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Argumentation in Students' Academic Discourse

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ABSTRACT: A variety of theoretical and epistemological perspectives on the notion of argument has contributed towards the development of numerous text analysis systems in contemporary argumentation research, making the selection of an analytic model for the description and evaluation of arguments in natural language contexts a complex task for researchers. Not surprisingly, Western scholars have overwhelmingly relied on Anglo- and Euro-centric models of argumentation as normative references of argument structure and quality in a variety of research contexts, disregarding plurality of practice within socio-cultural contexts. I will discuss how the findings of my own research, in which I examine the rhetorical styles of Australian and Japanese students' academic writing in English, have led me to suggest an approach towards argument analysis that accommodates the variety of rhetorical styles found in my studies of academic writing and contributes towards a useful account of the functions and structures of academic argument in contemporary tertiary texts.

KEY WORDS: argumentation, academic discourse, rhetorical structures, persuasion, justification, inquiry

INTRODUCTION

In modern composition research, notions of argument are predominantly grounded in rhetorical theories that promote the persuasive character and communicative purposes of language. Toulmin's (1958) model of informal reasoning and the 'new rhetoric' of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) and Perelman (1982) have become particularly influential in the teaching and evaluation of argumentative writing for native English speakers at U.S. colleges and universities, which has seen argumentation become almost synonymous with persuasion in contemporary writing pedagogy and research. Rhetorical theory has also significantly influenced developments in applied linguistic research. A revival of persuasion in discourse classification systems (Kinneavy, 1971) and the emergence of contrastive rhetorical research in the 1960s (Kaplan, 1966) stimulated research of persuasive discourse and cross-cultural research of argumentative and persuasive writing. Consequently, a variety of text analysis systems developed by linguists (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Aston, 1977; Martin, 1985; Lautamatti, 1987; Tirkkonen-Condit, 1987; Crismore, 1993) has been applied in many contemporary argument studies.

In most of the studies of argumentation in students' writing, Western scholars have limited their inquiry to investigations of i) the strategies of persuasion, and ii) the organising structure of persuasive discourse. Moreover, the widespread application in argument analysis and pedagogy of Toulmin's (1958) model of informal argument, devised from Western judicial justificatory practices, confirms an ethnocentric predisposition in contemporary argument scholarship. In fact, the use by researchers of a model of prototypical argument structure discounts the variety of structures of argument that might exist within a cultural or disciplinary context. Yet, any emphasis on discerning cross-cultural differences in the types of logical patterns employed in written texts has resulted in a tendency to stereotype the

rhetorical patterns of particular cultural groups and ignore the varieties of rhetorical structures that exist within particular groups of writers (Kubota, 1997).

Today, contrastive rhetoric and second language writing researchers are extending beyond purely linguistic frameworks to accommodate not only linguistic variables of text but also cognitive and socio-cultural variables of writing. Consequently, approaches to discourse analysis are becoming more pragmatic as texts are interpreted not in isolation but in terms of their situational contexts and purposes. This has led to discrepancies among researchers in definitions concerned with the nature, forms and functions of arguments in written texts, with empirical descriptions emphasizing the cultural and contextual specificity of argument practices and de-emphasizing normative standards (Siegel, 1999). Distinctions between argument and persuasion are also challenging the over reliance on rhetorical approaches to the analysis of argument in extended discourse and promoting enquiry into the relationships between rational argumentation, rhetoric and dialectic and their influence on the interpretations of argument structures and functions (Rescher, 1998). Moving beyond existing analytic frameworks, which depict argumentation as merely persuasion, and designing frameworks that accommodate diversity in argumentative practices appears essential for generating meaningful descriptions of authentic arguments.

In my study, I am examining the use of arguments in the coursework essays written as part of the normal course requirements by a group of six Japanese native speakers and seven Australian English native speakers enrolled in an Australian tertiary undergraduate humanities program. The study is a qualitative case study investigation of writing in naturally occurring academic contexts, supplemented by semi-structured, text-based interviews with the students while they were writing their essays to determine the social and cognitive processes that drive argument construction and to validate the identification, interpretation and reconstruction of the arguments in their written discourse. My initial analysis suggests that models of argument previously applied in composition research fail to accommodate the characteristic functions and structures of academic argument and the diversity of argumentative practices that exist among first and second language undergraduate writers of English. In particular, Toulmin's (1958) model of informal argument does not accommodate the persuasive strategies employed by students in their academic texts, suggesting that i) an alternative analytic framework is required to explore structures of persuasion in students' texts, and ii) persuasion may not be the singular goal of academic argumentation. I propose, therefore, an analytic model for describing the functions and structures of arguments in students' academic writing, which integrates rational, rhetorical and dialectical properties relevant to the academic context.

