

Modus Tonens

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Abstract Restating an interlocutor's position in an incredulous tone of voice can sometimes serve legitimate dialectical ends. However, there are cases in which incredulous restatement is out of bounds. This article provides an analysis of one common instance of the inappropriate use of incredulous restatement, which the authors call "modus tonens." The authors argue that modus tonens is vicious because it pragmatically implicates the view that one's interlocutor is one's cognitive subordinate and provides a cue to like-minded onlookers that dialectical opponents are not to be treated as epistemic peers.

Keywords Argumentation · Rhetoric · Modus tonens · Tone of voice

David Lewis's Proof that P: Most people find the claim that not-p completely obvious, and when I assert that p, they give me an incredulous stare. But the fact that they find not-p obvious is no argument that it is true; and I don't know how to refute an incredulous stare. Therefore, p.

It is a common enough occurrence. In the course of a conversation, one person says something that the other finds so outlandish, so preposterous, so absurd, so *unthinkable* that she can only incredulously restate what was said. In these exchanges, a good deal of dialectical-rhetorical work is done with the tone of one's voice. On the face of it, the speech act is a form of commissive that registers non-acceptance of a standpoint.¹ The speaker expresses her doubts about the other side's

¹ See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, p. 68) for an account of the commissives that are allowable in the confrontation stages of argumentative dialogue. See also Walton (1989, pp. 9–10) on the conditions for speakers to open argumentative dialogue with expressions of willingness to abide by commitment rules.

view, even if not her full commitment to its falsity. In addition, there is a directive element to the speech act, as it is used to challenge the other to defend, explain, or clarify her standpoint. As such, incredulous restatement can be an informal way of opening a critical dialogue—one repeats the other’s claim in a way that both confronts the claim with non-acceptance and challenges the person making the claim to provide reasons for it. Incredulous restatement has further potential pragmatic uses; for example, it may be employed as a negative politeness strategy.² In such a case, one restates another’s claim in order to raise the possibility that she misspoke and to allow her the space to re-formulate, clarify, or re-think what she has said. In this way, the speaker enables his interlocutor to save face in not having an explicit rejection of her view registered on record. Accordingly, modulated reiteration is especially useful in educational contexts—one, in effect, politely tells one’s pupil that she has some more thinking to do. Call this the pedagogical context for incredulous restatement. From the pragmatic-dialectical perspective, there are a good many cases in which the use of an incredulous tone of voice in restating an interlocutor’s claim constitutes a positive contribution to argumentation.

The problem is that tone of voice is frequently misused in argumentative contexts. In this paper, we want to draw attention to, and provide an analysis of, one category of such misuse, what we shall playfully call *modus tonens*. We will begin by characterizing *modus tonens*. Then we will identify how it functions in argumentative contexts. Finally, we will examine some broader implications of its use.

1

To begin, consider the following exchange. Two political experts are discussing gun control laws in the United States. Let us call the exchange *Gun Control*:

Speaker 1: You see – if we allowed more people to carry handguns, then we would have fewer cases of gun violence. Arming people has a deterrent effect.

Speaker 2: So, let me get this straight – *more* people with guns will *reduce* gun violence? (To the audience): *More people with guns will reduce gun violence ???*

Speaker 2 restates Speaker 1’s claim, and in so doing, 2 establishes a number of dialectical points. First, Speaker 2 has expressed his rejection of 1’s commitment. Second, with the tone of restatement, 2 highlights the preposterousness of 1’s claim. This is more than simple rejection, but with incredulous restatement, 2 presents a surrogate (or promise of) a demonstration of how far off the mark 1’s commitment is. Surely 1 can see the conflict between *more* people with guns and *less* violence. Third, as a consequence of these first two elements, 2 has put an onus on 1 to clarify her claim, qualify it, or defend it. With rejection of this sort, 2

² See Brown and Levinson (1987) and Cutting (2002) for accounts of strategies for avoiding face-threatening gestures. Additionally, surprised restatement may be taken as following a maxim of tact or approbation where one minimizes overt criticism of others (Leech 1983, p. 107).

