



# The discourse functionality of argument schemes in county assembly debates in Kenya using the pragma-dialectical approach

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## Abstract

The communicative interaction between discussants in parliamentary debates is aimed at exchanging different viewpoints through discussion to arrive at a policy decision. Discussants in Nairobi County assembly debates present their standpoints in a persuasive language that helps build conversations, minimise potential conflict, and maximise personal profit. This study aimed to examine the discursive functionality of argument schemes in county assembly debates using the pragma-dialectical theory. A descriptive case study design was used with qualitative approaches to allow a deeper enquiry into the phenomenon of debates using data from online archival Hansard records of the Nairobi County assembly. The study systematically sampled 48 debate transcripts of the print version of the Hansard from a total target population of 132 debates for a period of ten months. The study then purposively sampled 20 debates which consisted of motions of the Nairobi County assembly over the ten months, for analysis from February to November 2023. Public documents from the Nairobi County assembly registry, consisting of schedules of the sectoral committees and the Standing Orders of the assembly, were collected from the website. Qualitative data were analysed with speech acts forming the unit of analysis. The data were subjected to analysis using the criteria recommended in the pragma-dialectical theory. The study established that discussants employed pragmatic and symptomatic argument schemes purposefully to resolve differences of opinion on the merits in debates. The study was useful in suggesting procedural interventions aimed at improving parliamentary argumentative practices that could benefit discourse practitioners.

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## Introduction

The principal role of legislatures globally is to enact legislation that advances effective governance of institutions. The roles of governance are effected through parliamentary deliberations that finally result in the development of plans, policies and programmes that are critical to the growth of institutions. In Kenya, the creation of county governments as a result of devolution led to the



establishment of county assemblies in all 47 counties in the Republic of Kenya. These county assemblies have the responsibility of legislating on plans, policies and proposals that are brought to the assembly by their respective county governments and which are finally enacted as laws that county governments implement. Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlines the role of parliaments in creating effective, transparent, and accountable institutions, as well as their responsibility as a responsive, inclusive, and participatory organ that fosters democracy. The critical role played by parliaments in legislation makes discussants in county assemblies an integral part of the process of debating legislation that has an impact on the lives and livelihoods of the electorate. Walton & Godden (2005) define argument schemes as stereotypical patterns of defeasible reasoning that typically occur in common everyday arguments. During debates, discussants enhance the acceptability of their standpoints by employing either causal, symptomatic, or comparative argument schemes (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; Sibatani, 2025). The use of either of the argument schemes during debates is based on the function that such an argument scheme serves in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. Studying argument schemes and analysing how discussants engage in talk exchanges in Nairobi County assembly debates builds on the application of the pragma-dialectical theory as a tool for analysis of debates, and how such an analysis can help a linguist delineate processes that are important in the evaluation of texts in the discourse analytic field of research.

Konstantinova et al. (2019) observe that parliamentary discourse refers to deliberation that exists within a framework of formal institutions established by societies for legislative purposes, where formal rules of engagement are applied and principles, norms, and attitudes that make up that social system are observed. Makarov (2003) notes that parliamentary discourse has a rigid structure, with maximum speech restrictions, and is characterised by the primacy of a global organisation that regulates the communication of roles and goals within the institution. These two studies are significant in laying the basis of the current study, which examines how debates in county assemblies can be analysed using the pragma-dialectical rules for a critical discussion. Discussants employ the pragma-dialectical rules during the discussion stages of a debate to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits. By analysing debating patterns, the study generates rules or formulae that invariably inform the decisions ultimately made by the county assembly. Truan (2021) and Karasik (2016) argue that parliamentary discourse, as a form of institutional discourse, is further characterised by the presence of mandatory components of speech situations that include polyphonic institutional voices, strategies of participants in the discourse, their goals and values, and institutional discursive formulae. These findings by Truan (2021) and Karasik (2016) align with the current study in identifying the significance of institutional voices in county assembly debates. The institutional voices helped in identifying the argument schemes employed by discussants by analysing the debate texts in the Hansard records of the Nairobi County Assembly.

## Methods

The study adopted a descriptive case study design. A qualitative approach to data collection was employed to gather detailed information on debate phenomena in the Nairobi County Assembly. Data consisting of 48 Hansard records of debate transcripts were systematically sampled from a target population of 132 Hansard records of debate transcripts for ten months from February to November 2025. Simple random sampling procedures were employed to select the study area for the pilot study. Qualitative archival data from Hansard records of debate transcripts were obtained from the online portal of the Nairobi County Assembly, with complex and straightforward speech acts serving as the unit of analysis. The data was analysed using the tools provided in the pragma-dialectical theory. The



data were analysed using the pragma-dialectical criteria of a critical discussion, with only debate transcripts that had moves and counter-moves relevant to resolving a difference of opinion selected for analysis. The selection of the data involved an analytical overview where relevant moves were reconstructed through the processes of deletion, addition, substitution and permutations. The analytical overview helped generate argument schemes that were the outcomes of analysing the data from debate transcripts.

