

Communicative Competence and Local Theories of Argumentation:

The Case of Academic Citational Practices

Menno H. Reijven

University of Massachusetts/University of Amsterdam

Rebecca M. Townsend

University of Hartford

When people argue in a specific context, they usually know exactly how to do that. The social knowledge participants have to form their expectations regarding the interaction is what we consider as *their* theory of argumentation. Elucidating the theories of the participants in argumentative exchanges is to formulate a local theory of argumentation. In this regard, we consider the ethnography of communication (EoC) as a framework to supplement our studies on argumentation. We believe there are three forms of social knowledge that affect how argumentation is conducted in context. First, participants know what is persuasive within their interactional context. Second, they know how this interaction is appropriately conducted. Third, they attempt to enact and recreate their understanding of the context through their talk.

We use this framework to study citational practices in research. Each field has its own canonical authors. By citing them, academic practice reproduces the topics and audiences which have been deemed relevant. This is largely based on the norm that academic labor deserves acknowledgement. However, social structures may lead to exclusions of ideas and people, which are subsequently ignored. This is one of the issues raised after #MeToo. We consider whether in EoC acknowledgement should be given to other authors next to our canonical figure. We conclude that related research traditions like language socialization (Woolard & Schieffelin,

1994) and ideology (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) should also be considered within, and reinscribed into, EoC.

Communicative Competence as a Local Theory of Argumentation

A local theory of argumentation should articulate how argumentation is conceptualized, structured, and evaluated in specific contexts. As arguing interactants have specific “expectations for speech or interaction (or evaluations of their worth) [that do not] transcend time and place” (Townsend, 2006, p. 204), arguers already have local knowledge about what counts as good, effective, and fair argumentation within a specific context. By participating in the communicative practice, they have to theorize about the nature and requirements of argumentative interactions and implicate a particular theoretical understanding of argumentation within that context. To form local theories of argument, scholars should articulate the local theories people use to argue (e.g., Townsend, 2019). A local theory would describe the argumentative interaction “on” and “*in* [the participants’] own terms” (Townsend, 2006, p. 230).

The framework of EoC is helpful in this regard. This research tradition starts with the observation that within speech communities, people are able to successfully talk to each other (Hymes, 1974). A competent language user is able to produce sentences that are appropriate (i.e., understandable and acceptable) to the context in which they are uttered. In cases of successful communication, participants have “shared knowledge and insight” (Hymes, 1974, p. 8)—that is, communicative competence—acquired through the socialization process into a particular community. When children learn to talk, they acquire “a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes, other modes of communication, etc.—all the components of communicative events, together with attitudes and beliefs regarding them” (Hymes, 1974, p. 75). Central to EoC is identifying and learning this tacit social knowledge regarding communication, which enables

description and analysis of local practices of communication. EoC thus offers argumentation theory a framework to articulate local theories by focusing on learning the knowledge of participants in argumentative practices.

By adopting the framework of EoC, we emphasize that argumentation, like any other form of communication, never occurs in a social vacuum. What effectively counts as good argumentation depends on the standards and goals participants presume in the communicative practice wherein it is used. How people locally conceive of argumentation is intimately intertwined with their organization of social life. Many theories within pragmatics and ethnomethodology could focus more on explicating the social knowledge of the participants within a specific context. These study argumentation separate from the local theories of argumentative practice. For example, while the local context is accounted for in pragmatic-dialectical studies, it is not studied as a local theory but as a variation of the generally applicable ideal model (Snoeck Henkemans & Wagemans, 2015). Left unarticulated in these approaches is precisely the local theory of argumentation, and thus they fail to elucidate participants' understandings of relevant persuasive moves or local ideals of reasonableness.

We acknowledge that pragmatic and ethnomethodological studies have radically different orientations towards the study of communication than EoC. While the former are concerned with intersubjectivity, EoC is concerned with the social knowledge participants share. However, the social knowledge of participants provides insight into communicative behavior beyond pragmatic and ethnomethodological studies. When interactants draw pragmatic inferences and maintain social order, they do this against some background knowledge of what is going on. As EoC focuses on this knowledge, it provides insight into the local expectations regarding communicative conduct. While learning this knowledge requires intersubjectivity (Schegloff,

1992), different communities have come up with different shared practices—different social knowledges—to regulate communicative conduct (Grossberg, 1982; Hymes, 1986). In different circumstances, participants ground their talk upon different sets of values and beliefs—they start with different local theories of communication. Thus, while pragmatics and ethnomethodology are indispensable to researching argumentation, these methodologies cannot articulate these local theories as they do not describe the social knowledge presumed by participants.

