ISSA Proceedings 2014 – Testing The Relationship Between Argument And Culture

Abstract: This paper proposes a framework for testing the relationship between argument and culture. The framework is based on the ideas that: 1) the minimal requirement for what constitutes argument across different cultures is the idea of argument as "linkage", and 2) that arguments can be conceptualized in terms of the context of messages. A short exploratory analysis of a data set is used to illustrate the framework.

Keywords: argument, contexts, culture, Edward Hall, linkages

1. *Introduction*

The relationship between argument and culture has not been a common topic of consideration in the field of argumentation. The traditional view was that argument was a universal process that fundamentally operated the same everywhere. In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the relationship between argument processes and culture, which has been manifest in an increasing use of "culture" in theoretical treatments of argumentation (e.g. Johnson, 2000), consideration of argument in non-Western traditions (Jensen, 1992; Combs, 2004), and studies of argumentation practices in various societies (Hornikx & Hoeken, 2007; Hazen & Inoue, 1991). However, even with this increased attention, what is missing in the literature is a systematic attempt to relate argument to culture.

We will contend that the study of argument across cultures reveals the limitations of existing definitions, the need for a more fundamental definition of argument that is part of the process of communication and that is linked to the phenomenological way argument is used among people. Therefore, we will explore the outline of such a framework by

1. defining argument as it can be applied across cultures,
2. relate argument to Hall's theory of "contexting" (1977), and
3. examine the framework in terms of examples of cross-cultural argument.

2. *Definitions of argument and cross-cultural considerations*

To be able to outline the relationship between argument and culture, it is necessary to have a definition of argument that will work across cultures. Such a definition is necessary to insure that we are talking about the same phenomenon in different cultures.

Most definitions of argument have their origin in the Western tradition, and are closely associated with the following terms: logic, rationality, and reasoning. While a number of figures were involved with the development of argument in the West (Plato, Hermogoras, the author of the *Ad Herennium*, Cicero, and Quintilian), Aristotle is the pivotal figure in our thinking about the nature of argument. Aristotle's ideas about argument are based on his observations of Athenian society. As such, they are complex and not totally systematic. On one hand, a number of his works deal with what has become known as formal or analytic argument with an emphasis on deduction and the syllogism designed to lead to certain knowledge. On the other hand, some of his works deal with the more informal or substantive processes of argument with an emphasis on the general acceptance of opinions (dialectic) or the convincing of an audience about a view (rhetorical) (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans, 1996; Wolf, 2010).

These viewpoints have proved problematic for the cross-cultural study of argument. First, forms of argument in the West and in other cultures may not appear to be comparable. Some of the forms of argument considered to be "valid" in western cultures may not be found or accepted in other cultures. Thus, Morrison (1972), in discussing Japan, asserted that there is a "virtual lack of any logical system resembling Aristotelian logic, experimental logic, or any other kind" (p. 90). His conclusion is based on a comparison of scholarly topics in Japan with those in the West, making it appear that comparable uses of argument do not appear across cultures. In addition, other forms of argument may be found in non-western cultures that do not seem to be the same as in Western cultures. Finally, cultures may have different norms about what are acceptable forms of argument. They may look with great displeasure on disagreement expressed in public situations. Thus, we are faced with a situation where our traditional ways of viewing argument do not seem to fit what we are finding in other cultures.

Second, the conditions under which our understanding of argument and logic developed in the West, and particularly in Athenian Greece and Republican Rome, were not typical at that point in time around the world and not been typical

throughout most of human history. Athens was a city state (as opposed to larger entity like a kingdom or empire), and was quasi-democratic (as opposed to authoritarian as were most other states). These characteristics led Aristotle to focus his observations on the public use of argument to persuade others in democratic deliberations. Different political systems and assumptions about the role of the public and public discourse existed in other societies, which did not privilege certain elements of the argumentative process that were valued in some of the Western traditions. In an authoritarian society, public discourse and the attempt to persuade through argument is limited by the power structure and the assumptions of those in authority. When called upon to make arguments, people in these societies operated under tight constraints and faced dire consequences for the arguments that they made.

