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VERBAL INDICATORS OF ARGUMENTATION AND EXPLANATION

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Abstract:

Linguistic descriptions of (markers of) textual relations are not always immediately relevant for providing guidelines to the analysis of argumentative discourse. This is partly due to the fact that these descriptions usually do not distinguish between argumentative and explanatory relations. The paper argues that the identification of argumentative and explanatory relations can benefit from combining insight into the use of certain specific linguistic expressions with insight into the contextual preconditions for performing the speech acts of arguing and explaining.

1. Introduction

Although a great many authors have emphasized that the verbal presentation of argumentation plays an important part in the identification of standpoints, reasons and argumentation structures, so far the clues provided by the wording of the text have not been systematically explored. In order to investigate the types of words and expressions that can be helpful in the analysis of argumentative discourse, a research project was started at the university of Amsterdam that concentrates on the verbal indicators of the communicative and interactional functions of argumentative moves present in the Dutch language. The aims of the project are to make an inventory of potential indicators, to classify these indicators in accordance with the pragma-dialectical model for critical discussion, and to describe the conditions that need to be fulfilled for a certain verbal expression to serve as an indicator of a specific argumentative move.¹

2. Using linguistic insight in analyzing argumentative discourse

The model for critical discussion specifies which speech acts can contribute to the resolution of a dispute in the various stages of the resolution process. These speech acts do not only include arguments and standpoints, but also speech acts by means of which standpoints and arguments are accepted, agreements are reached on the allocation of the burden of proof, concessions or criticism are expressed et cetera. The scope of the project is therefore not restricted to indicators of arguments and standpoints, but extends to all indicators of speech acts that can play a part in the resolution of a dispute. As far as the indicators of argumentation and standpoints are concerned, we are not just interested in 'connectives' in the 'narrow' sense, such as 'for' and 'therefore'; we shall also pay attention to argumentative indicators in the 'broad' sense: 'my reasons for this are,' 'my conclusion is,' *et cetera*. In carrying out our research we make use of pragma-linguistic descriptions of connectives and other linguistic elements that may be indicative of aspects of argumentative discourse that are indispensable for an adequate evaluation. Although in recent years the connectives and other discourse markers have been given much attention by linguists, the research is still in a preliminary stage. At present, in many approaches the main

concern seems to be to develop taxonomies of relations for describing and classifying the different types of connectives.²

Another obstacle to using linguistic insights when analyzing argumentative discourse is that most prominent taxonomies of text relations are developed from a metatheoretical perspective that differs crucially from the functionalizing and externalizing approach chosen in pragma-dialectics. In addition, there is a difference of purpose: usually linguists are not specifically interested in the problems of analyzing argumentative and other types of discourse. In this paper I shall make clear how linguistic descriptions, despite all these drawbacks, can be utilized in analyzing argumentative discourse if insight into the use of linguistic expressions is sensibly combined with insight into the contextual preconditions for performing the speech acts of arguing and explaining.

3. Problems of applying linguistic insight to argumentative discourse

When describing and classifying the different types of discourse connectives, pragma-linguists currently often make use of two different taxonomies of textual relations or a combination of both. The first is Sweetser's (1990) *multiple-domains theory*; the second is the *Rhetorical Structure Theory* developed by Mann and Thompson (1988).³

Sweetser distinguishes between three different domains that play a role in—among other things—the interpretation of the relationships between clauses: the *content* domain, the *epistemic* domain and the *speech act* (or 'conversational') domain. Traditionally, grammarians have listed argumentative connectives in the category of causal relations.⁴ According to Sweetser, sentences that contain 'causal' conjunctions, such as 'therefore', 'since' and 'so', can be given different readings depending on the type of domain. The relationship between the conjoined clauses can be based on (a) real-world causality, (b) epistemic causality or (c) speech act causality. Sweetser (1990: 77) gives the following examples:

- (1a) John came back because he loved her.
- (1b) John loved her, because he came back.
- (1c) What are you doing tonight, because there's a good movie on.

In example (1a), the clauses are connected by real-world causality: his love was the real-world cause of his coming back. Example (1b) is a case of epistemic causality: according to Sweetser's analysis, the speaker's knowledge of John's return 'causes' the conclusion that John loved her. In (1c) the clauses are connected by speech act causality: the *because*-clause gives the cause of the speech act (the question) embodied by the main clause.