has placed a burden of defense on 1. So with these three components, 2 rejects 1's proposal, expresses a commitment to a good deal of evidence contrary to 1's claim, and thereby requests defense, clarification or qualification of the view. Further, notice that 2 is responding only to 1's conclusion and not to 1's argument. 2's objection is to the view defended, and has nothing to say to the case for it. Moreover, note that 2 appeals to the audience after his initial response to 1's claim. Tone of voice is used not only to mark out the dialectical terrain between two interlocutors, it may be used to mark it out for a third group of people. Here, 2's final sentence is entirely for the audience, and with it, there is a further element. 2 not only communicates his rejection of and the preposterousness of 1's commitment, but he also implicates that he expects the audience to share the assessments of 1's claims. Use of tone of voice can, then, be *argumentatively averse* (with the avoidance of addressing 1's case) and *manipulative of an audience* (as with the final sentence).

There is nothing intrinsically vicious with incredulity at claims one takes as inane. There are many silly commitments out there, and we should be free to express our surprise at just how silly some can be. The crucial thing is not to take the fact one takes a view as silly to change one's dialectical burdens in responding to it. This is where incredulity can be destructive of the goals of argumentative dialogue. As we have said, we term vicious use of incredulous restatement *modus tonens*. What makes *modus tonens* vicious is that it controverts the goals of argumentative exchange; we will sketch in the following the functional features defining it.

Modus tonens can be characterized by the interplay of two components, one *dialectical* and the other *pragmatic*. First, *modus tonens* involves the *dialectical* component of inappropriately shifting the argumentative burden. In this way, *modus tonens* resembles *argument from outrage* (Moore and Parker 2007, pp. 196–197). Like arguments from outrage, *modus tonens* has the effect of shifting the dialectical burden of proof solely on the basis of the purported preposterousness of the opponent's claim. When one rejects an interlocutor's claim, one incurs an obligation to state the basis of one's rejection; however, in cases of *modus tonens* and argument from outrage, one rejects an interlocutor's claim in a way that refuses to acknowledge the corresponding obligation to state the basis for the rejection. *Modus tonens*, like an argument from outrage, simply demands that the interlocutor reformulate or defend her claim.

Despite this structural similarity, *modus tonens* is crucially different from arguments from outrage. An argument from outrage expresses *moral* opposition to an interlocutor's view and hence *moral outrage* with the interlocutor; *modus tonens*, by contrast, attributes a *cognitive deficiency* to one's interlocutor which purports to explain the defectiveness of what she has said. Put otherwise, arguments from outrage begin from a negative moral assessment of the interlocutor's view and then draw an inference about the (lack of) moral character of the interlocutor; *modus tonens* begins from an expression of the purported stupidity or uninformedness of an interlocutor's view and then offers the interlocutor's alleged cognitive deficiency as an explanation of the fact that she holds her view. In *Gun Control*, above, clearly speaker 2, in responding to 1, is implicating that 1 has not thought about her proposal very carefully. If 1 cannot see how counter-intuitive it is to have *more*

people with guns leading to *less* violence, then 1 must be intellectually deficient in some important way. This feature brings us to the *pragmatic* component of *modus tonens*.

Modus tonens involves the *pragmatic implication* that the dialectical situation between the two speakers is cognitively asymmetric. To see this, let us return to the educational example mentioned above. As we noted, in pedagogical contexts, incredulous restatement pragmatically registers the possibility that the student perhaps has misspoken, or not thought things through, or may have made some error that she will see and correct, provided that she hears the view said back to her. In these cases, incredulous restatement is an indirect way of communicating the thought that those who know what they are talking about would not say what the interlocutor has said; hence it is a face-saving way of inviting a student to take a moment to reflect.³ Among epistemic peers, however, incredulous restatement is out of bounds. Again, in *Gun Control*, there are no components of the context that makes it appropriate for the defaults to be that Speaker 1 should be 2's pupil. To be sure, in contexts of cognitive parity, one speaker may have a good deal to teach the other, but nevertheless, neither belongs in the other's tutelage, and neither is *entitled* to claim the role of the other's teacher.