1. USES OF ACADEMIC ARGUMENT

A predominant view among rhetoricians, composition theorists and argumentation scholars is that the primary purpose of argumentation is persuasion (Meiland, 1989). Blair (2004) proposes that if we conceive argumentation in general terms, as an activity aimed at the rational alteration or modification of a position, standpoint or attitude, then at least five primary uses of argument may be identified: 1) proof or demonstration, 2) justification, 3) persuasion, 4) inquiry, and 5) resolution of a disagreement (Blair, 2004). Important in Blair's (2004) conception of argumentation and the use of arguments is the notion that argumentation is a teleological practice not limited to persuasion, which bears important implications for the design of analytic models of argument.

I posit that of the five primary uses of argument identified by Blair (2004), persuasion, justification and inquiry may all contribute toward the goals of argumentative practices in students' academic settings. I do not consider proof-demonstration and

disagreement-resolution to be among the types of arguments used by students in their academic texts.   Most naturally occurring arguments are not deductively valid so, as Blair (2004) points out, arguments used for proof or demonstration are reserved for specialized contexts, such as 'philosophical scholarly argumentation in the analytic tradition' (Blair, 2004, p. 23). Negotiation appears integral to arguments used for disagreement-resolution so, although written arguments may be modelled as internal dialogues with dialectical processes, it does not appear to me possible to accommodate the mutual decision-making process of disagreement-resolution without an *active* dialogue.

The functions of academic argument may be specified according to the following definitions:

1.1.1) *Persuasion* is the use of arguments to make a reader believe a certain position and so adopt some attitude or decision to do something.

1.1.2) *Justification* is the use of arguments to show grounds for knowledge claims, especially when they are questionable or challengeable.

1.1.3) *Inquiry* is the use of arguments to determine the merits of arguments identified as being relevant to a hypothesis or position on an issue.

Gage (1996) emphasizes the fundamental distinction Meiland (1989) makes between persuasion and inquiry, stating that 'persuasion implies prior commitment to an idea; inquiry implies a search that may or may not lead to such a commitment' (Gage, 1996, p. 5). In inquiry, therefore, a writer investigates the merits of a position or hypothesis without necessarily establishing a position or reaching a conclusion whereas in both justification and persuasion, a writer establishes a position and uses arguments to support it. Persuasion and justification are distinguished by the fact that in persuasion, the writer seeks a concession from the readers to adopt the established position of the argument whereas in justification, the writer does not hold the expectation that the readers will necessarily adopt the writer's propositions (Blair, 2004). Persuasion may be further distinguished from justification by the characteristics of its academic register which, compared with justificatory discourse, tends to be more interpersonally charged, exhibit greater emotional investment in the advocated position, and assume a distinct lexico-grammatical system (Coffin, 2004).

A classification system of argument raises the question of whether or not there is a predilection for one type of argument in academic contexts.   In academic contexts, argumentation is not considered to be an activity concerned merely with the generation and justification of opinions but rather one that is inextricably linked with the maintenance and production of knowledge. In addition, scholars generally perceive academic discourse to be a type of discourse that holds a specialized mode of argument wherein writers are expected to place more import on rational than rhetorical conventions by demonstrating 'absolute truth, empirical evidence, or flawless logic' (Hyland, 2001, p. 549). Since most of the analytic models applied in composition research to date have been based on models of persuasive argument, it seems relevant to propose an alternative approach to the analysis of academic argument.