One of the problems of applying Sweetser's taxonomy to argumentative discourse is that it is not a taxonomy of speech act relations. It also does not fit in completely with a speech act based model of textual relations such as the model for critical discussion. The taxonomy is in so far compatible with a speech act perspective that the relation of *real-world* causality (or 'content' conjunction) could be seen as a relationship between the propositions of two speech acts, situated at the propositional level. *Speech act* causality too is situated at the speech act (or 'illocutionary') level: it is a relation between two speech acts, one of which asserts that, or questions whether, a felicity condition for the other has been fulfilled. The relation of *epistemic* causality, however, is problematic. Sweetser provides an internalizing definition of this type of relation, not situating it at the

speech act level, but at the level of the speaker's thought processes. 'Internal act-external act' is, according to Sweetser, the dividing line between epistemic and conversational causality:⁵

There is a class of causal-conjunction uses in which the causality is that between premise and conclusion in the speaker's mind [...] and there is another class of uses in which the causality involves the speech act itself (1990: 80).

The internalizing approach underlying the concept of epistemic causality runs counter to the pragma-dialectical starting-point of externalization, which requires that argumentation theorists concentrate on the speech acts performed rather than the beliefs and inferences involved in the reasoning process of drawing a conclusion.⁶ Sweetser's epistemic relation is a relation between a premise and a conclusion; in that respect it is similar to argumentation. Its internalizing definition, however, proclaims a fundamental difference between the epistemic causal relation and the argumentative relation.⁷ Sweetser's *causal relation in the speech act domain*, on the other hand, is compatible with the relation between a reason and a standpoint. This category of causal relations, however, covers only argumentation that pertains to the acceptability or propriety of a speech act, not to the truth or justifiability of a proposition.

The conclusion is that Sweetser's trichotomy of causal relations does not seem capable of capturing all aspects of the relationship between the speech act of putting forward a standpoint and the speech act of argumentation. An additional problem is, that the relations between the three types of causal relations in her taxonomy are not completely clear. Seen from a speech act perspective, the *propositional* causal relation is to be situated at a lower hierarchical level than the *speech act* causal relation. In principle, a combination of the two relations could therefore occur in one and the same speech act complex, each relation manifesting itself at a different level of analysis. Although Sweetser acknowledges that different readings can almost always be given, she believes that the one reading will usually be more plausible than the other, so that the one will in practice exclude the other. This may be inferred from her comments on example 1b:

Example (1b) does *not* most naturally mean that the return caused the love in the real world; in fact, under the most reasonable interpretation, the real-world causal connection could still be the one stated in (1a), though not necessarily. Rather, (1b) is normally understood as meaning that the speaker's *knowledge* of John's return (as a premise) causes the *conclusion* that John loved her (1990: 77).

Such remarks make it doubtful whether *content causality* can really be regarded as a propositional relation.

The Rhetorical Structure Theory seems at first sight to correspond nicely with the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation. Mann and Thompson consider their theory to be a functional theory of text structure that can be used as a tool for the analysis of a wide range of text types. They distinguish a large number of text relations differing from each other in the effect they intend to achieve in the reader. For each of the relations between two text spans, called the 'nucleus' and the 'satellite', they formulate a number of constraints, which are highly similar to the felicity conditions for speech acts. The textual relations are divided into two groups, 'subject matter' relations and 'presentational' relations:

Subject matter relations are those whose intended effect is that the reader *recognizes* the relation in question; presentational relations are those whose intended effect is to *increase some inclination* in the reader, such as the desire to act or the degree of positive regard for, belief in, or acceptance

of the nucleus (1988: 257).

In their definition of subject matter relations, the only intended effect mentioned by Mann and Thompson is the communicative effect of recognizing the relation between the propositional contents of the related speech acts. For which illocutionary purpose, or interactional goal, a propositional relation is employed by the writer is not accounted for. This means that Mann and Thompson's analyses are only partly functional.

The fact that propositional and illocutionary relations are treated as interchangeable in the Rhetorical Structure Theory, makes it difficult to establish which of Mann and Thompson's relations are to be considered as argumentative. Apart from more obvious candidates such as the presentational relations 'Motivation', 'Evidence' and 'Justify', there are subject-matter relations such as 'Cause' that could be used argumentatively. The same is true of 'Solutionhood': the intended effect of this relation is that the reader recognizes that one part of the text presents a solution to a problem presented elsewhere in the text. Such a solution can, however, not only be presented for descriptive purposes, but also for argumentative purposes, as in pragmatic argumentation. Due to its underdeterminateness, the Rhetorical Structure theory is deficient as a method for analyzing argumentative discourse: in order to establish whether there exists an argumentative relation or an explanatory relation between two parts of a text, it is for instance not sufficient merely to identify a causal relation.