Third, as Aristotle and other thinkers have been interpreted and used over the course Western thought, there has been an over-emphasis on the proper forms or validity of arguments. While Aristotle discusses how argument works in everyday life, this emphasis has often been overlooked in Western thinking. He specifies that there is a rhetorical form of both induction (the example) and deduction (the enthymeme), where the key is that something is not explicitly stated in the message and the audience participates in the process a set of statements with the conclusion unstated or one example that serves to lead to a generalization. Such forms of argument could approximate the way people argue in everyday communication. One solution to this problem would be to simply default to the conclusion that argument varies across cultures and its forms are relative to the nature of a particular culture, however, such an approach would be premature. First, the comparison of western conceptual forms of argument with the description of eastern forms of actual argument is not a parallel type of analysis. The appropriate comparison would be the description of actual argument behavior in both the west and the east. Second, the frequency of use of a particular form of argument is not an indicator of whether a particular form exists in a culture or is capable of existing in the discourse of a culture. And third, if we see argument as completely under the direction of culture, then it overlooks a major force for cultural change and does not correspond to the actual analysis of historical events. Instead, a more fruitful approach may be to explore whether our definitions of argument are limiting what we see in other cultures. What are the bare essentials of argument? This question can be answered from the perspective of both function and form.

The result of these emphases in Western thought is a need for a view of argument that
a. would fit any culture,
b. would fit societies ranging from to democratic to authoritarian,
c. would fit historical examples as well as the present, and d) would deal with informal as well as formal views of argument.

3. *The need for a cross-cultural definition of argument*
We are interested in describing what arguments look like in other cultures. This necessitates going behind the labels and ways of talking about argument in one culture, and looking for what is in common in the process across cultures. Thus, we need a definition of argument that is minimalistic, i.e. would use the most basic or foundational aspect of argument to define the process.

My desire to think about arguments in a more fundamental sense grew out of my experiences attempting to explain argument within different cultures such as Japan, the Soviet Union (Russia) and later China. These experiences led me to believe that our conceptions of argument and logic while useful and worthwhile did not automatically encompass the concept at its most fundamental level; particularly as it applies to different cultures and different time periods.

This position can be explained in terms of an incident in my first intercultural experience. As part of the NCA's Committee on International Discussion and Debate program, I found myself in Japan with two American students for a six week tour involving debate. At one stop, I was asked to give a lecture on what is logic to an audience of about 600 students and faculty. My immediate inclination was to fall back on my training in Western argumentation theory and discuss things as deduction and induction. However, since I knew that the members of this audience were less likely to be familiar with that tradition, I started to wonder whether there was some more fundamental way to explain argument to these people.

My concern was not meant to deny the importance of any of the highly elaborate and established systems of logic that have been developed in the West or even in such societies as India and China. Instead, I was asking a simple question about what is the most fundamental idea underlying the concept of argument, i.e. what constitutes the most minimal definition of argument? We know that in a culture such as Japan or China, there are long histories of intellectual inquiry, but that

the concept of argument as set forth in Western societies is not present in the same forms. This does not mean that argument is not present or even thought about in those cultures, but it does mean that our way of thinking about argument may not be the most fundamental way of understanding the process. These concerns have led me to wonder whether our present conceptions of argument are the most basic ways of representing the fundamental nature of the argumentation process.

A consideration of this question can start with an article written by Corbett (1986), where he explored the question of how argumentation strategies have changed from ancient to modern times in the West. His thesis is that changes have occurred in the strategies of argumentation particularly as they relate to "kinds and combinations of attendant factors," however, there is a single archetypal pattern that spans this period of time. The archetypal pattern, as he sees it is one in which a person makes an assertion and if it is not self-evident or cogent enough to compel conviction, then they present evidence or arguments to support the assertion. If we look at this pattern, he starts with an assertion that becomes linked indirectly to things that are self-evident such as cultural assumptions, or that compel acceptance by their implied elements or that directly present evidence to support the assertion.

