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In Response to: John A. A. Sillince's *Coherence in organizational argumentation*

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In his paper, John Sillince analyzes a fragment of a discussion which took place in an organizational context, in an endeavor to show two things: that linguistic coherence is the result of two processes, binding and unfolding, and that there are similarities between these two linguistic processes on the one hand and both organizational processes and cognitive complexity, on the other.

Mr. Sillince's paper touches on a wide range of subjects and invokes a multitude of perspectives. I find it somewhat difficult to comment on the paper, because it is not always clear to me what exactly the focus of the paper is, or the problem that it sets out to investigate. So I will limit myself to some remarks on a number of topics which have attracted my interest.

First, I would like to express some disappointment with regard to the treatment of argumentation in this paper. The subject receives very little attention, and the little it gets, raises a number of questions.

In the beginning of the paper, the author tries to find a perspective from which coherence in argumentation can be approached. First, he rejects the conversational paradigm. He does so for the wrong reasons, I think. Since Jacobs and Jackson's seminal work in the eighties of the past century, we know that argumentation does not require "a selfish monologue style of talking". Conversational argument, in which the various participants all contribute in building an argument, is an ordinary form of argument, and, in fact, prototypical for monological argument, which, after all, is recipient-designed just as much as conversational contributions are. It also is not self-evident why in argumentation "topic stability cannot be assumed so easily". Argument always centers on a standpoint, and the "disagreement space" (Jackson's term) associated with that standpoint guarantees the topical coherence of the argument. If anything, in argumentation topic is less problematic and shiftier than in conversation. In fact, a little later, Mr. Sillince himself asserts that argumentation likens narrative in its thematic stability.

After considering narrative as a second model for analyzing argumentation, as a third perspective the author takes up adjacency pairs. At first it is not quite clear why adjacency-pair relations are considered a third perspective, that is, separate from that of conversation, but that soon becomes clear, because these relations are put on a par with all kinds of other two-part relationships, such as problem-solution, cause-consequence. I think that this constitutes a rather unfortunate collation. In the first place, adjacency pairs are defined by strict sequentiality (first pair part precedes second pair part) and the fact that the different pair parts are produced by two different speakers. Neither characteristic applies to the problem-solution relationship that plays such a central role in the analysis. In the second place, adjacency pairs constitute coherence on the illocutionary level, while relations like problem-solution and cause-consequence create coherence on the propositional level. Finally, the likeness between these relations and argumentation seems not so very clear to me. The characterization of argumentation as having in common with them "the creation of a reasoning step from an initial datum to a conclusion" is in various respects not very satisfactory: to begin with, datum and conclusion are categories from very diverse perspectives, but, more importantly, argumentation, which is a speech act aimed at

convincing an opponent of the acceptability of a standpoint, is something different from the reasoning process which underlies it.

It is unfortunate that in the short segment of the analysis later in the paper which actually does address argumentation, notably in terms of Toulmin's model, again this mix-up of different categories occurs: two of the terms, Warrant and Claim, are Toulmin's, but surely Toulmin would be unhappy with the third term, Premise. On top of this, the actual analysis itself seems misdirected: Mr. Sillince gives a clause-by-clause analysis, in which each single clause is supposed to contain the elements Claim, Warrant, and Premise (in a way which is not very clear to me). However, the argumentatively far more important relationships BETWEEN the various clauses are not analyzed in these terms.

On to a second topic: Mr. Sillince's rejection of Grice's model for describing coherence. Apart from the fact that the model is not rendered correctly (the maxim of Quality is absent, in its place a reformulation of the Relevance maxim is given), some common misconceptions are in evidence. First of all, Grice's maxims are not prescriptive rules; they merely specify expectations that conversationalists employ. These expectations may be violated, and in some cases it is exactly these violations that generate meaning. In fact, this is precisely what explains the use of ambiguous and symbolic language, which Mr. Sillince adduces as counter-evidence. Secondly, Grice's maxims are NOT absolutes. In fact, what they are about is the use of language RELATIVE to a purpose. That is why a rendering of the Quantity maxim as "Be succinct yet complete" is misguided: the maxim says that information will be given to the amount that is relevant for the purpose or direction of the conversation at that point. Also, the maxims are not into effect universally: Grice expressly stipulates 'Unless there is evidence to the contrary, the Cooperation Principle is in effect.' That takes care of most of the counter-examples that are adduced. Last but not least, there is no conflict between cooperation and conflict, or, in Mr. Sillince's words, "contradictory pressures that require hypocritical language." Even in a conflict, one needs to be understood, and in order to be understood an appeal is made to the cooperative principle. Moreover, lying can only be done fruitfully if the Quality maxim is in effect, in other words, under the assumption that one is speaking the truth.

A third matter concerns the status of the material that is analyzed in the paper. It is not clear how much of the actual talk is rendered. In the first turn, do the dots signal that material has been left out? And what about the humming and hawing, the hesitations, the pauses, the 'well's and 'hmm's, the overlaps and gaps? In order to understand the coherence of the utterances, these interactional signals, which are part of the preference organization of conversational discourse, are as important as the actual words, particularly where the expression of agreement and disagreement is concerned.

This brings me to a fourth point: I dearly miss a speech-act analysis of the utterances in the example. Coherence does not reside on the propositional level alone. In fact, analysis on the propositional level becomes relevant only after coherence on the speech-act level has been established. And for an analysis that tries to capture the way in which participants in a discussion argue their way through a conflict of opinion, a speech-act level analysis is essential. Some of this work, I admit, is done in the section on perspective, but it is not done in a consistent and systematic manner, and it is conflated with a multitude of other things, such as topic, politeness and other kinds of interpersonal business.

As a final point, I would like to question Mr. Sillince's attempt to establish a relationship between discourse coherence and organizational or cognitive complexity. What it comes down to is that in organizations and in cognitive complexity, we find, just as in discourse, differentiation as well as integration. I believe that this could be extended to just about any area of life. Everything has similarities and differences with everything else. And thus the claim becomes rather uninformative.

After raising these questions and criticisms, I do want to end this response by noting that an important part of what *is* done in the paper, particularly, the analysis of topic unfolding and topic shift, strikes me as very interesting. Mr. Sillince gives detailed analyses, paying close attention to the way in which the exact phrasing signals development and change. And it is this kind of careful scrutiny of the way in which a discussion is carried on, that can be of considerable service to the study of argumentative discourse.