In fact, according to Meiland (1989), the primary function of argumentation in tertiary contexts is not persuasion but inquiry, which is consistent with the views of Peters (1986), a writing research scholar, who states that writing in academic situations involves 'exploring the complexities of the subject or field, rather than challenging the convictions of the unknown reader' (Peters, 1986, p. 170). The view that argumentation has a knowledge building function appears consistent with the heuristic goals of the coursework essay, which many academics in Western tertiary programs regard as an effective instrument for learning. In fact, if we regard inquiry as an heuristic form of reasoning, we should acknowledge that inquiry probably entails processes of abductive reasoning, whereby 'scientists and other professionals appropriate or connect with the thinking or observations of others to produce

new lines of thought' (Warnick and Manusov, 2000, p. 387). Inquiry appears, in this sense, to be a useful mechanism for formulating new knowledge.

Justification, however, would also appear to be an important goal of academic writers concerned with showing that the reasons for asserting their claims to knowledge are sound and, consequently, tenable. When the primary use of arguments is for justification, the writer puts forth a claim to knowledge and is concerned with demonstrating why it is reasonable for the writer to believe the claim in question (Blair, 2004). In inquiry, though, a writer, in spite of passing judgment on the merits of the claims advanced by other scholars in the epistemological context of inquiry, does not necessarily purport to have reached a definitive conclusion and, in some instances, after considering the knowledge advanced by other scholars may only advance a tentative hypothesis. Compared with inquiry, therefore, justification appears to be more important in academic texts focussed on confirming knowledge than on generating new perspectives on knowledge.

I propose that contextual factors, including the specific nature of essay questions, disciplinary requirements, and interpretations of tasks, contribute to a student's formulation of an argumentative goal, which subsequently influences the structures and strategies of their written arguments. I also contend that in persuasion, justification and inquiry, distinct structures and strategies of academic argument are generated, which can be described with recourse to the rational, rhetorical and dialectical properties of argument.

2. PROPERTIES OF ACADEMIC ARGUMENT

2.1. Rational properties

When investigating the logical properties of individual arguments, instead of formulating their descriptions of arguments on premise-conclusion structures, many researchers have elected to use Toulmin's (1958) six-part argumentation model to describe the structures of informal reasoning in academic texts. I contend that the adversarial character of Toulmin's (1958) model is not compatible with the goals of all students' academic argumentation, especially inquiry. The model imposes a judicial procedure on the execution of argument and ultimately restricts our interpretation of argument structure and function. I believe the fundamental goal of academic argument is consistent with the interpretation of Copi's definition of argument proposed by Finocchiaro (2003), who states, 'the purpose of the argument is to justify the conclusion by means of supporting reasons' (Finocchiaro, 2003, p. 22). I assert that the basic premise-conclusion structure of argument gives us greater scope than Toulmin's (1958) argument model for investigating and interpreting the illation of argument by allowing us to examine from a functional perspective 'the special relationship that holds between premises or reasons and conclusion or thesis' (Finocchiaro, 2003, p. 22) in the three types of academic argument, persuasion, justification and inquiry, which I will now explain.

In persuasion, we can consider the premise-conclusion relationship to hold that the writer, whose goal is to have the readers adopt the writer's position, presents reasons to persuade the readers that the conclusion is true and therefore worthy of belief. In justification, the writer's goal is to provide reasons that make the conclusion acceptable without necessarily altering the readers' beliefs. Inquiry seems to be the type of argument least able to be accommodated by the premise-conclusion structure because, as mentioned earlier, inquiry does not necessitate reaching a conclusion. If a conclusion is reached, it may not be definitive but more of a tentative hypothesis generated after consideration of the knowledge claims advanced by other scholars. Instead, if we wish to apply the premise-

conclusion structure of argument to inquiry, then the notion of 'conclusion' requires some re-interpretation.

In inquiry, a writer investigates a position or hypothesis with the aim of making a judgement on the knowledge claims advanced by other scholars on the position or hypothesis. In doing so, the writer may, after critiquing the literature, arrive at a conclusion by assuming a distinct position on the basis of the inquiry. This position may be consistent with the conclusions proposed by other scholars; in other words, the writer assumes an established position in the field. In this sense, the conclusion is very much like the conclusion of justification, whereby the writer's position rests on the reasons proffered by other scholars, which help to make the writer's position acceptable and, thereby, tenable.