Further analysis of the various treatments of argument and attendant concepts reveal a similar theme of linkage emerging from the thickets of difference and convolutedness. For example, in many discussions of formal logic and forms of valid reasoning, the word "inference" keeps reappearing. Kneale & Kneale (1962) in their monumental discussion of *The Development of Logic*, in their first sentence say that "logic is concerned with the principles of valid inference" and that such forms imply the seeking of "proof" (p. 1), which involves premises and arguments from them to some conclusion. The idea of drawing inferences from premises involves drawing "links" between ideas in a fashion that are judged as valid.

Standard treatments of argument in the mid-twentieth century, have similar suggestions. For example, Ehninger (1974) defines an argument as "a single capsule or unit of proof" that can be "grouped together into organized patterns" (p. 1). A similar traditional definition of an argument is that of a claim and reasons for it (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1979), which also reveals the idea of linkage.

In the last half of the twentieth century, another view of argument became prominent, which viewed it as a disagreement between people. O'Keefe's (1977) combined the two views by distinguishing between argument1 where argument is viewed as a kind of utterance that one makes and argument2 where argument is viewed as a kind of interaction or process. Argument*1* exemplifies most of the traditional ways of thinking about argument, while argument*2* takes the colloquial idea of disagreement and situates it within the accepted canon of what constitutes argument. Should we be concerned with whether arguments are seen as the products of interaction or seen as a process of interaction? Should we see argument as tied implicitly to the concepts of validity and "good" arguments versus "bad" arguments?

4. *A cross-culture view of argument*

In general, there is no conceptual problem with the accepted definitions, however, when approaching argument from a comparative and intercultural perspective, it is useful to think of it in a minimalistic sense. It is important to view argument in terms of the activities that perform the argument function in different cultures so as to not get caught up in disagreement about whether argument exists in particular cultures based on whether a particular label is used. This pragmatic approach is based on viewing phenomena as argument when they function as argument whether they are defined as argument in a particular society or not.

4.1 *The form of argument*

As discussed above, the question of "what is argument" in cross-cultural setting seems to be related to the idea of linking, i.e. it connects ideas and pieces of information so as to provide coherency and support between them. This perspective is broad enough to include the various definitions of argument and therefore is more parsimonious but more importantly, it starts to get at what argument is doing *phenomenologically* in different cultures. It describes the process that people actually use to justify their views and positions in communicative exchanges. The resulting linking process may be a generally accepted one such as going from a series of examples to a generalization or it may be a less familiar form where one goes from a period of silence to an implication about a person's character. As a result, it is easier to see the argument function in any culture when it is viewed as linkages between things. When argument is defined in narrower ways such as in traditional Aristotelian

forms of argument1, it may be seen as absent in cultures such as Japan (Morrison 1972) and when defined as argument2 it may be seen as inconsistent with the emphasis on harmony in Confucian cultures (Becker 1986). Therefore:

1. The form of argument should be thought of as involving the linking of any two ideas, concepts or feelings.

A major part of the proposed perspective on argument is the distinction between the form of argument and the function of argument. The aspects of form and function are often conflated in discussions of argument. For example when we talk about argument as a "kind of utterance" or a "kind of interaction" we seem to be suggesting something about the form of an argument and when we talk about induction and deduction, we are definitely referring to form. However, when we talk about reasoned decision-making, we could be talking about either form (the steps of the process) or function (the outcome of the process). Most of the discussions about argument in different cultures seem to focus on the form aspects of argument and conclude that argument is absent in a culture, if the form is absent (e.g. deduction or debate). However, when we shift to looking at function, we find a fundamental human outcome that takes a number of forms. We could leave the analysis at this point, and accept the idea that any form that fulfills the function is argument and while accepting the common function, explore the different forms. However, there is a further step to consider, whether the forms have anything in common?

