May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Sillince

Bishop

Author: John Bishop

In Response To: John Sillince's *Power and topic shifts in strategic management argumentation*

John Sillince proposes (P) that people in committee meetings are more likely to raise new topics (NT) than they are to give reasons (R) for their proposals (P). How true! I want to use my floor time (F) to talk about something else (NT); namely, types of committee meetings (TA) and methodological issues (TA) about studying argumentation in committees (TW).

My purported aim is to argue that further research in this area will require extending Sillince's model of argumentation *within* committees to formally include data *about* the committee. With such an extension, Sillince's method will give significant results; without it the conclusions reached about argumentation will float in a sea of significant but vague information. Sillince in fact gives large amounts of such information; his model should formally recognise it.

My real aim, as a Sillincian analysis of my first paragraph makes clear, is to assert my linguistic power and in that way to prove that Sillince is right.

Sillince has done an immensely detailed analysis of the argumentation tactics used in a meeting of a committee discussing a new medical facility. He has coded (and had verified) each verbal utterance in the meeting according to one or more of the following argumentation characteristics and manoeuvres: Floor Time, Reasons, Proposal, Questions, Answers, Challenges, Rebuttals, Supports, New topics, Repeated efforts to raise same topic, Topic avoidance, and Topic widening.

He has defined two characteristics of speeches - linguistic power and linguistic accountability - in terms of the speaker's use of argumentation manoeuvres, and he has defined one characteristic of the argumentation process - linguistic conflict.

Besides the association of Floor time with both power and accountability, Sillince has found that power is associated with accountability. This latter finding is counter to his original hypothesis, and he says he found it surprising. Speaking from the perspective of hindsight, I do not find it at all surprising that powerful people accept accountability when talking to followers for the simple reason that acceptance of accountability doesn't mean much when the people you are talking to are powerless to hold you accountable later. It is hugely more significant in organizational terms when a follower talking to a leader accepts responsibility; in the corporations I have worked for this was known as "putting your job on the line" for the obvious reason that the leader had the power to hold the follower actually accountable later in the way he/she had accepted. Sillince's data does not show the difference between leader-to-follower, follower-to-follower, and follower-to-leader acceptance of accountability. One of

my suggestions for those using Sillince's model and methodology in future is that these be distinguished as down-, lateral-, and up-acceptance of accountability. But the more interesting part of Sillince's conclusions are in his discussion of the implications of his research for conceptions of linguistic power in committees and his suggestions for further research. From his study of this committee meeting, Sillince concludes that:

> Power in committees is not about winning arguments.
>
> Linguistic conflict is minimised.
>
> Processual power is used in other forums.
>
> Role based interests lead to power related language forms.
>
> Linguistic power is maximised.
>
> Followers passively accept linguistic power.[1]

The question we need to ask is what is the *status* of these conclusions? Are they conclusions about committees in general? Committee within certain types of organizations? Certain types of meetings? etc. etc.

Sillince is, of course, fully aware that the generalization of his conclusion is a large program for further research. In his sections entitles "Future directions" and "Conclusion", he predicts the finding that "the extent of conflict and argumentation in committees will vary" (p. 27) He suggests a large number of factors which might affect the nature of argumentation in committees, including the following:

> Size of organization.
>
> Nature of project.
>
> Nature of organization.
>
> Degree of agreement about objective by committee members.
>
> Degree of agreement about causal relationships by committee members.
>
> Level of organizational power of leaders.
>
> Aims of leaders in terms of:
>
>> 1. creating and maintaining co-operative atmosphere
>>
>> 2. protecting followers
>>
>> 3. reducing perceptions of social distance

4. avoiding challenges and reason-giving

5. directing choice of topic

Norms of power relationships in organization

Norms of (un)acceptability of conflict in organization

Damage of conflict to organization

This list is of course not complete. I'm sure Sillince would accept at least some of the following as well:

Job security of committee members

Opportunity cost of meeting time

Level of trust, especially follower-leader

Involvement in or estrangement from organizational goals

Relationship of committee members to organization (eg. employees, consultants, retained lawyers, etc.)

Presence of researchers, tape recorders, etc.

Formation of parties or blocs

Whether organizational leaders and meeting chairs are same people

Whether meeting chair and most powerful member are same people

Unionized environment

I raise all of these factors in order to highlight the fact that the committee meeting Sillince has reported on is quite a clean one in that organizational relationships are straightforward, clear, and correspond to power in the committee. Some committee meetings are very messy in these respects.

Formally acknowledging the external factors which may affect the nature of argumentation within a committee meeting involves including several types of data besides the data on argumentation within the actual committee meeting of the sort Sillince has elicited from coding the transcripts. Indeed Sillince often refers to data about the organization, events before and after the committee meeting, and the purpose of the meeting.

If the methodology and model Sillince proposes is going to be extended to a general study of committees, then these and other elements need to be formally integrated into the model. Sillince's methodology needs to be extended to specify how and what external data is to be collected, and the model needs to place the committee meeting within a typology that locates

what sort of meeting is being studied and other external information. For example, in my earlier suggestion that coding reflect down-, lateral-, and up-acceptance of accountability, data about the organizational relationships of committee members needs to be built directly into the coding of argumentation events within the committee meeting.

Such a larger model will generate hypotheses about how argumentation reflects different sorts of power in different kinds of committee meetings, and the information on argumentation within the committee meeting will have the powerful ability to confirm, modify, or refute typologies of committee meetings.

In other words, Sillince's final conclusion should formalize the types of data he refers to elsewhere in his paper and read something like this:

[In committee meetings in hierarchical organizations, in which organization leaders are meeting with organizational followers, for the purpose of legitimating decisions the leaders have made, then] "conflict is perceived as damaging for individuals and the organization, so that those who are able to oil the wheels by managing and containing conflict while still achieving important managerial goals are accorded extra legitimation by others."

Endnote

1All these conclusions are near quotations from Sillince with the grammatical form changed so they are grammatically parallel.