On the other hand, after surveying the literature or knowledge in the field, the writer may not reach a conclusion, as noted by Meiland (1989, p. 189):

> In inquiry, one might reach no conclusion about the position or hypothesis being investigated. One might, for example, find good reasons on both sides of the case which seem to cancel each other out. Or the investigation might prove to be so complex, with so many branches and subsidiary lines of argumentation, that it might be very difficult to see what it adds up to.

Where a conclusion is not reached, a premise-conclusion structure would appear to be an invalid formulation of argument structure. I contend that a conclusion is, in fact, reached after any process of inquiry if we elect to call the judgement, which a writer reaches after critiquing the field, the conclusion. In the case where the writer does not assume a position, the writer will inevitably make a judgement that the reasons on both side of the case are good and, therefore, a definitive position is not attainable. This judgement is, in itself, a kind of conclusion, one that rests on premises (the reasons advanced on both sides of a position) which have equal force and so do not cancel out the conclusions generated by opposing scholars.

Finally, a writer may, after inquiry, generate an original conclusion or new line of thought, distinct from the conclusions proffered by other scholars. In this sense, a conclusion is reached but the relationship between the premises and conclusion is quite different to that in justification. In other words, after investigating an established position or hypothesis, the writer may draw an indirect conclusion to propose a new position or hypothesis, distinct from the position or hypothesis promoted in the field. The conclusion rests on the same reasons provided by other scholars for their position, but the writer draws a new line to reach a distinct conclusion. In this sense, argumentation is heuristic, and inquiry is a mechanism for generating new knowledge.

2.2. Rhetorical properties

Persuasion, as a primary use of arguments, functions to make someone adopt a particular attitude or assume a particular course of action and is distinct from the use of rhetorical strategies in argumentation to link the discursive practice and content of argumentation with specific socio-cultural contexts, communicative purposes and audiences. Consequently, when designing analytic models, while it is necessary to move beyond frameworks that skew the use of arguments primarily for persuasion, it remains essential to accommodate the rhetorical strategies that orators and writers employ to ensure their arguments will hold position in the face of opposition and scrutiny.

In much the same way that Aristotle distinguishes between non-argumentative means of persuasion, *ethos* (character) and *pathos* (sentiment), and argumentative means of persuasion, *logos* (logic), I would like to distinguish between stylistic and rational persuasion. Essentially, stylistic persuasion is the type that is grounded in the literary style of the writer

and represents the writer's interaction with the readers through the use of literary devices for 'facilitating communication, supporting a writer's position and building a relationship with an audience' (Hyland, 1998, p. 438). Rational persuasion, on the other hand, is 'the attempt to persuade an audience on the basis of the reasons offered' (Ohler, 2003, p. 67) and is integrally linked to the logical component of argumentation. According to Johnson (2000), rational persuasion is the fundamental purpose of argumentation and refers to the dialectical obligations an arguer must meet in the process of arguing to counter objections, criticisms or alternative positions. In this section, I will discuss the relevance of using a linguistic framework for analysing text metadiscourse to facilitate the explication of that aspect of rhetorical structure and function in academic texts that I refer to as stylistic persuasion. In the following section, I will discuss the requirement of a dialectical tier as an essential rhetorical strategy of academic argument, a strategy generally known as rational persuasion.

In investigating rhetorical strategies employed by student writers, text metadiscourse becomes a useful indicator of rhetorical strength and purpose. Metadiscourse, in the sense I am using it, refers not only to the surface features of a text that help organize and facilitate interpretation of propositional content (such as logical connectives) but also to specific linguistic and rhetorical devices that implicitly accommodate the norms and expectations of the discourse community and, importantly, convey the communicative intent of the writer (Hyland, 1998). Consequently, while an analysis of metadiscourse reveals insight into the ways tertiary writers convey stance, demonstrate their level of commitment to knowledge claims, and promote credible representations of their work to readers, I contend that in an analytic model of argument, an account of text metadiscourse also permits a functional analysis of argument structure by providing insight into the communicative intentions of the writer. Hyland (1998) uses a classification of metadiscourse derived from earlier work of Crismore *et al.* (1993), which not only distinguishes between textual and interpersonal types of metadiscourse but also accommodates a writer's ability to express meaning and promote adequacy and acceptability of their arguments in academic texts. In fact, as metadiscourse is inherently linked with rhetorical function, I am proposing that features of metadiscourse will, in fact, differ between the three types of academic argument, persuasion, justification and inquiry. In my current work, I find that an analysis of metadiscourse provides insight into the meanings and functions of text in students' situational contexts of learning, which subsequently facilitates the explication of written argument structures in their texts. Furthermore, my early findings suggest that proficiency in various uses of metadiscourse affects the structural interpretation and evaluation of students' written arguments, influencing significantly the communicative effect of their academic arguments. Consequently, in attempting to discern variation in argumentative practices, especially in second language writing contexts, it would appear wise for researchers to incorporate an account of the influence of factors such as linguistic proficiency and pragmatic sensitivity on the argument patterns generated by writers. Such an approach, I believe, would more carefully identify writers' intended meanings and avoid merely attributing differences observed in argument structures employed by first and second language writers to distinct (and, often, culturally stereotypical) styles of reasoning.