4. Verbal indicators of argumentative and explanatory relations

The taxonomies of textual relations proposed in the linguistic literature do not provide a good starting point for making an inventory of potential indicators of arguments and explanations. Due to the authors' failure to distinguish systematically between relations at the propositional level and the illocutionary level, an important source of clues is in fact disregarded. In order to make this clear, I shall first give an overview of the main distinguishing features of the speech acts of arguing and explaining. My overview will be based on Houtlosser's (1995: 226-227) analysis of the speech act complex of giving an explanation, which is inspired by van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1984: 44-45, 1992: 31) analysis of the complex speech act argumentation.⁸

While argumentation is an attempt to convince the listener of the *acceptability* of a standpoint with respect to a proposition, explanation aims to increase the listener's *understanding* of the proposition represented by the explained statement (*explanandum*). There are no restrictions on the propositional content of a standpoint that is supported by an argument, but both the propositional content of the explained statement and the explaining statements are condition-bound: the explained statement should refer to a *factual state of affairs* and the explaining statements should mention the *cause* of this state of affairs. Another important difference is that argumentation is put forward when the speaker expects that the *acceptability* of the standpoint is at issue, whereas giving an explanation is pointless if the speaker does not believe that the explained statement *has already been accepted* by the listener as depicting a true state of affairs.⁹

When confronted with a case where it is doubtful whether we are dealing with an explanation or with argumentation it is a good analytic strategy to determine first whether the conditions for the propositional content of an explanation have been fulfilled. I shall give some examples where this is not the case. In discussing these examples, I make use of some analytical distinctions that play a role in the pragma-dialectical evaluation procedure regarding the use of argumentation schemes (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992: 158-160): (1) the three types of argumentation: argumentation based on an analogy, argumentation based on a causal relation and argumentation based on a symptomatic relation; (2) the distinction between descriptive, evaluative and

inciting propositions, and (3) the distinction between propositions with singular, particular or universal scope. Examples 2 to 6 represent different cases in which the conditions for explanation are not satisfied:

2. There must have been a sea here once, because the ground is full of sea shells.
3. She will have poor eyesight when she grows up, because she's always reading in bed.
4. We must mail these forms today because otherwise we won't get our subsidy.
5. Burmese cats make a lot of noise, because all my three Burmese cats did that.
6. This drug must be toxic in humans, because most of the mice have died.

In example 2 the 'because'-clause mentions the effect instead of the cause: the reasoning is from effect to cause. In example 3 the causal relation is as it should be, but it is used to make a prediction. Since a prediction concerns a state of affairs that is to be realised, and not a factual state of affairs, 3 cannot be an explanation. In example 4 the first clause cannot function as an explanandum, because the proposition is not a descriptive proposition in which a factual state of affairs is described, but an inciting proposition. In example 5 the reasoning is not based on a causal relation, but on a symptomatic relation. Moreover, the 'because'-clause contains a particular proposition, whereas the first clause contains a proposition whose universal scope is universal. In an explanation, particular facts can be explained by referring to a general rule or principle, but not the other way around. Example 6, finally, is not based on a causal relation, but on an analogy.

By linking relations at the propositional level systematically with relations at the illocutionary level, it is thus possible to obtain information that is crucial to the analysis of argumentative discourse.¹⁰ A piece of reasoned discourse can only be an explanation if the reasoning is at the propositional level based on a causal relation, and not on a symptomatic relation or an analogy. Moreover, this causal relation should be construed in such a way that the effect is mentioned in the explained statement, and the cause in the explaining statement, instead of the other way around. The explained statement should contain a descriptive proposition, not an evaluative or inciting one. This proposition should refer to a factual state of affairs, not to a state of affairs that is still to be realized.

Since an explanation must be based on a causal relation, identifying the type of relation that the reasoning is based on at the propositional level is a crucial step in the analysis. Indicators of propositional relations, which in the case of argumentation are called 'indicators of the argumentation scheme', are therefore an important source of clues for distinguishing arguments from explanations.¹¹

Linguistic clues for the identification of argumentation and explanation can also be derived from the main differences between the speech acts of argumentation and explanation. One difference is that argumentation is put forward when the speaker expects the *acceptability* of the standpoint to be at issue, whereas with explanation he believes that the explained statement *has already been accepted* by the listener. For this reason, according to Govier, certainty moves in an argument from the premises to the conclusion, whereas it moves in an explanation from the fact explained to the explaining statements:

In the explanation, the explained statement is as certain as the explaining statements and often more certain. In an argument the premises are typically more certain than the conclusion (1987: 162).

Observations such as these can only be put to good use by the analyst if he knows how to determine whether a certain statement is as certain as or more certain than another statement. Govier appears to call a statement 'certain' if the speaker believes that the statement will not be disputed by the listener or that it is already accepted by the listener. An important type of indication that the speaker believes that the listener may take issue with one of his statements is, according to Houtlosser (1995), a certain use of modal terms:

The epistemic use of modal terms can modify an assertive's force. Then the acceptability of the assertive is brought into question by way of an implicature (1995: 311).

Because modal terms indicate that, as far as the listener is concerned, the acceptability of an assertive might be at issue, they can be instrumental in distinguishing arguments from explanations. This can be illustrated by means of examples 7a-7c:

7a. (1) He left his job, (2) because he couldn't get along with his colleagues.