**Results and Discussion**

*Characteristics of the data sources obtained from Hansard transcripts*

Data for analysis was obtained from the Hansard report of Nairobi County assembly debates in the morning and afternoon sessions. The Hansard records were categorised according to the subject matter and the relevant committees of the assembly under which the issues were debated. A summary of the sources from which the data for this study were extracted is presented as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Table showing the characteristics of the data sources*

No	Committee	Session	Debate	Date
1	Children, Early Childhood Education and Vocational Training	Afternoon	Policy and programmes on child headed households within the county	4 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
2	Justice and Legal Affairs	Afternoon	Amendment of Standing Orders and formation of ad hoc committees	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2023
			Adjournment to discuss delay in disbursement of bursaries	7 <sup>th</sup> November 2023
			Motion of adjournment on assembly calendar	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
3	Energy and Information, Communications and Technology	Afternoon	Committee on Investigation of county Revenue Systems	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2023
4	Culture and Community Services	Afternoon	Inefficiencies and delays in the delivery of county government services	28 <sup>th</sup> September 2023
			Operationalisation of the sports fund	18 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
5	Environment and Natural Resources		Perennial water challenges by Nairobi Water	1 <sup>st</sup> November 2023
6	Lands, Planning and Housing	Afternoon	Report on illegal demolitions of residential homes	4 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
7	Transport and Public Works	Morning	Flagging of county bus services	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
			Projects undertaken by the defunct Nairobi Metropolitan Services	2 <sup>nd</sup> November 2023
8	Health Services	Morning	Mandatory health assessment for county employees	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
9	Finance	Morning	Nairobi City county Finance Bill 2023	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2023

*Source: Field notes, 2023*

The findings established that debates in the Nairobi County assembly were structured, and all the assembly business was transacted from matters generated from the nine sectoral committees of the assembly, as shown in Table 1. It emerged that during debates, the decision-making powers from the



debates were based on the matter at hand and the goal of the discussants as stated in Rule 3 of the rules for discussion in the pragma-dialectical theory (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). Rule 3 of the rules of procedure requires the protagonist and antagonist to agree on the roles each one of them takes before the start of the argumentation stage. It further commits the discussants to shared commitments. The focus on shared commitments enables discussants to have control over the matter being discussed in the assembly, thus limiting the use of fallacies by antagonists in debates, which might hinder progress on issues during discussions.

The findings revealed that discussants employed various argument schemes in presenting their standpoints. Argument schemes were used in all stages of the debate discussions. The argument schemes served as justificatory standpoints for the protagonist or regulatory standpoints for the antagonist. Furthermore, the study found that discussants employed three central argument schemes in Nairobi County Assembly debates. These are causal argument schemes, symptomatic argument schemes, and argument by analogy. Table 2 shows the positive pragmatic argument scheme at the opening stage of a debate in the Nairobi County assembly.

***Positive pragmatic argument scheme at the confrontation stage***

A positive standpoint, which supports the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system, was employed by the protagonist at the confrontation stage of the discussion. At the confrontation stage, the protagonist and antagonist take sides, either supporting or refuting the standpoint. However, both the discussants have shared commitments to the standpoint being debated (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). The argument generated from the analysis of excerpt one is described in the positive pragmatic argument scheme below:

*Example 1: Positive pragmatic argument scheme*

1. We should set up an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system
  - 1.1a The ad hoc committee will investigate how the revenue system works
    - 1.1.1a Without revenue, the county will be unable to provide services
      - 1.1'.1 Setting up the revenue administration committee is a desirable thing to do because it will result in desirable consequences.

In the positive pragmatic argument scheme in example 1, the protagonist presents a standpoint for the establishment of the ad hoc committee, which is linked to the premises 1.1a and 1.1.1a. The two premises justify the acceptability of the standpoint and lead to the desirable consequences in the unexpressed premise in 1.1'.1.

**Excerpt 1**

PI: Hon. Speaker, Motion No. 8 by the designation of God, Hon. PI MCA, the great Leader of the Majority of Nairobi City County Assembly, is to move the motion. The subject is; Establishment of an Ad Hoc committee to Investigate the county Local Revenue Collection Systems and Administration.

Hon. Speaker, the essence of this motion is to bring sense to the revenue system of our county. No matter how much the elected leaders are pondering on the issue of the Ward Development Fund to be disseminated at the ward level, without revenue, this is not possible.