Studies in EoC have worked on different types of knowledge relevant to the study of argument. Argumentation is culturally patterned in three ways: what counts as persuasive in argumentative discourse, what counts as appropriate presentation of argumentative moves, and what counts as relevant articulation of contextual features through argumentative talk. Each of these is relevant local knowledge regarding argumentative conduct and should be explicated in a local theory of argumentation.

First, there are *local tools for persuasion*: what is persuasive in particular argumentative exchanges is tied to the local system of values and beliefs. Argumentative discourse is built upon starting points that are acceptable to the addressee: standpoints should have the potential of being shown acceptable within a specific context. This is a culturally defined common ground between the arguers. Fitch (2003) argued that any culture has a set of ideas that are so strongly entangled within the overall belief system of that community that they are immediately accepted as valid by the audience. Cultures also have beliefs that are unsayable, and thus cannot be defended at all (Fitch, 2003). Communities also share a cultural logic that grounds their argumentative discourse, enabling locally understandable and locally relevant inferences (Philipsen, 1986).

Second, there are *local conceptions of reasonableness*. Within a context, local norms regulate argumentative conduct to determine whether moves advanced are appropriate and

legitimate contributions. This knowledge regarding how argumentative exchanges are supposed to go is tied with a local understanding of what is being done. These local conceptions of reasonableness may affect argumentative discourse in a variety of ways, including regarding turn-taking, style, or participation. Consider New England town meetings: the argumentative interaction is organized and evaluated based on an understanding of how democracy is done (Townsend, 2009).

Third, the *rhetorical situation* in which argumentative discourse takes place is locally constituted. Specifically, argumentation takes place in speech events, which are recreated by members of a community through their discursive conduct. Through argumentative discourse, participants recreate a web of culture, articulating certain forms of being, relating, acting, feeling and dwelling (Carbaugh, 2007). They position themselves and their fellow discussants through their talk based on their local knowledge of the speech event. For instance, by positioning one another as citizens in equal relationships to one another, people are able to re-create deliberative meetings. Argumentative discourse is always part of such attempts to recreate a local understanding of the speech event, and thus the rhetorical situation in which it takes place (Biesecker, 1989).

By articulating the cultural knowledge participants use to participate in argumentative practices, a local theory of argumentation elucidates why argumentation is instantiated in specific ways. As participants put their local knowledge in practice through their argumentation, they recreate this social knowledge as well (e.g., Biesecker, 1989). Thus, the cultural discourse is also affected by argumentative discourse, potentially revising the local theories. The two stand in an interdependent relationship.

To understand local argumentative practice fully, scholars should look beyond the speech act of argumentation. For example, while in pragma-dialectics local deviations from the ideal model are accounted for through analyzing whether higher-order conditions have been met (Snoeck Henkemans & Wagemans, 2015), a local theory of argumentation supplements this by explicating the knowledge of participants that resulted in this deviating argumentation. Otherwise, we could easily overlook additional local constraints and affordances for interaction. This separation between studies focusing on the speech act of argumentation and studies focusing on the cultural context also enables investigating interaction between our general theories of argumentation and local ones.

A Local Theory of Academic Argument: Citational Practices

To demonstrate how this model for studying local argumentation is helpful, we look at how scholars have to employ social knowledge to construct their argumentative research reports. How they write their arguments is based on their (local) theory of academic knowledge production within their field of study. This knowledge is acquired through (re)socialization of someone into their discipline through graduate school (Egan, 1989), into a specific academic community with shared norms for communication. Through teaching, advising, and correcting by their teachers and reviewers (Ahmed, 2017), students acquire the social knowledge to successfully partake in research (Graves, 2004). Students learn who can (and should) be cited for their arguments. The student is brought into an academic home in part built through citational “bricks,” becoming so habitual that these “bricks form walls” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 148). A field’s core citational “bricks” should be articulated as tools for persuasion when describing a specific field’s local theory of argumentation. For instance, in EoC, a persuasive argument should make sure that Hymes is cited as initiator of this field of research.

