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Commentary on Jean Goodwin: “What, in Practice, is an Argument?”

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Professor Goodwin claims in “What, in practice, is an argument?” that argumentation theorists are “very good at argument, and at theory” and that “this fact is hindering the further development of argumentation theory.” Let us see how she supports these sweeping statements and whether they can be maintained.

Goodwin rightly observes that experts looking at a situation see something different than novices. They directly perceive “meaningful configurations” and know “what they could do next.” This means that experts have something extra to offer that makes a difference and makes it worthwhile to have them around. This confirmation is reassuring, because we educate students to become physicists, linguists and physicians in the expectation that later we can benefit from their expertise. Although we know that our family doctor is not infallible, we may nevertheless trust that she is more capable than we are to diagnose our illnesses and recommend treatment. If something similar does not apply to argumentation theorists, their expertise is fake and they cannot lay claim on being experts at all.

Is it really the case that argumentation theorists, as Professor Goodwin fears, only see, as she puts it, the configurations they are “primed to see,” so that the preconceptions of their theories are imported into the discourse they study and they are prevented from seeing what is “really” going on? This would be terrible, so it is indeed important to scrutinize what Professor Goodwin has to say in favor of her alarming claim.

Professor Goodwin turns to corpus linguistics, more precisely to the concordancer AntConc, to examine the “structures” of what she calls “naturally occurring argumentative talk.” The naturally occurring talk she selects for this occasion is a corpus of the U.S. Congressional debate over initiating hostilities in what Goodwin refers to as “the first Gulf War.” In the United States this debate is widely seen as “best practice” (Goodwin, 1999). Goodwin aims to find out what *conception of argument* is held by the participants in the debate without making use of any preconceived theoretical instruments, so that she will be able to compare her results with the results in analyzing this discourse that would have been achieved by the argumentation theorists that find themselves in the dock.

In my opinion, it can be an interesting enterprise to use computer-assisted methodologies to study discourse corpora. As Greco Morasso has shown for argumentative discourse conducted in Italian, if corpus linguistics is used appropriately, it can *add* to the insight that has been achieved by other means. It can do so by providing quantitative confirmation of certain linguistic intuitions and also, as Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998, p. 23) noted, by expanding the scope of earlier investigations and opening up possibilities of conducting new kinds of investigations into the *use of language*. Corpus linguistics, however, does by no means *replace* using linguistic intuition and relying on theoretical concepts. In fact, in order to lead to any sensible results, it cannot do without these. This also goes – as she herself involuntarily demonstrates – for the corpus research conducted by Goodwin.

The first question Goodwin sets out to answer concerns the *meaning* of the English words “argument” and “arguing.” In this endeavor, she puts herself in the same position as the compiler of a dictionary, albeit that she allows herself to bring in O’Keefe’s celebrated

distinction between argument-as-reason and argument as-a-fight, which is based on his linguistic intuition regarding the English language, and some other distinctions she intuitively considers important, such as that between PRO, CONTRA and neutral/ambivalent/indeterminable attitudes. In coding the grammatical structures used to identify arguments Goodwin makes good use of theoretical notions from grammar such as “simple clause constituent,” “complex clause constituent,” “anaphoric reference” and “cataphoric reference.” Also, she uses well-known argumentative indicators such as “for” (in “an argument for”) and the subordinating conjunction “that” (in “argued that”) as “argument identifiers.” It is therefore clear that the results of her research, far from arising inductively and automatically out of the “dumb data,” depend heavily on intuition and theory. Unlike Goodwin thinks, she could have carried this approach even further by realizing that complex grammatical constructions conveying complex argumentation may also contain identifiers that point to specific forms of complexity (multiple, coordinative or subordinative), so that the desired decomposition can be achieved without having to rely on the reconstruction Goodwin dislikes so much.

It is a pity that Professor Goodwin chooses to limit herself to the English word “argument.” Some further reflection on the differences between its meanings and the meanings of its equivalents in other languages, such as French, German, Italian and Spanish, would have prevented her from spending too much attention to the distinction between argument-as-reason and argument-as-fight that makes English “idiosyncratic.” A less Anglo-centric approach would have enabled her to pay attention to more relevant observations instead. I am convinced, for instance, that taking account of the crucial “process-product ambiguity” of the words argument and argumentation leads to better results than taking account of the distinction between “argument-1” and “argument-2.” As Goodwin notes, “the evidence of the corpus largely bears out O’Keefe’s basic conception of argument-2s as overt, extended disagreements, and his ‘have/make,’ ‘argue about/that,’ and ‘with [between]’ tests,” but she also acknowledges that there is additional evidence “that throws other aspects of this distinction into doubt.” On top of that, it is clear that when you view them from the argument-1 perspective, which is the relevant perspective here, the tests become even less distinctive. Goodwin rightly concludes that “the various meanings of ‘argument’ have more in common than a strong distinction between argument-1 and argument-2 might suggest” and that the word “argu-” is in all its meanings related to using speech *to manage disagreement*.

This last conclusion is not new and – I am happy to say – in full agreement with the definition of “argumentation” that was given earlier in the handbook *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*, co-authored by a group of European and North-American argumentation theorists (van Eemeren et al., 1996). This definition was based on a lexical analysis sharpened stipulatively on the basis of theoretical considerations. All the main elements of the concept of argument that arises out of Goodwin’s research are already present in this definition: the centrality of the *management of disagreement* (“difference of opinion”), the view of arguments as both *interactionally significant* and “logically” *assessable*, and the role argument has in *supporting* (“justifying”) or *undermining* (“refuting”) a *conclusion* (“standpoint”). Should this not count as proof that, in this respect, Goodwin’s research by no means falsifies the earlier work of argumentation theorists?