In excerpt 1, the protagonist initiates the motion to establish an ad hoc committee to investigate the county's revenue collection system at the confrontation stage of the discussion. During the confrontation stage, parties take the side they wish to belong to in the debate by establishing their



standpoint. In this case, the mover of the motion, who is the protagonist in the debate, employs a positive pragmatic argument scheme to support the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system.

### *Message framing in argument schemes*

Message framing is a device employed by discussants in the motion on the formation of an ad hoc committee to persuade discussants to support the motion. The mover of the motion in excerpt 1 gives reasons to justify the acceptability of one's standpoint by giving a negatively framed reason of what would happen if the ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system is not formed. The protagonist uses a negative-framed message as a reason to remove doubt or criticism of one's standpoint by showing the consequences of not supporting the motion on the formation of the ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system. In causal argumentation, discussants seek to show the desirability of performing specific actions and, at the same time, justify the consequences of not performing such actions. Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004) refer to this as a cause-and-effect relationship, which expresses the undesirable effects that would result from not performing specific desirable actions. This finding is supported by Van Poppel (2013), who asserts that pragmatic argument schemes involve a course of action that is recommended or discouraged from a particular standpoint. The recommendation is defended in the argumentation by pointing to the desirable or undesirable consequences of the course of action.

The use of negatively framed messages by protagonists that show why one's standpoint should be supported is purposeful for the protagonist. Discussants who express criticism of the positive standpoint are reminded of the harmful and undesirable effects that would befall them if they fail to support the perspective of the motion.

### *Example 2: Negatively-framed conditional variant of pragmatic argument scheme*

1. We should set up an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system of the county.
  - 1.1a If we do not set up the committee, the electoral wards will not have revenue.
  - 1.1' It is desirable to set up the revenue collection system because not setting it up will have undesirable consequences.

In the negatively framed conditional variant of the pragmatic argument scheme in example 2, the negative consequences for not supporting the establishment of the ad hoc committee as stated in the standpoint in one. They are linked by the premise in 1.1a and the unexpressed premise 1.1', showing the consequences that would befall discussants who do not support the standpoint. The premises lead to the justifiability of the standpoint and finally the resolution of the difference of opinion on the merits, which is the establishment of the ad hoc committee as expected.

The study revealed that message framing is an essential strategy employed by the protagonist in argument schemes to persuade discussants who doubt the standpoint. It showed the consequences of not taking positive action. It is further revealed that although Van Poppel (2013) mentions four variants of pragmatic argument schemes, the above-listed conditional variant is not among the four. The current study proposes a fifth variant of the practical argument scheme called the conditional variant, which prescribes negative consequences of not performing an action. The conditional variant is specified in Table 2.



*Table 2 showing the Conditional variant of the pragmatic argument scheme*

Description	Text
Standpoint	Action X should be performed
Because	Action X leads to desirable consequences
And	If Action X which leads to desirable consequences is not performed it will lead to undesirable consequences

Source: Field notes, 2023

The conditional variant of the pragmatic argument scheme in Table 2 shows the desirability of acting and the undesirable consequences of not performing the desired action at the same time. It performs the function of obligating discussants to perform specific actions because not performing the stated actions from this standpoint has known consequences. The protagonist skillfully employs the use of the conditional variant of the pragmatic argument scheme as a reason to persuade the antagonists. The acceptability of the premise is transferred to the standpoint based on argumentation in the unexpressed premise or connection premise labelled 1.1. The unexpressed premise states the negative consequences of not taking the desirable action.

***Negative pragmatic argument scheme in the opening stage of the discussion***

The opening stage of the critical discussion is a point at which the discussants assume their discussion roles, either as protagonists or antagonists of the standpoint being debated (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002). The antagonist at this discussion stage expresses doubt about the protagonist’s perspective and counters the protagonist’s move by employing a negative standpoint opposing the membership of the ad hoc committee.

***Example 3: Negative pragmatic argument scheme***

- 1. We should not establish an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system.
- 1.1 The membership of the ad hoc committee is not inclusive.
- 1.1’ Establishing an ad hoc committee is not a desirable thing to do because the membership of the committee is not inclusive.

In Example 3, the negative pragmatic argument scheme is employed by the antagonist to counter the protagonist's standpoint in favour of establishing an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system. The antagonist highlights the undesirability of establishing the ad hoc committee by providing a reason to justify the negative standpoint. The premise 1.1 does not, however, have a causal link with the standpoint one; thus, it fails the critical test of argumentation and is considered a fallacy. In argumentation rules, the protagonist has an opportunity to continue presenting argumentation in support of their standpoint until there is no doubt in the antagonist. When the antagonist expresses no more doubt, then a resolution of the difference of opinion on the merits has been made, and the debate is concluded.