Through citing, students show and learn who contributed to the theory's/field's development. This is often represented in a linear manner, originating with a particular theorist. There is an academic habit of articulating "familial" relations, foregrounding teacher-student relations. The reality of academic research is often different. This representation forgets to mention the relevance of a scholar's colleagues, or even their broader social environment, in the development of theoretical arguments. Citing one person as founder of a theory without citing those whose ideas also contributed to its development makes it seem as if scholarship is a solo practice. Yet, this is exactly what academic socialization accomplishes, as disciplinary habits and practices build walls that exclude people from a field's canon (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Flores, 2016). Reviewers and professors discipline students to "bracket" social "concerns" like sexism as beyond the relevant disciplinary habits (Ahmed, 2017, p. 8). Thus, how scholars cite contributes to (re)constructing the academic argumentative setting. Through citing, scholars (re)establish who matters in their field and to their research, and who does not. Through writing our articles, a rhetorical situation is (re)created by delineating the topics and the audience. Through research, we contribute to creating and re-creating the field's ongoing academic discussion and who participates in it. Not only is the citation framework of a field persuasive, it is also a practice that defines and redefines the relationships among scholars.

Norms beyond citation also need to be adhered to. Following discussions on #MeToo, people have recognized that it matters how these walls have been built. While some key scholars have been identified as sexual harassers, academic practice has still been based upon an ideology perpetuating these inequalities. Various scholars have therefore argued that redressive action is necessary to undo past silencing of scholarly effort. While it is generally allowed that citing such scholars in a field should still happen—after all, they provide "epistemic authority" to our

argument and scholars should make sure to separate their own work from that of others (Leiter, 2018, para. 15)—there is a call for acknowledging scholars’ broader responsibilities. For example, it would be good practice to avoid having a reference list keeping up the tradition formed through unequal power relations (Flores, 2018). There are also suggestions to truly take to heart the social nature of academic research, and not only cite the author of key research pieces but also their research assistants (McCourt, 2019). These are just two expressions of the general norm to acknowledge everyone’s academic labor, irrespective of power structures that generated research, status, and authorship. Even those opposing redressive action invoke this same norm: not citing key figures undermines the due they deserve. Thus, while this norm is generally accepted, there is no clear agreement on how it materializes in practice.

A local understanding of a discipline’s argumentation enables us to better characterize the practice of research. Certain scholars’ work is a persuasive cornerstone within a field and that citational foundation for the field is exclusionary, resulting in a rhetorical situation where certain topics and certain people matter. Citational practices follow the norm that academic labor should be given its due, but this norm has led to disagreement regarding how citation traditions should affect our work.

A local theory enables us to evaluate local argumentation. To comply with the norm of “equal due” in our citational practices, we need to reflect on the “walls” we were taught through our (re)socialization, as students remain largely unaware of how these walls got built. Woolard and Schieffelin urge us to consider “whose interests are served” by the patterns of speech that are rooted in “social practices and interests” (1994, p. 72). We must reflect on who argues, how we were taught, who we were taught, and, consequently, who is ignored; this is the rhetorical situation we articulate within our scholarly work.

We engage with these questions from the perspective of EoC, our own field. While Hymes is a canonical figure, our community has become aware that there are structures of power that should be investigated in order to form an appropriate reference list. It has become clear that his actions harmed women. Some women have legally settled sexual harassment claims about his behavior (O'Donnell, 1988). Moreover, as dean, he did not promote any women or persons of color (Heath, 2011, pp. 401-402). It is necessary to assess whether this resulted in exclusions and adjust our own citational practices accordingly. Some are grappling similarly with this issue as faculty and students at UPenn, where Hymes worked—for them, too, citation was a big question (Elegant, 2018). As citation practices are essential in furthering and sidelining careers, reinscribing important figures to the development of a discipline may need to include people who have faced disruptions.

We try to be aware of who we cite and improve our current citational practices. By recreating the rhetorical event, we articulate relevant identities (Biesecker, 1989). We wish to reconnect Woolard, Schieffelin, and Ochs's insights as integral to the development of thinking about social knowledge members of a community have to successfully communicate—in particular, thinking about our socialization into a community. On one hand, this means that when citing Hymes, we try to present him as *a* key figure of our tradition, limiting his agent-force when possible by referencing parenthetically. On the other hand, traditions like language socialization (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) and ideology (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) should also be a standard consideration by those who work within EoC. Specifically, this would be a requirement based on the local theory of argument we have presented for academic argumentation. If we are to give equal due to all academic work, scholars of EoC should not ignore the potential importance of studies in language socialization and ideology.

Conclusion

A local theory of argumentation should be expressed in terms of the social knowledge participants have regarding argumentative conduct within a specific context. In this pursuit, EoC is an indispensable framework. We used this approach to analyze academic citational practices and have shown how this argumentative discourse can be evaluated based on this local theory of argument. We concluded that regarding EoC, work on language socialization (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) and ideology (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) should become a greater part of the tradition. We have suggested that argumentation is formed through social knowledge that has been subjected to power structures within that community. The next step is to connect these findings to traditions that study the general features of argumentation. This may help us improve our understanding of how arguments gain power in general.

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