Another way of capturing the pragmatic essence of *modus tonens* involves appeal to the felicity conditions for argumentative directives. Only in mutually-acknowledged cognitively asymmetric conditions—such as, to again use our example, teaching—can one direct another to think more about something simply on the basis of one's non-acceptance; that is, the mutually-acknowledged cognitive asymmetry provides the condition for the appropriateness of the modulated restatement. In cases where either the asymmetry is unclear or the situation is in fact cognitively symmetric, the speech act of incredulous reiteration proclaims without argument that cognitively asymmetric conditions obtain. In other words, *modus tonens* is the act of *asserting* that one's interlocutor is cognitively subordinate; it is therefore an assessment of the dialectical situation disguised as a directive within it.

To explain: generally, when one utters a directive, one implicates that the felicity conditions for that directive obtain. The principal felicity condition of the directive to reconsider and reformulate is that the interlocutors are *not* epistemic peers. Yet in cases of *modus tonens* the modulated tone of voice is employed with a view towards *introducing* the claim that one's interlocutor is not an epistemic peer. *Modus tonens* offers by non-argumentative means a new *description* of the dialectical situation in its implication that its felicity conditions are satisfied—namely, that the speaker is rightfully the interlocutor's epistemic superior. By implicitly describing the situation as one that is cognitively asymmetrical, not only does one shift the dialectical burden such that the interlocutor now must reformulate her view, but, additionally (as with arguments from outrage), one advances a *surrogate* for the proof of the view's falsity.⁴ In other words, when employing *modus tonens*, one puts

³ See Tracy and Carjuzáa (1993, pp. 181–182) on identity enactment in reasoned dialogue—cognitive authorities enact that authority even with their questions. With expressions of surprise, in cases where the authority is clear, the implication is that of directive to reformulate or rethink.

⁴ Such an argument would take the form of argument from authority: those who have thought about the issue of whether p or not p hold that not-p; *therefore*, it is reasonable to hold that not-p.

one's interlocutor on the defensive by implying that she is cognitively subordinate rather than by offering a criticism of her view. This places the interlocutor at a significantly disadvantaged position, since she must now struggle under the presumption that she needs further correction and tutelage.⁵

This pragmatic component of *modus tonens* enables us to identify the difference between acceptable and vicious uses of incredulous restatement: When acceptable, the restatement expresses non-acceptance in a way that requests further elaboration, thereby opening a dialogue. When vicious, the restatement attempts to shift the dialectical burden while at the same time implying that the dialectical context is not one of epistemic parity. Accordingly, *modus tonens* rejects epistemic parity and dissolves argumentation into *browbeating*.⁶ We should be careful here. Expression of surprise need not imply that one considers one's interlocutor intellectually inferior. And asking questions and using directives does not make an interlocutor a subordinate. Being surprised by one's interlocutors and asking for clarifications and arguments from them are part of the give and take of argumentative life. Our point here is that these elements of dialectical exchange can be abused, and we are highlighting how these abuses may be captured *functionally*. So far, the functional elements have been dialectical and pragmatic. There are two further functional abuses of tone of voice in restating an interlocutor's view.

2

So much for our characterization of *modus tonens*; now we turn to examine how it functions in argumentation. *Modus tonens* may be introduced at two different argumentative stages. On the one hand, a *modus tonens* may be issued at the opening stages of an argument, when premises or presuppositions are being announced; on the other hand, one may introduce a *modus tonens* in the concluding-evaluative stages of an argument. In the former case, *modus tonens* is vicious because it, without justification, claims default status for the rejection of the interlocutor's view on the basis of the speaker's rejection of the view and the pragmatic asymmetry between the speaker and interlocutor. In the latter case, incredulous restatement occurring in the evaluation of an argument still registers non-acceptance, but its vice is that it does not provide any reason for rejecting the conclusion beyond its supposed *prima facie* implausibility. We will treat these two features of the misuse of *modus tonens* separately.