2.3. Dialectical properties

A premise-conclusion component will not suffice alone to generate a satisfactory argument in academic texts unless accompanied by a dialectical tier, whereby the arguer addresses the 'web of arguments, objections, and replies which are relevant to the topic in question' (Meiland, 1989, p. 194). Johnson (2000, p. 174) points out that Toulmin's (1958) notion of rebuttal is really a narrow conception of dialectical structure, which, in Toulmin's (1958)

framework, is constrained by the jurisprudential model of argument. Consequently, I contend that the model does not accommodate the dialectical strategies of academic argument. Defining the contents of the dialectical tier is problematic but Ohler (2003) assumes a pragmatic approach by stating, 'the actualities of the Other, the audience, or the discussion at hand must inform the *content* of the dialectical tier' (Ohler, 2003, p. 68). I posit that a functional focus located in a pragmatic approach helps to specify the arguer's dialectical obligations. In other words, the content and quantity of reasons dispelled in the dialectical tier of an argument will be contingent on the primary goal of the writer as well as being guided by the socio-cognitive and disciplinary expectations of the discourse community.

For many scholars, persuasion implies a necessary obligation to anticipate the readers' objections and doubts and provide arguments, or reasons, to remove them. Yet, Meiland (1989) contends that 'in argument for persuasion there seems to be no necessity to consider objections' (Meiland, 1989, p. 194), especially if there is a risk that raising objections might weaken the writer's case and persuade the readers of the opposite of the proposed thesis. In fact, a diminutive dialectical structure is highly probable among student writers who lack the knowledge to defend their arguments from potential criticism, so prefer not to address objections and, therefore, omit them from their essays. In such cases, students resort to using arguments for persuasion by focussing solely on arguments that support their position and resorting to stylistic rhetorical strategies to strengthen their claims to gain the readers' concession.

In justification, as it is tenable for readers to hold the opposite position of the writer, there is less risk that raising objections might weaken the writer's case. In using arguments to justify, students are participating in a heuristic process, not merely in a process designed to induce a change in attitude. In addition, there is also not the requirement to meet objections with the same force of antagonism as in persuasion, since the writer's position only has to be shown to be acceptable and does not need to induce a change in the readers' position. Consequently, writers may provide cautious answers to objections without having to convey the strength of appraisal that is necessary to influence the readers' beliefs in the arguments put forth by the writer in persuasion. I contend that, compared with students who use arguments for persuasion to induce a change in attitude or incite action, students who use arguments for justification of a viewpoint are more likely to recognize the strategy of raising objections as an effective means to strengthen a case and so, therefore, attempt to employ the strategy in their academic writing.

In arguments used for inquiry, it would seem beneficial for students to map out the dialectical field as much as possible, since in inquiry, the aim is 'to discover arguments that are relevant to a position or thesis and to discover the strength or weaknesses of those arguments' (Meiland, 1989, p. 188). Raising objections and positing responses to those objections in inquiry does not involve adhering to a specified position, as in persuasion and justification. According to Ohler (2003), what to include or exclude as part of the dialectical tier is a function of the audience. I suggest that, as well as being dependent upon criteria established by lecturers and disciplinary audiences, the content of the dialectical field will also depend upon the specific topic of the writing task as well as a student's level of knowledge and capacity to research the field. A student's confidence in raising and challenging opposite viewpoints will also influence their willingness and ability to dispel their dialectical commitments.

