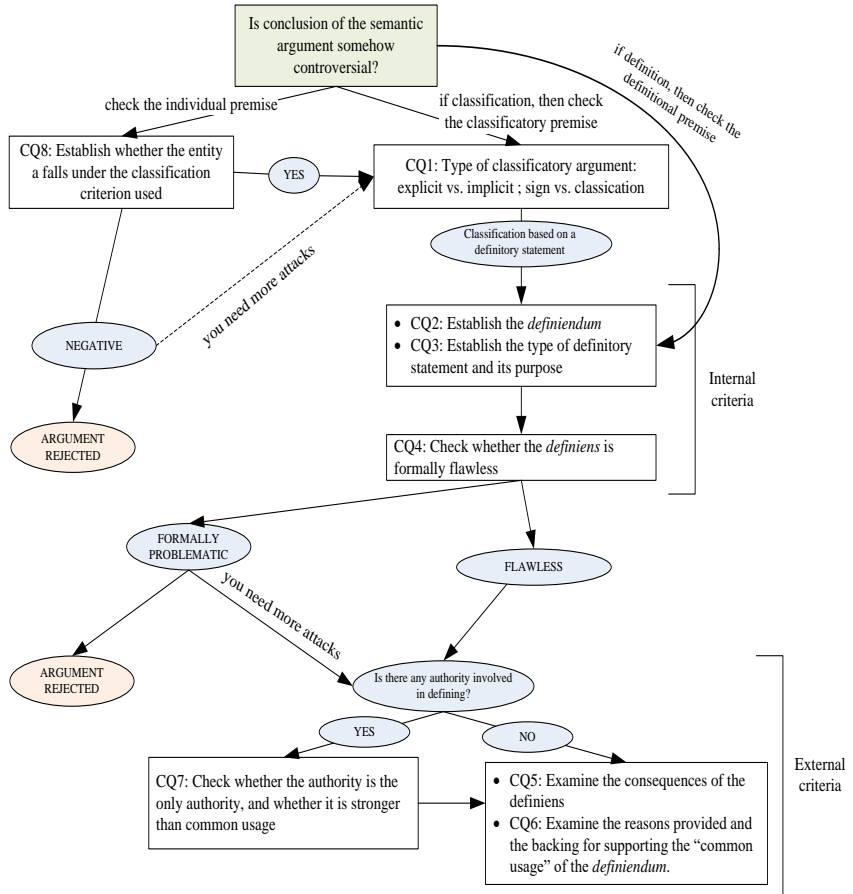
Is conclusion of the semantic argument somehow controversial?

check the individual premise

if classification, then check the classificatory premise

if definition, then check the definitional premise

CQ8: Establish whether the entity a falls under the classification criterion used

YES

NEGATIVE

you need more attacks

CQ1: Type of classificatory argument: explicit vs. implicit ; sign vs. classication

Classification based on a definitory statement

- CQ2: Establish the *definiendum*
- CQ3: Establish the type of definitory statement and its purpose

Internal criteria

ARGUMENT REJECTED

CQ4: Check whether the *definiens* is formally flawless

FORMALLY PROBLEMATIC

you need more attacks

FLAWLESS

ARGUMENT REJECTED

Is there any authority involved in defining?

YES

NO

CQ7: Check whether the authority is the only authority, and whether it is stronger than common usage

- CQ5: Examine the consequences of the definiens
- CQ6: Examine the reasons provided and the backing for supporting the "common usage" of the *definiendum*.

External criteria

Figure 1. Critical Questions for Assessing Semantic Arguments

As shown in this diagram, the critical questions can be used as a strategy for assessing a classification. The hearer can decide whether to attack the individual premise or the classification one first – even though in lack of an explicit definition it would be hard to determine whether the entity has the required features. Moreover, the lack of the required characteristics for fitting the definition can be easily defended by rejecting the hearer's definition, which would lead to the analysis of the classificatory premise. After determining whether this premise is explicit or taken for granted, and establishing the *definiens*, the *definiendum*, and the nature of the latter, the hearer can choose whether

to evaluate the structure of the definition (internal criteria) or the other external elements, such as its consequences and the authorities involved. In particular, the problem of evaluating the reasons provided in support of the "common usage" can emerge in case the flaw of a too broad or narrow definition (detected formally) is challenged.

5. Conclusion

When we discuss, we normally rely on the most basic presumption that our interlocutors share the linguistic system we use, and the most important grammatical and pragmatic mechanisms for interpreting an utterance meaning (Clark 1996, pp. 113–15). However, this presumption can fail for several reasons, but one of the most serious causes is the modification of a word's shared meaning or the use of a definition that is not or cannot even be presumed to be shared by the interlocutor. This failure shows how the most fundamental and frequent type of inference, namely the one resulting in the classification of a state of affairs, is purely presumptive. The notions of semantic argument and argument from classification were developed to capture when this normally automatic and uncontroversial mechanism of inference is problematic, and thus its conclusion is challenged or subject to doubts – in other words, it becomes an argument (Walton 1990).

To assess semantic arguments, it is first necessary to identify the nature of the classification (whether it is based on a sign or a classificatory premise), and then inquire into the types of classification that can be used. One of the basic topics addressed in the classical (traditional) logical/dialectical textbooks since Aristotle was the notion of definition and its assessment. These works provided clear criteria for assessing semantic arguments, which we combined with the more modern and contemporary ones for the analysis of five case studies. Through these analyses, we tried to defend the necessity of combining the traditional and the modern accounts for developing a set of critical questions, which we mapped as different strategic choices for attacking or evaluating doubtful classifications.

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