Revisiting the similarity between *modus tonens* and arguments from outrage, both are predicated on shifting and increasing the burden of proof by invoking the absurdity of the opponent's view. Arguments from outrage are considered on their face arguments from emotion, which generally suffer from problems of relevance. However, it is also clear that outrage is not always irrelevant: if the opposition's view is *outrageous*, it should not only be allowable but may even be required that one express outrage. This, precisely, points to the problem with arguments from

⁵ Take such situations as tantamount to well-poisoning.

⁶ We borrow the term *browbeating* from Gaus (1996, p. 124).

outrage. Expressions of outrage themselves are not sufficient to demonstrate that the claim criticized is itself outrageous. With it, one merely substitutes sincerity for argument. Further, with outrage, one is taking on a significant commitment—namely, that what one is expressing outrage about is not only something worthy of criticism, but something so egregiously wrong that it should cause right-minded people to feel indignant. Surely it is *this view* that requires argument, since outrage is not only an expression of non-acceptance but the vehement denial that the interlocutor's claim is even a contender for truth. In taking on this attitude, one should shoulder a measure of the burden of proof in the dialogue. However, expressions of outrage usually stand less as openings for further arguments, but more as surrogates for them. The same is true for *modus tonens*, since what is doing the dialectical work is entirely behind the scenes—namely, the implications of epistemic asymmetry between the two speakers.

If the interlocutor's claim is the conclusion of an argument, *modus tonens* is a failure of argumentative cooperation. The speech act is a commissive of non-acceptance, so *modus tonens* functions in these cases as a rejection of an argument. However, negative responses to argument carry the burden of helpful reasons—reasons that articulate why either the premises or their support are not sufficient to elicit assent to the conclusion.⁷ Given that arguments are designed not only to gain the truth about some matter but to resolve disagreements, both parties should contribute to the discussion in ways that promote those ends. Surprised or incredulous restatement, as an *invitation* to deliberation and argument (a qualified invitation, as noted earlier), is pursuant of those ends. However, as a *response* to argument, it stands in the way of those ends. This is because with *modus tonens* an argument is rejected with no account of how it has gone wrong. As such, those on the receiving end of a *modus tonens* do not have enough information about what the criticism is of their view for them to reformulate it in a way that resolves the disagreement, or even respond to the criticism; just as incredulous stares cannot be refuted, one cannot refute a *modus tonens*. That is, with *modus tonens*, a disputant disagrees, and vigorously so, but offers no actual criticism of the other's position beyond the emphatic expression of rejection and implication that those who hold the position need to be educated. How the other party in the dispute should proceed, then, is a mystery, since if the problem is with the view, it is unclear how to either clarify the view, or reformulate the argument, or weaken the claim to make it acceptable.

Note that in *Gun Control*, Speaker 1 provided an argument from deterrence for more gun ownership, and 2's response does not address the case for deterrence, only the preposterousness of the claim supported. As such, the disagreement not only persists, but with no indication as to how it may be resolved. Additionally, given that the speech act implicates epistemic asymmetry with its directive element for the other disputant to think things through or give an argument, it is the other side's turn to say something. But in light of the lack of specific details of what is wrong with the view or the case against it that must be addressed, there is little to go on. With *Gun Control*, Speaker 2 has not made any case as to why Speaker 1's deterrence

⁷ See Walton (1989, p. 63) for an account of the listener responsibility of helpfulness.

argument fails, and as such, it seems that the only proper response to an *incredulous restatement* of a view is a *confident* or *matter-of-fact restatement*. Of course, this not only fails to further the interlocutor's dialectical ends of resolving the disagreement, but it entrenches the disagreement and further polarizes the discussants.

3

Thus far, we have focused on the use of *modus tonens* from the point of view of the dialectical relationship between two interlocutors. However, *modus tonens* is often employed as an *oratorical* tool for engaging an interlocutor in front of an audience. Note that in *Gun Control*, Speaker 2 restates 1's claims *for the audience*.