4.2 *The function of argument*

Arguments should be defined in terms of the activities that fulfill a function not their labels. So, it does not matter if we call argument "logos," "wen," "logic," or even "argument". As a result, the task for argument theory is to explain the functioning of argument in different cultures, i.e. the process of convincing others of the best course of action whether it be in the democratic forms of decision-making or before an absolute monarch with the power of life and death, and the resulting forms it can take in different situations. The task for the study of culture is to outline the dynamic process that explains how meaning and conviction are generated in a culture. This means moving beyond the idea that culture dictates the nature of meaning and argument to a more nuanced idea that sees argument as sometimes influenced by cultures, sometimes reinforcing culture and sometimes changing or generating culture. The result is that in linking ideas, argument functions to make one idea related to another idea and in so doing

increases the plausibility and believability of the original idea. Therefore:

2. The Argumentative Function is the linking of ideas so that they support each other and in doing so, making sense to people and influence others

It should be noted that this perspective is broader than it may initially appear. First, the use of phrases such as “justify” or “reasons” should not be taken to imply a degree of conscious intention as sometimes happens in Western theory. Instead, it implies a function that a person may or may not be aware of but that they still find makes sense. In addition, it should not be assumed that everything is explicitly stated in a verbal fashion. Indirectness, implication, and silence can all function as part of the argument process as can the verbal, nonverbal and situational. The result is a view of argument where ideas are linked in both conscious and unconscious fashions using a plethora of means going beyond the explicitly verbal with results that may be consciously intended or not.

If we look at the function of argument, its primary function has always been to convince someone of the truth, rightness or correctness of a claim. Argument does this by linking the claim to other things, which may, in the Toulmin sense, be called grounds, warrants, backing etc. or in non-western cultures, something else. Thus, functionally, arguments exist in cultures whenever someone presents two things (a claim and a reason?) as linked in an effort to convince someone else. What is accepted as the claim and what is accepted as support may vary from culture to culture, and what links are accepted as valid may also vary, however, at a bare minimum, ideas are linked together to function as a means of convincing someone else.

So, why have we not been able to see the argumentative function as operating in all cultures? There are at least five reasons. First, cultures vary in the degree to which they expect messages to be explicit or implicit. The problem here is that people from cultures that expect to see explicit arguments may not see the implicitness of arguments in other cultures. They may not be able to understand the claim or any of the kinds of support that are present because they expressed in an indirect fashion or even not verbally expressed at all.

Second, understood knowledge is often an important part of arguments, but much of that knowledge is cultural. Aristotle recognized this in his discussions of the enthymeme and the example as the rhetorical forms of deduction and induction.

The problem is being able to see the presence, and understand the meaning of, such knowledge in cultures in which we are not immersed.

Third, cultures vary in the degree to which they depend on the verbal and the nonverbal to communicate. If the nonverbal is used to provide information in a message situation, someone from outside the culture may not be aware of its presence or meaning. Fourth, the norms for what is acceptable argument and for the presence of disagreement vary from culture to culture. Where public disagreement is frowned on, there is a tendency to use non-explicit forms of argument, which will probably not be apparent to an outsider.

Finally, the rhetorical exigencies of a culture and period of time often vary and constrain the types of argument used. In strongly authoritarian societies, the use of implicit and safe forms of argument are essential for survival. This does not mean that people are not capable of using explicit argument, just that it is not expedient. Thus, we can see that a major part of the problem of difference in argument forms across cultures is the inability to see how argument functions because of outsider status and the concomitant tendency to assume that argument ought to look like that with which we are familiar.

4.3 *The importance of argument description cross-culturally*

Describing arguments across cultures tells us what kind of arguments (linkages of ideas) people use and think make sense. The comparative perspective is primarily interested in argument from a descriptive point of view where we look at what is functioning as argument in any culture. It is not to be denied that a normative element can be overlaid on this definition by those who choose to do so, i.e. they can look for the pattern of idea linkages that they think are valid or lead to good decisions or that a society thinks are valid and may lead to good decisions. However, a descriptive approach to argument as a function can be seen as prior to the normative in that only when we can describe what people are doing argumentatively, can we make judgments about it. When a normative definition is privileged, it can result in situations where argument is equated with forms of democracy, free expression or types of decision-making. The result is that such forms of argument may not be present in a culture due to its political traditions even though the process of argument is still functioning in other ways. It is useful then to look at the phenomenon of argument as it functions in different cultures and then talk about what characteristic patterns of links are doing and what values they incorporate.

