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Commentary on: Ionana Cionea, Dale Hample, and Edward Fink's "Dialogue types: A scale development study"

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper represents research of the kind that very much needs to be done if argumentation is to advance to becoming more than a purely abstract field in which each researcher has his or her own theory on what an argument is, and how to identify, analyze and evaluate arguments of the kind found in everyday conversational argumentation practices. What is needed is that such abstract theories, for example theories about the different types of conversational settings in which argumentation takes place, should be applied to real arguments, and tested on how well they model them. At University of Windsor we have been undertaking some research of this kind on political argumentation in provincial elections, and we recognize the need for using social science methods of data analysis as a framework for the investigations. This paper represents exactly the kind of empirical research that the field of argumentation studies is presently in need of. For these reasons, I strongly support this kind of research, and the authors' present contribution to it.

I have no quarrel about the basic methodology or about the validity of the findings in the paper, as far as I understand them. My comments are of two sorts. The first are some questions for clarification about what is being done. The second are some worries I have concerning some of the limits of the questions asked in the study, and the way it has been set up.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

My first questions concern the objectives and methodology of the paper, which I confess I don't entirely understand. It looks to me like there were eight different scenarios presented to each of the experimental participants, and then the participants were told how to identify each type of dialogue by using a set of dialogue orientations. Each dialogue orientation, I take it, presents a short list of questions representing typical types of questions one would ask if one thought that a persuasion dialogue was appropriate for the scenario. When the subject is presented with a particular scenario, she identifies what her response would be in that scenario. For example, her response might be to engage in a persuasion dialogue. Or another response might be to engage in negotiation dialogue. The

experimenters then tested to see what type of dialogue corresponded to each scenario according to the responses of the experimental subjects. The objective of the study, I assume, perhaps wrongly, is to find some criteria that can successfully be used to identify these types of dialogue in everyday argumentation situations of the kind represented by the scenarios.

I may be misunderstanding the objectives and methodology of the experimenters, so I invite their corrections, or further explanations on this matter. Based on the way I interpreted the experimental design of the study, I will next go on to raise some questions about the findings.

3. DIALOGUES AND DIALOGUE TYPES

One of the concerns I had about this paper was the finding that people don't use two of the six dialogue type, namely inquiry and deliberation. I'm not so sure where or whether inquiry might come into it. Inquiry is the type of dialogue where the participants are collectively trying to prove or disprove the claim at issue by marshalling the pro and contra evidence to see whether a line of argument can be constructed from this body of evidence so that the ultimate claim can be proved to the appropriate standard of proof. Generally, in an inquiry, the standard of proof is high. For example in a scientific inquiry, the aim is to prove the hypothesis to a sufficiently high standard so that the need for subsequent retraction of the hypothesis will be minimized (or even ideally, removed). Retraction can never be entirely ruled out however, since scientific hypotheses are falsifiable in principle, and this characteristic means that the possibility of retraction in the face of contravening evidence can never be entirely eliminated. Not all doubt can be eliminated (except, debatably) in pure mathematics.

Next let's consider deliberation dialogue. The goal of deliberation dialogue is to move forward in a set of circumstances by making a choice between two or more alternatives that are available. Typically doing nothing at all also represents a choice option that has significant consequences. Therefore, as an agent moves forward in real time weaving its way through the circumstances in its individual situation, it constantly has to make choices under conditions of lack of knowledge, and even inconsistency. Deliberation has to be an extremely common type of dialogue in relational interpersonal communication, since partners in a relationship constantly have to make decisions on what is the best course of action for them to jointly pursue in situations where they have to make choices. Surely relational dialogues are very often about making choices on what to do, as opposed to being persuasion dialogues about whether a proposition is true (acceptable) or false (unacceptable).

For this reason I was very surprised that examples of persons in romantic relationships engaging in deliberation were not found. However, it may be the restriction of the study to cases of relational transgressions in romantic relationships that accounts for this absence of findings about argumentation in the deliberation context. A perceived transgression invites negotiation or persuasion, but may seem less related to deliberation. Even so, where the parties agree that a transgression represents a problem that needs to be solved by going forward with some course of action on the part of the one party or both, deliberation would come

into play when the parties argue about how the problem posed by the transition can be solved. The other side of this is that there can often be shifts from persuasion dialogue to deliberation dialogue (Atkinson et al., 2013), and deliberation dialogue flowing from a transgression may only take place when there has been such a shift from a prior persuasion dialogue. All in all then, the finding that people don't use deliberation dialogues in conversations about relational transgressions is surprising.

4. ARGUMENTATION AND EXPLANATION

Another limitation of the study that I thought might deserve some comment is that I was surprised to see that the connection between argumentation and explanation did not come into it. Recent research in argumentation in artificial intelligence has shown that there is a very close relationship between explanation and argumentation, much closer than was traditionally thought in argumentation studies (Bex & Walton, 2013). What was so often emphasized in traditional argumentation studies was the need to clearly distinguish between argument and explanation, so that students, or beginners to the field, do not get the two kinds of speech mixed up. It is hard to separate them. For example consider the question why were you late to work today. An explanation could be given, for example the respondent might say that his alarm clock not go off because of a power shortage during the night. However, such an explanation can also be seen as a justification, since the act of failing to appear at work at the required time is a transgression of a kind that can be forgiven if there is an explanation showing why the apparent transgressor was not at fault.

There are some places, however, where explanations did come into the experimental study. In table 1, the following were the first two questions in the dialogue orientation items in the persuasive dialogue orientation.

PD01: How much would you try to explain your position to your partner?

PD02: How much would you try to give reasons for your position?

The first question is a request for an explanation, while the second is a request for an argument. Also, in the list of questions in the information-seeking dialogue orientation in table 1, the third question (ISD03) reads: how much would you try to offer your partner the whole story on this matter? The use of these three questions clearly indicates that explanations as well as arguments had a place in the study, even though the respondents were not asked to try to identify explanatory dialogue, as opposed to argumentative dialogue.

For these reasons, I find it very surprising that this scale development study focused exclusively on argumentation and did not take explanation into account as an up-front part of the experimental design. However, I can certainly understand the restriction of the topic to argumentation and the need to not get into the difficult and controversial territory of the relationship between argumentation and explanation. Perhaps an extension of this research could study explanations that are

put forward by one participant and questioned by another, leading to a sequence of dialogue combining explanation and argumentation.

5. CONCLUSION

As a concluding remark I might add that I see the project of finding clear indicators that could be used to identify types of dialogue in sequences of everyday argumentative exchanges to be extremely worthwhile, and emphasize once again that I support this type of research very strongly. My questions have been ones of clarification concerning the application of the methodology, and what it is designed to find.

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