

Commentary on Zemplén's Profiling dialogues: Multi-trait mapping of televised argumentative exchanges

MEHMET ALI ÜZELGÜN
Universidade Nova De Lisboa
uzelgun@fcsh.unl.pt

Gabor Zemplén's paper provides us with a much-needed kind of research: research that links the normative study of argumentative discourse with the empirical study of the interaction of embodied agents. By mapping what they call the traits of an argumentative exchange – repeated occurrences of both verbal and somatic reactions and gestures – Zemplén and his student co-workers promise the readers a path towards a multi-modal analysis that extends the linguistically grounded pragmatic theory. Representing the identified traits on a series of temporal charts, the paper provides the reader an detailed abstract map of a 24-minutes televised debate. I have only three points to make.

The first point has to do with the issues arising from the long time-span of such an analysis, extending namely from 2013 to 2018. Controversies – such as the one over a government's education policy – have a life of their own, they develop, expand, and the meanings ascribed to particular events and positions change as these accumulate across the years. This poses a challenge to the continuity of the analytic framework. Zemplén's study is alert to this challenge: rather than assuming or questing uniformity in the detection and interpretation of the traits across the years (and resorting to aggregation), the analysis also develops along the six years. The students that contributed to the first year of the study provide the core of the multi-trait analysis. The succeeding yeargroups then build on this grounding work with the improvement and standardization of the traits, employing different approaches to and accumulating experience with the same data. It is an ingenious design, combining pedagogic and analytic features in a cumulative and creative manner.

Concerned with the level of expertise of his student analysts, namely in scrutinizing discourse and argumentation, the author reserves significant attention to the issues of experience and tacit knowledge. My second point concerns the primacy of what is called tacit

knowledge: what makes the student analysts apt for the task, we could add, is not just their background knowledge of Hungarian language and culture, or the ethos of the TV channel. As the very subjects – directly affected by the policies being discussed – and parties to the debate scrutinized, the students can be expected to possess substantial “argumentative content knowledge” (Goodwin, 2019). In other words, they would probably have a good grasp of the significant positions, key arguments, and the topics through which the controversy unfolds. Such a structured understanding of the topics or issues being dealt with is essential especially when one aims to extend a primarily linguistic theory to the domain of the embodied performance of speech acts and gestures. Only with that kind of understanding of the debate can one make sense and connect various pre-linguistic, somatic reactions to the semantic, reflective processes, and identify the virtual standpoints (Jackson, 1982).

This brings me to my third and central point. Zemplén’s paper promises us insights concerning the link between the established norms of reasonable argumentation and the real life interaction of “arguing organisms” (p. 22). To that end, the author rightly criticizes and moves away from the treatment of argument as an atemporal product. It is true that most normative analyses fall short in taking into account the temporality of the argumentative encounter – and sometimes even in an adequate sequencing of speech acts – but they do that in their effort to examine the inferential patterns that are used across contexts and topics. Atemporality then can be seen as a symptom, rather than the obstacle itself. In taking into account the actuality – or embodiment – of an argumentative exchange, the main obstacle concerns the efforts to strip the content away in order to arrive at pure forms and descriptions. And contemporary argument theories strive to address this shortcoming, for instance by conceptualizing argument schemes through a combination of material – involving the *endoxon* or contextual common ground knowledge – and procedural premises (e.g. Rigotti and Greco Morasso, 2010).

Abstractions have their legitimate use, for instance in identifying the prototypical and stereotypical patterns of argumentation that can be specified with regard to the institutional preconditions of a communicative activity type (van Eemeren, 2017). They can become obstacles in some projects, such as profiling real-life dialogues. While providing us a map of the televised debate with high temporal resolution, I think the paper overlooks the adequate resolution for the presentation of its rich detail. We understand from Table 3 that Zemplén and his coworkers have identified nine topics that were discussed throughout the 24-minutes debate. The paper provides no idea whatsoever what these are, and which topics incorporate what

traits more saliently. Instead, it provides the reader artificial segmentations of the dialogue into, for instance, three 8-minute segments (Figure 8). We understand from such a representation that some traits cluster in the initial one-third of the debate, and others in the last-third of it, but how do such representations inform the mentioned link between the normative theories and the interaction of embodied agents? I would say building such a link requires, at least to some extent, building the link between the argumentative content and the argumentative process. More precisely, the bridge between the pragmatic and the somatic is built only through a good understanding of the sense or significance of those somatic reactions, that is, in the context of the very issues that constitute the disagreement space.

No doubt such contextual approach was employed in the study, be it intuitively or reflexively, and this criticism involves probably not its design, but the choices made in its presentation. A paper that outlines the places of agreement, disagreement, and the threads of argument built among them, would help the reader penetrate the sense of the yet largely enigmatic traits. It is after all those places or topics that incorporate and charge with meaning the recorded reactions and responses.

REFERENCES

- Goodwin, J. (2019). Sophistical refutations in the climate change debates. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 8(1), 40–64.
- Jackson, S. (1992). “Virtual standpoints” and the pragmatics of conversational argument. In F. H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair & C. A. Willard (Eds.), *Argumentation illuminated* (pp. 260-269). Amsterdam: Sic Sat.
- Rigotti, E., and Greco Morasso, S. (2010). Comparing the Argumentum Model of Topics to other contemporary approaches to argument schemes: The procedural and material components. *Argumentation*, 24(4), 489–512.
- van Eemeren, F. H. (2017). Argumentative patterns viewed from a pragma-dialectical perspective. In van Eemeren, F. H. (ed.) *Prototypical argumentative patterns: Exploring the relationship between argumentative discourse and institutional context* (pp. 7-29). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.