3. The cross-cultural study of argument or the argumentative function needs to describe how arguments are used in a culture before evaluating their validity

5. *Argument & contextuality*

The theory developed by Edward Hall, over a long career, provides a way of looking at the relationship between communication and culture that is compatible with the proposal developed in the previous section. He is famous for his aphorism: "Communication is culture and culture is communication," however, the exact nature of the relationship is embodied in his idea of "contexting". Contexting is based on the following question: What information do people pay attention to when communicating with each other? Hall assumes that people are presented with more information than they can pay attention to and as a result they have to choose what kinds of information to encode and to pay attention to. The patterns used for encoding and decoding are what he defines as "contexting."

For Hall, contexting is a process that occurs at both the level of the culture and the level of messages, even though his basic definition of contexting is in terms of messages. Cultural contextuality can probably be best thought of as a set of norms that condition the perceptual tendency about where to look for information and how to encode it in messages. On the other hand, message contextuality ought to be thought of as a set of message features that provide or direct people to certain places for information.

For Hall, messages can fall along a continuum between low context messages on one end and high context messages on the other end. Low context messages are those where "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (i.e. spoken or written communication). High context messages are where "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person." The external or physical context of the message involves things such as the situation, the setting, the status of people involved, and the activity, while the internal context includes things such as past experiences, common cultural information, common cultural assumptions, the structure of the brain and nervous system, e.g. Gestalt rules of perception).

In most cases, messages are a mixture of explicit information and contextual information, which affects the appearance of arguments across cultures. Of course, this idea is closely related to Aristotle's ideas of the enthymeme and the example. It can also be seen in the following discussion of the difference between

formal systems of reasoning and everyday systems of reasoning by Johnson-Laird and Wason (1977) within the context of cognitive science. They argue that "The distinction between conscious deductions and everyday inference is probably a reflection of a more general contrast that can be drawn between explicit and implicit inferences" (p. 5). And of course, inferences involve the moving from one idea to another in a fashion so that they are linked.

People do not operate exclusively out of a low context or high context perspective. Individuals may move back and forth on the message continuum depending on the situation. For example, Americans, when talking with close friends where there is a high degree of homogeneity or familiarity among the communicators, are more likely to use messages toward the high context end of the continuum. But when talking with people they do not know or when communicating in formal settings like the legal system, they are more likely to explicitly spell out their arguments in low context messages.

The kind of process that Hall discusses in his ideas about the contextuality of messages is very similar to that proposed for thinking about arguments across cultures. The information in a message, whether explicitly expressed or not, provides the elements that can serve as an argument. Furthermore, in Hall's conception, presumably the information that is expressed in the various parts of a message is seen as linked by the participants in the interaction. Thus, if all or part of the message functions as an argument that may or may not be explicitly expressed, then arguments may be contextualized in the culture and may function in any possible combination of explicit and implicit elements.

6. *A cross-cultural exploration of the theory*

To demonstrate how this theory might work, we will examine some data from a 2008 study by Hazen, Inoue, Fourcade and Maruta. The study compared the responses of 42 American students from a private southeastern university with 46 Japanese students from a public university in the southern part of Japan. We will look at a subset of the data to explore the relationship between arguments as linkages and contextual characteristics of print advertisements. Eight print ads from the United States and Japan were selected on the basis of a pilot study to represent both high and low context messages that would be interchangeable between the two cultures (Fourcade & Hazen, 2006).

The question will be what relationships exist between measures of linkage such as

“making sense” and “cohesiveness” with a measure of “logicality” and with measures of contextuality such as “clearness,” “implicitness,” informativeness,” “completeness,” and “obviousness. Japan has usually been assumed to be a culture that makes greater use of high context arguments than the United States, which is seen as more likely to use low context arguments.