7b. (1) He left his job, (2) most probably because he couldn't get along with his colleagues.

7c. (1) He may have left his job, (2) because he couldn't get along with his colleagues.

Example 7a and 7b are explanations. In 7a, both the 'because'— clause (2) and the first clause (1) are unmodified and therefore presented as equally certain. In 7b, clause (2) is less certain than clause (1). Example 7c is a case of argumentation: clause (1) is modified and therefore presented as disputable, whereas clause (2) is presented as certain.

A last kind of linguistic clue that I shall discuss here is the type of connective that is employed in establishing a relation between the clauses. According to Houtlosser (1995: 227), it is a preparatory condition for an explanation that the speaker believes that the listener's understanding of how the state of affairs mentioned in the *explanandum* has come into being is insufficient. By informing the listener about the cause of this state of affairs, the speaker hopes to enhance the listener's understanding. Given these conditions, it may be assumed that the speaker believes he is providing *new* information to the listener in the explaining statement. This is different in the case of argumentation: here the speaker must assume that the premises will be acceptable to the listener. Although this does not necessarily mean that the premises never contain new information, ordinarily the speaker will expect the premises to be acceptable to the listener because they are taken as given, or have the status of facts for the listener. In her pragmatic study of English causality conjunctions, Vandepitte (1993: 91) has established that the selection of conjunctionals such as 'because', 'as' and 'since' is influenced by what the speaker thinks the listener already knows. Causal relations whose cause or reason is assumed to be known by the listener are most frequently introduced by means of 'as' or 'since'. The conjunctional 'because' is least frequently used to introduce a manifest state of affairs. If a causal relation is marked by 'as' or 'since', there is good reason to assume that this relation is part of an argument rather than an explanation.

5. Conclusion

My conclusion is that the functionalizing speech act perspective inherent in the pragma-dialectical approach constitutes a fruitful starting point for making a systematic inventory of linguistic clues at the different hierarchical levels of argumentative discourse. Combining pragmatic analyses of the contextual preconditions for performing the speech acts of arguing and explaining with the use of pragma-dialectical analytical instruments regarding argumentation schemes, provides an important source of indicators. In this way, a basis is created for using linguistic insights in a well-founded and systematic way.

Notes

1. The project 'Argumentative indicators in Dutch' is subsidized by the National Science Foundation (NWO), project nr. 200-41-012. Participants in this project are F.H. van Eemeren, J.M. Gerlofs, R. Grootendorst, P. Houtlosser and A.F. Snoeck Henkemans. 

2. For an overview of the main approaches to textual relations, see Kroon (1995). 

3. For examples of textual analyses within the framework of Rhetorical Structure Theory, see Mann et al. (1992). Kroon (1995), Redeker (1990) and Sanders (1992) are pragma-linguists who make use of Sweetser's and Mann and Thompson's taxonomies. 

4. The broad category of causal relations includes relations such as effective cause, result, condition and purpose. 

5. Sweetser admits that the *because*—clause in epistemic causal—conjunction cases can be analyzed as secondarily buttressing a speech act of assertion, but in her opinion 'its primary function, surely, is to explain the epistemic act of drawing the conclusion [...]' (1990: 80). 

6. According to van Eemeren et al. (1996: 276) the study of argumentation should not concentrate on the psychological dispositions of the people involved, but on their externalized — or externalizable — commitments: 'any efforts to reduce argumentation to a structure of attitudes and beliefs, or a process of reasoning, are inadequate'. 

7. Even if Sweetser's epistemic causal relation were to be reinterpreted as a relation between speech acts, it would still not fully satisfy the concept of argumentation. Sweetser's epistemic causal-conjunctions always have factual conclusions: certain knowledge 'causes' the speaker to conclude that something is true. There is no place for argumentation in support of evaluative or inciting conclusions. 

8. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 116-117; 1992: 29) observe that it is important to distinguish between argumentation and explanation (or amplification) since explanations are designed to increase the listener's comprehension, and will have to be judged accordingly. Starting from this observation, Houtlosser gives a specification of the felicity conditions of explanations and compares them with the felicity conditions of argumentation as formulated by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984: 45-46; 1992: 30-33). His more detailed analysis is consistent with Johnson and Blair's (1983) and Govier's (1987, Ch. 8) analyses of the differences between arguments and explanations. 

9. This difference in the speaker's expectations of the listener's beliefs is seen by several authors as the most important difference between argument and explanation. See Govier (1987), van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 1992) and Johnson and Blair (1983). 

10. Klein (1987) arrives at a similar conclusion; he specifies which types of propositional relations can go together in particular illocutionary relations. 

11. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992: 98-99) list a number of expressions that can be used to indicate a particular argumentation scheme. 

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