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Commentary on David Hitchcock's "The Culture of Spoken Arguments"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Once every few years I wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat thinking back to one of those all-too revealing questions that students ask about argumentation. Sometimes the question is a rhetorical question, like "Aren't these critical tests, well, sort of obvious?" More often the question is genuine, posed on the naïve assumption that there is an answer ready at hand. It's a question like "How well do these schemas work? I mean, do they apply to all arguments?" I wake up because I don't know the answer. Often I don't even know what an answer would look like.

Not many argumentation scholars ask questions like this last one—and it's not because it is sophomoric or trivial. It is actually a question that is so hard and difficult that one hesitates to even raise the issue. David Hitchcock's paper is a refreshing exception to this pattern of neglect. He clearly sees that how natural language inferences and arguments work in fact is an important source of insight into how arguments work in theory, and how arguments should work. This paper is a sequel to his 2002 study. There he examined inferences in scholarly books to test the applicability of his covering generalization approach (CG) to inference evaluation (Hitchcock 1985, 1992, 1994, 1998). Here he tests the applicability of covering generalizations to evaluating inferences made by people in their call-ins to radio and television talk shows. And like the previous study with scholarly books, Hitchcock concludes in this study "that the covering generalization approach to evaluating inferences can be applied successfully" to spoken inferences and arguments (p. 16). In the following two sections I will explain why I think that conclusion is premature. The first concern has to do with what it would mean to "empirically" test whether "the covering generalization approach fits our habits of reasoning and argument" (p. 3). The second concern has to do with the object of the test—what general category is represented by the cases analyzed.

2. (HOW) DOES THIS TEST THE COVERING GENERALIZATION APPROACH?

At first glance, Hitchcock (here and 2002) would seem to ask a simple question that should get a simple answer: Can CG be applied successfully to actual discourse? Yes or

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no? And it would seem that the way to answer this question is to do just what was done in these studies. Find some inferences in discourse. Unitize the reasons and conclusion. Formulate the covering generalization. Evaluate the covering generalization. At each step you find out, can you do it? If you can for all steps, then you have an affirmative answer to the research question.

But this is not much of a test. Granted, if either study had failed to accomplish any of these steps it would be a serious problem. And in all likelihood only the author of CG could expect to get that kind of finding taken seriously. Failure for anyone else would be taken to mean that they just didn't understand CG. But if that had happened, we would like to know what went wrong. What kind of troubles emerged and what do they reveal about inference and argument in general? Now, that didn't happen, but we still would like to know the answer to some similar questions: What kind of difficulties occurred in applying CG? Did CG get it right?

The very elegance and straightforwardness of the covering generalization concept is part of the problem. A covering generalization is likely to be found for any argument or inference because it is practically built into the procedure. The very definition of an inference or argument already produces ready to analyze cases, i.e., premise-like reasons and explicit conclusions, all presumably issued as assertives and ready to represent in the standard canonical form of declarative sentences. Anything else never gets into the process. Finding a topical link is the key to producing a covering generalization, and pretty much any coherent, sensible discourse is going to contain a topic. And if it weren't coherent and sensible, there wouldn't be an inference to work with in the first place. So, finding a category contained in (one of) the premises that is also contained in the conclusion is not unexpected.

The more difficult test would be to see whether or not the covering generalization was formulated in a principled way and captures the intuitive connection between reasons and conclusions. One way to get at this would be to assess consistency in formulation of the covering generalization—the sort of thing standardly sought with measures of inter-rater reliability or test-retest reliability (would the same coder come up with the same formulation twice?). Another way might be to have ordinary language users evaluate or choose among alternative formulations. This would be tricky because it would require principled decisions about what is the same and what is a different content formulation. But it would raise an important question for argumentation theory generally: Just what differences in informal formulations matter and why?

Another problem in assessing success in applying CG comes with evaluations. Here we find a common tension between normative and descriptive concerns with natural language use as well as the standard problems that arise in deciding how to apply a principle of charity. Hitchcock reports that the covering generalizations in 15 of the 37 cases were judged “invalid.” Is that because of bad reasoning by callers or because the covering generalization wasn't how the callers were reasoning? Hitchcock (2002) also found that 26% of the inferences in scholarly books were “invalid.” So, if CG is getting it right even the published and reviewed writing of trained academics displays pretty poor reasoning.

Now, perhaps these evaluations are appropriate. And perhaps what is empirical is the questions of whether evaluations of natural language inferences and arguments can be successfully made. But if that is the case, then we need more than just a report of what

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evaluations were made. We need some standard for a principled assessment of successful and unsuccessful evaluations.

3. WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

Hitchcock (this study, 2002) is quite properly concerned that his findings be projectable to the general category of natural language inference and argument. But there is a real conceptual problem in terms of what that is. The focus on regularities and propensities in the classifications of this study and in comparison to the 2002 study would suggest a picture of natural discourse based on a kind of “freeze-frame” of everything everyone everywhere is saying and writing right now or across some broader strip of time. But that is not the only theoretically relevant way to think about our subject-matter. Our theories project into a domain that is constantly changing. New kinds of arguments emerge; old ones fade away. Structural distinctions of real importance may or may not correspond to what happens frequently or infrequently. Our theoretically relevant domain is as much a domain of possibilities as it is actualities. We are often interested in what does happen because of what it tells us about what could or could not happen.

Unlike most researchers—including heavily quantitative social science researchers—Hitchcock is at pains to apply selection methods that are genuinely random. Way too many researchers report as a “random” sample what is in fact haphazard, arbitrary, or a matter of convenience. The idea is that without an unbiased sample of natural language arguments, one cannot make warranted inferences about the distribution of properties in the general population based on the distribution of those properties in the sample. Hitchcock is right that anything less will call into question what the cases he has studied represent. Unknown as well as known biases in sampling necessarily restrict and distort the nature of the population being sampled.

But that projection to the broader category of natural language inference and argument is already blocked. Both studies began with convenience samples. Inferences from the cases sampled stop with the larger group that was identified as a matter of convenience (books at McMaster’s library; call-ins to the radio/tv shows at the place, date, and time recorded). The limitations here can be seen by considering alternatives to the contrast between “written” and “spoken” discourse. It could have been classified just as easily as planned/unplanned, initiated/solicited, academic/everyday, general/political, reviewed/unreviewed, formal/casual, or any other number and combination of attributes. The point is that we have two case studies of indeterminate classification. We really can’t make much of the quantitative similarities and differences. It’s just a start. But it is a start.

[Link to reply](#)

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