3. STRUCTURES OF ACADEMIC ARGUMENT

The kinds of argumentation I propose to be relevant to students' academic writing can be aligned with systemic functional linguistic frameworks of text argument structures previously

identified in students' academic writing (Coffin, 2004). Figure 1 illustrates how writers progressively move through stages of argument, with each stage of argument macrostructure performing a function in achieving the goal of argument. Not all stages are obligatory, with those in brackets optional or less likely.

Figure 1:
A schema of three kinds of argumentation in students' academic writing
(adapted from Coffin, 2004, p. 236)

Argumentation	Persuasion	Justification	Inquiry
Purpose	to advocate and support a position, and recommend an attitude or course of action	to put forward and support a position, and so show claims on knowledge to be reasonable	to identify arguments relevant to a hypothesis or position on an issue and determine the merits of those arguments in order to reach a judgement or determine the 'best' position on the issue
Argument Macrostructure (Stages)	Thesis Arguments + Evidence (Counter-Arguments + Evidence) (Reinforcement of thesis) Recommendation	Thesis Arguments + Evidence Counter-Arguments + Evidence Reinforcement of thesis	Issue Arguments + Evidence (2 or more perspectives) Judgement / Position

A classification of argumentation according to argument function provides a useful mechanism for describing the structures of argument. I contend that the rational, rhetorical and dialectical properties of argument may be used to characterize the kinds of argumentation in academic discourse and contribute towards understanding the structures and functions of academic argument. A structural approach can, however, be prescriptive, as it imposes a rigid organization and structure on each type of argumentation. Coffin (2004) concedes that the Anglo-based framework of systemic functional linguistic argument structures does not accommodate structural diversity, a particularly pertinent issue to consider when investigating the writing of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Yet, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) point out, 'we have to bear in mind that 'measuring' something always boils down to imposing an artificial standard – and that deviations may arise that call for an explanation' (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 28). A framework of argument structure provides, therefore, a mechanism for explicating standards and norms in the academic context and identifying deviations from the norm. I argue that the framework I propose supports greater diversity in argument practice than the frameworks applied in previous studies to the analysis of argument in college compositions and second language academic texts. Importantly, it accommodates structural variation according to argument function. I contend that not only does structural variation exist between the major

types of argumentation in tertiary academic contexts, but there also exists the potential for structural variation within each type of argumentation. Consequently, the stages of argument outlined in Figure 1 are intended merely as a guide to the potential organization of written argument within each major type of argumentation. Furthermore, while I contend that each type of argumentation will contain key structural elements, the elements will not be constrained to the order specified in systemic functional linguistic frameworks. For example, in persuasion and justification, a writer may choose to present their arguments before stating their position, imposing what writing research scholars refer to as an inductive pattern of reasoning on text structure (and which has, unfortunately, tended to be generalised as an Asian inductive pattern of reasoning). Furthermore, I contend that we may ultimately accommodate a subset of argument macrostructures within each category of argument type, which will hopefully reduce the tendency for prescriptivism in research and pedagogy and promote the diversity of argumentative practices in contemporary writing contexts.

SUMMARY

Using a functional approach, I have attempted to show how rational, rhetorical and dialectical aspects of argumentation theory may be used to account for the rhetorical patterns observed in students' written academic arguments. I have outlined three primary uses of academic argument and specified ways for interpreting the rational, rhetorical and dialectical properties of each use of argument in academic contexts. I have attempted to show how a functional approach towards argument definition permits structural specification in terms of the properties discussed.

It is my contention that by integrating rational, rhetorical and dialectical properties of argument into an analytic framework with applicability for academic contexts, researchers may, while specifying a range of commonly accepted academic norms, be better equipped to accommodate structural diversity of students' written arguments and so avoid making rash generalisations about both first and second language rhetorical patterns. Understanding and accommodating diversity in academic genres, including written argument, is essential in today's global community where, as Matsuda (1997) so aptly points out, even students from similar linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds bring to their learning contexts diverse experiences with genres and discourse communities of writing, which inevitably challenge the conventions of established disciplinary communities.

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