The second question Professor Goodwin wants to answer concerns the *usage* of “argument.” She checks the collocations of the word “argument” in the corpus, including in her lists not only the adjectives and verbs that speakers use with the word “argument,” but also identifiers of argument. From the results we learn, for instance, that some of the adjectives refer to the *force* arguments exert on audiences, some to the *importance* they have and some to their *soundness*. The verbs refer to things *produced*, *received* and *responded to* and to things *judged*. Goodwin’s observations concerning the identifiers “that” (beginning a clause that specifies the proposition argued), “about” and “of” (indicating the argument’s topic) and “for” and “against”

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(suggesting its supportive or refuting function) are also pertinent, but all these observations can, in fact, also be made without any corpus linguistics.

Professor Goodwin's third question concerns the frequency of "arguments." After having provided interesting tables, she concludes that words derived from the root "argu-" appear "at best, [...] about as frequent as some comparable words." This observation is followed by the hasty and chaffing conclusion that "this raises the interesting question of why we should be pursuing *argumentation* theory at all." It will be clear to all, I hope, that the need for studying argumentation is not determined by the relative frequency of the occurrence of the word "argument" in an American Congressional debate.

The answer to Professor Goodwin's fourth question concerning the attitude speakers have towards arguments can, if this American Congressional debate is again taken as the norm, be summarized as "*We* make points, *they* make arguments." I have no reason to doubt that Goodwin's summary is accurate, but it is important here again to emphasize that this negative attitude towards arguments is by no means reflected in the use of the equivalents of the word "argument" in other languages. I regard this a peculiar characteristic of the word "argument" in the English language and see no reason why it should be included in a description of the *concept* of argument.

Finally, Professor Goodwin's answers to the interesting questions of what makes two explicitly identified arguments the same (question five) or different (question six) make, in my opinion, again clear that argumentation theorists are not so far removed from argumentative practice as she suggests. Speakers prove to be capable to identify instances of different occurrences of the same argument in the way envisaged by most argumentation theorists, even if these occurrences are not literally the same. As Goodwin observes, "to participants in the Congressional Gulf War debate, the same argument could not only be repeated by different people [...], it could be carried forward over long time spans without changing its identity." Obviously, these people have a certain conception of the identity of arguments. Also they agree with Freeman's observation, which is shared by many argumentation theorists, that "one argument may incorporate any set of reasons, as long as they support one conclusion." This means that "arguments" can consist of one phrase but also expand into a long account without there being any need for users of this term to have an "accordion-like," or even "amoeba-like" conception of argument.

More important, however, is that the way in which Goodwin analyzes the ways in which various kinds of grammatical forms are used to convey "inferences," "claims on the ultimate issue," "penultimate reasons or claims," and other argument contents reveals not only that she makes abundant use of theoretical concepts and intuitions necessary to identify occurrences of argumentative units to which they apply, but also that she uses concepts and intuitions that run to a large extent parallel with those of argumentation theorists who want to identify the structure of argumentation. In this endeavor, she is not simply relying on the evidence of the corpus (as she claims in note 5), but interpreting the corpus with the help of analytical tools based on theory. At times, in her explanations she even falls back on the concepts and terminology used by argumentation theorists: "If we imagine the central issue of the debate as the 'top level' of an argument diagram, contents [of the kind she is discussing] could be called 'penultimate' statements."

Although Professor Goodwin's corpus study *in itself* is most interesting, she spoils the effect by framing her research in the context of offering an *alternative* to the approaches of argumentation theorists she pronounces deficient. In my opinion, this distracts the attention away from a careful interpretation and weighing of the significance of her results. In this connection the conclusion of her essay is telling. It not only contains a number of unsubstantiated claims but it also sketches a much too simplistic picture of the positions of the theoreticians she reacts to. If it is indeed true that "our expertise as argumentation theorists may fail us when dealing with

Congressional argumentative practice,” which is by no means proven, then it makes a difference whether this is so because some of the tools that are needed are lacking or because our theories lead us to the wrong results, as Goodwin suggested at the beginning of her essay. In her conclusion Goodwin seems to concentrate in the first place on tools that are lacking. She suggests that the tool of argumentative indicators does not work well, but seems to have only a very limited idea (“because,” “since,” and “therefore”) of what this tool involves (cf. van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007), without realizing that she herself makes use of a much broader interpretation of this tool in her analysis. She also ignores the fact that the application of this tool is not just an automatic (“dumb”) thing that can be done by a computer, but requires understanding of how argumentative discourse is conducted so that pragmatic insight of a Gricean kind and insight from discourse analysis can be brought to bear in the interpretation. “Argumentation theorists looking for indicators in the Congressional debate will be disappointed,” she says, and “those trying to diagram arguments [...] may also face frustration.” Although both remarks may be true, they give a completely wrong picture of what argumentation theorists are out to do. Similarly, the fact that in the Congressional debate “no particular piece of evidence seems to be necessary, and evidence goes unmarked” is not something that will simply leave argumentation theorists “baffled”; on the contrary, it may remind them why they are in business.

[link to response](#)

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