A ranking was made of the overall degree to which the participants saw each of the messages as making sense on a seven-point scale (1=makes sense). Two of the advertisements seemed to make sense to both the American and the Japanese samples, Fritolay chips (2.18) and Dell Printer (2.80), and one advertisement did not seem to make sense, Vodaphone cellphone (4.69) especially for the Japanese. There were also two advertisements that fell in the middle of sense continuum: Kanebo cold medicine (3.71) and HP speakers (3.71). Using these three references points, we will make some observations about the relationship between argument linkages and contextuality. In the original framing of these advertisements, FritoLay, Dell, and Kanebo were seen as on the low contextuality side, while Vodaphone and HP were seen as on the high contextuality side.

For Japanese sample, a couple of interesting relationships are present. In terms of logic, there is a significant negative correlation between making sense and logicality for both ends of the continuum (the high sense ads and the low sense ads), i.e. the more sense the ad made, the less logical it was seen as. Since logic is not a traditional concept in Japanese thought, it may be that this term does not fit into their thinking about arguments. In addition, the more sense that ads were seen as making, the more obvious they were seen as. Which is interesting because the relationship between sense making and certainty was seen as negative, i.e. the more sense an ad made, the less certain it was.

On the other hand, the American sample, generally did not see a relationship between making sense and logicality. In the one case where they did, for the Vodaphone ad, it was a significant positive relationship, i.e. the advertisement was not seen as making a lot of sense and it was not seen as logical. For all of the advertisements, the relationship between making sense and two contextuality characteristics, obviousness & clearness, were seen as consistently positive and significant, i.e. as the ads made more sense, they were seen as being more obvious and clear.

The preceding analysis of this data suggests that the framework of argument links

(making sense) and contextuality characteristics can provide interesting insights into the way argument works and the differences between cultures.

References

Becker, C. B. (1986). Reasons for the lack of argumentation and debate in the Far East. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10, 75-92.

Combs, S. C. (2004). Challenging Greco-Roman argumentation trajectories: Argument norms and cultural traditions. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 41, 55-57.

Corbett, E. P. J. (1986). The changing strategies of argumentation from ancient to modern times. In J. L. Golden & J. J. Pilotta (Eds.), *Practical Reasoning in Human Affairs* (pp. 21-35). Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Eemeren, F. H. van, Grootendorst, R. & Snoeck Henkemans, F. (1996). *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ehninger D. (1974). *Influence, Belief, and Argument: An Introduction to Responsible Persuasion.* NY: Scott, Foresman & Company.

Fourcade, S. S. & Hazen, M. D. (2006). *Effects of Message Contextuality & Nationality on Responses to Print Advertisements: Japanese & American Responses to High & Low Context.* Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, San Francisco.

Hall, E. T. (1977). *Beyond Culture.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Hazen, M. D. & Inoue, N. (1991). Argument processes and informal logic: The case of Japan and the United States. In F. H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair, & C. A. Willard (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Argumentation* (pp. 971-979). Amsterdam: SICSAT.

Hazen, M. D., Inoue, N., Fourcade, S. & Maruta, N. (2008). *Cross-cultural responses to arguments in high and low context messages*. Paper presented at the Tokyo Argumentation Conference.

Hornikx, J. & Hoeken, H. (2007). Cultural differences in the persuasiveness of evidence types and evidence quality. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 443-463.

Jensen, J. V. (1992). Values and practices in Asian argumentation. *Argumentation and Advocacy,* 28, 153-166.

Johnson, R. H. (2000). *Manifest Rationality.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Johnson-Laird, P. N., & Wason, P. C. (1977). *Thinking: Readings in cognitive science.* Oxford, England: Cambridge U Press.

Kneale, W. & Kneale, M. (1962). *The Development of Logic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Morrison, J. L. (1972). The absence of a rhetorical tradition in Japanese culture. *Western Speech XXXVI*, 89-102.
O'Keefe, D. J. (1977). Two Concepts of Argument. *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13, 121-128.
Toulmin, S. R., Rieke, R. & Janik, A. (1979). *An Introduction to Reasoning*. NY: Macmillan.
Wolf, S. (2010). A system of argumentation forms in Aristotle. *Argumentation,* 24, 19-40.