When employed as an oratorical tool, *modus tonens* can take the form of a subtle threat. When used in this setting, *modus tonens* does not only proclaim that the interlocutor belongs in one's tutelage, but threatens ostracism or lowered group status for members of the audience who side with the interlocutor. By promising both a refutation and embarrassment and humiliation if the interlocutor does not revise her view, *modus tonens* provides a cue to the audience of where their loyalty should lie. In this way, *modus tonens* is not only an attempt to alter the dialectical situation by *re-describing* it to one's advantage, it is also an attempt to alter the *social dynamic* of the situation by suggesting to one's audience (who may be not expert in the matter under discussion) that they adopt the description of the dialectical situation, namely, that the interlocutor is ignorant and hence should not be believed.

In extreme instances, the appeal to the audience via *modus tonens* serves a *purely* oratorical purpose, in which the speaker is actually making a *gesture wholly for the sake of the onlooking audience*.⁸ That is, the speech act may be introduced not for the sake of demeaning the interlocutor or even for putting her on the defensive, but instead as a reminder to an audience of what their core commitments are (or ought to be). Because the speech act of *modus tonens* attempts to re-describe a cognitively symmetric context as an asymmetric one, the speech act communicates to the audience that only the stupid, benighted, or positively vicious would articulate or hold fast to the interlocutor's view. And as such, the speech act serves as a gesture of solidarity within the group (the speaker and audience) against those who reject their core commitments (namely, the interlocutor).

In both the modest and extreme instances, the oratorical use of *modus tonens* serves the decidedly *anti*-dialectical purpose of attempting to turn the audience's attention *away* from reasons and towards non-argumentative features of discourse. In the short-run, *modus tonens* is simply one of the many tools of deception

⁸ See Aikin and Anderson (2006, pp. 21–22) for aspects of arguers tacitly addressing an onlooking/non-participating audience. The force of such gestures is to communicate an assessment of the interlocutor that should be shared between the speaker and the audience. For example, expressions of exasperation with an interlocutor are not only for the interlocutor but also for the sake of those watching the exchange. Additionally, Richardson's 'performative bullshit' (2006, p. 94) has the same function—a speaker directs her audience to take her arguments as good because she presents them as good, and alternately her opponent's arguments as bad because she presents them as bad.

available to the sophist, who must sustain the perception that he is concerned above all else with reasons and argument while engaging in tactics designed to obstruct actual argumentation. But the long-run consequence of the oratorical feature of *modus tonens* is more troubling, since it encourages the group to which it appeals to become cognitively insular. If critics of the group's axiomatic commitments are deemed too uninformed or thoughtless to merit substantive response, then the group will never take any form of substantive criticism seriously. Any disagreement can be dismissed *ex ante* as being from people who do not deserve arguments, but rather education, or at least a scolding.

The deleterious effect of the kind of cognitive insularity on doxastically homogenous groups that is encouraged by *modus tonens* has been treated at length in recent work by Sunstein (2003, 2006). Chief among these effects is *group polarization*, which is the phenomenon in which like-minded members of a deliberating group “typically end up in a more extreme position in line with their tendencies before deliberation began” (Sunstein 2006, p. 92). This tendency of doxastic groups to polarize—that is, to move together towards a more extreme version of their pre-deliberation views—is exacerbated in contexts in which the group is exposed to a limited “argument pool” (Sunstein 2003, p. 84), and hence operates within an “information cocoon” (Sunstein 2006, p. 9) that serves as a chamber in which members of the group hear only “echoes of their own voices” (Sunstein 2003, p. 82). The remedy for group polarization is *dissent* that is taken as presumptively possibly well-founded and correct. That is, when exposed regularly to dissenting views and internally encouraged to take such challenges seriously, groups tend to not polarize.

To be clear, the claim that group polarization is to be avoided does not rely on some presumption that more extreme views are more likely to be false than moderate ones; rather, the problem is that when groups polarize, they do so without regard to the strength of the arguments and reasons in favor of their preferred view (Sunstein 2003, p. 82). More importantly, as doxastic groups polarize, they grow increasingly unwilling to and incapable of seeing dissenting views as anything but irrational, ill-informed, and silly. Put otherwise, members of polarized groups are unable to engage in argumentation. Insofar as *modus tonens* encourages individuals to identify with a cognitive “in group” which sees its opponents as necessarily hapless and benighted, it is not merely a corrupt move within an argument, it is an attempt to corrupt the process of argumentation itself.

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