Excerpt 2 shows the debate on the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system of the county.

**Excerpt 2**

WC: I stand guided, Mr. Speaker. However, allow me to oppose this motion, not on the subject matter but in the composition of the Membership of the Ad Hoc committee. I have no issue with the sponsor of the motion or the subject of the motion. I have a problem with the composition of that committee.



The antagonist in the debate in excerpt 2 introduces a mixed difference of opinion in the discussion of the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system by use of multiple standpoints. The first standpoint is the establishment of an ad hoc committee. The standpoint is based on a pragmatic argument scheme, which is linked to the standpoint by an unexpressed premise showing the desirability of the action. However, the antagonist questions the membership of the ad hoc committee, a factor which is not linked to the establishment of the committee and is thus considered a fallacy.

***Symptomatic argument scheme at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion***

In the argumentation stage, the protagonist supporting the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system presents a symptomatic argument scheme supporting the standpoint.

*Example 4: Symptomatic argument scheme in the concluding stage of debate*

1. The speaker is an expert on the conduct of business in the assembly.
- 1.1 The speaker is a trusted person.
- 1.1' The speaker can direct the assembly to debate on the substantive motion on the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate revenue collection.

Example 4 is a symptomatic argument scheme, a subtype of argument by expert opinion. The speaker controls discussions in the assembly in terms of giving directions on the conduct of debates as directed in the Standing Orders. The speaker is also responsible for allocating turns during debates. This ensures that the speaker moderates the conduct of debates by allocating turns and cutting off discussion moves that are not relevant in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. Excerpt three below shows the discussion moves that the speaker employs to support the standpoint for establishing an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system.

Excerpt 3

**Speaker:** Order, Hon. Members! Let us not make a mockery out of the debate. Hon. Members, by leave of the Chair, you were allowed to ventilate on the motion, but subsequently, you need to understand we have a substantive motion appearing in the Order Paper, which takes precedence. For that reason, Hon. Members, I call the mover of Motion No. 8 to reply.

In excerpt 3, the speaker of the assembly allows the mover of the motion to proceed on the standpoint of establishing the ad hoc committee by employing symptomatic argumentation. The antagonist does not challenge the argument, and the debate is concluded as per the advice of the speaker, thus resolving the difference of opinion on the merits.

Table 3 presents symptomatic argument schemes in the discussion stages of debate on the composition of the ad hoc committee for establishing the revenue collection system.



*Table 3: showing symptomatic argument schemes in the debate on the composition of the ad hoc committee on the establishment of the revenue collection system*

Serial no	Argument scheme type	Argument scheme type	Discussion stage
1	Symptomatic argument	Argument by authority	Confrontation
2	-	-	Opening
3	Symptomatic	Argument by example	Argumentation in support of standpoint
*4	Symptomatic	Argument by example	Argumentation refuting the standpoint
5	Symptomatic argument	Argument by authority	Concluding

\* fallacy

The current study established that symptomatic argument schemes, especially the subtypes of argument by authority and argument by example, were employed by discussants to discuss the conduct of debates guided by the Standing Orders of the assembly. Table 3 above shows that protagonists used symptomatic argument schemes to give directions of discussion and as a symbol of the authority of the assembly.

The study further establishes that discussants would usually apply the model in critical discussions during debates in the Nairobi County Assembly to engage in a crucial exchange of ideas. The criteria for a vital conversation comprise a normative model for the exchange of ideas by discussants involved in a talk exchange, which follows a formal structure. In pragma-dialectics, this structure is listed in terms of the four discussion stages of a text, namely the confrontation, opening, argumentation and concluding discussion stages of argumentation. These findings align with Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004), who assert that discussants would typically engage in a critical exchange of ideas and do so rationally and efficiently. The findings also align with Demir (2014), who observes that debates are highly conventionalised and contain formal and rigid structures of argumentation that discussants must comply with.

**Conclusion**

The study of argument schemes reveals the existence of formal and recurring argumentative patterns employed by discussants during debates. It has been established that by discussing argument schemes, such as the pragmatic argument scheme and symptomatic argument scheme, more frequently in certain discussion stages, discussants achieve their desired goals. Discussants employ pragmatic arguments in debates to demonstrate the desirability of acting or the consequences of not performing specific actions. The findings align with Van Poppel (2013), who describes the frequent use of pragmatic argument schemes in medical prescriptions to demonstrate the desirability or consequences of performing specific actions through the use of variants of argument schemes. The current study differs from Van Poppel (2013) in that it proposes a conditional variant in message framing as a further strategy employed by protagonists in debates. This, in effect, minimises opposition to their standpoints, which leads to a faster resolution of a difference of opinion on the merits.



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