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1

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Proceedings of the IADA Workshop
Word Meaning in Argumentative Dialogue

Homage to Sorin Stati

VOLUME 1

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DIALOGUE-SPECIFIC ILLOCUTION INDICATORS

FRANZ HUNDSNURSCHER

Introductory remarks

The title of this conference (*Word Meaning in Argumentative Dialogue*) brings into contact two rather distant fields of linguistic investigation; the relation between the two has during the last century been under constant discussion in the philosophy of language as well as in linguistics. In my contribution here I can present only a few aspects of the problems involved.

I shall begin with a short discussion of the state of the art in lexical semantics; I will then give a sketch of the general dialogical background of argumentation and at last point to some examples of a class of 'argumentation words'.

1. *The problem of word meaning*

To begin with, the term 'word' itself is an intuitive concept that evades exact definition, and the various efforts to find better terms for characterising the basic meaningful units of language – 'morphemes', 'lexemes', 'formatives' and so on – are, of course, dependent on their respective methodological frameworks, and these will vary and change quite frequently over the years, especially in linguistics. So the concepts of word and word meaning are floating ones, and in some contexts they are even used as metaphors for language itself. In German for instance we make a distinction, using different plural forms, between 'Wörter' – which means 'single words in isolation' (e.g. die Wörter im Lexikon) and 'Worte' – which means 'sections of coherent speech', in fact sometimes even whole texts (e.g. die Worte der Dichter).

In grammatical and semantic description there arises the crucial problem of how to isolate in a sensible way individual words within phrasal expressions, for instance in order to count and arrange and to classify them and to allot to each one a clear-cut meaning (e.g. Er drückte sich *klipp* und klar *aus*) (He told them plump and plain), where *klipp* is obsolete and kept up for alliteration, and *aus* is a separable particle that goes with the verb in specific functions).

F. de Saussure (1948) stressed the priority of words in 'la langue' regarding them as signs for our ideas of things that are expressed and combined in a coherent and meaningful 'chaîne parlée' of spoken discourse.

The picture changed when Noam Chomsky (1957; 1965) pointed out the central position of sentences within language – that in speaking we do in fact not just arrange words in linear order, but we generate sentences, i.e. syntactically organized configurations of words.

By the way, the problems with the term 'sentence' are somehow parallel to the problems connected with the term 'word'; it is also an intuitive concept, only vaguely determinable. Lexical meanings of words compounded together with the contributions of different types of grammatical and syntactical functions are supposed to somehow make up some sort of 'sentence meaning'.

Jerrold J. Katz (1966) imagined 'amalgamation processes' that combine the lexical meanings of 'formatives', and 'projection processes' that incorporate these compound meanings into syntactic constituents to yield 'sentence meaning' as the interpretative result. Yet it still did not become quite clear what exactly is being 'amalgamated' and 'projected' and how 'interpretation' actually works.

In another line of thought, John L. Austin (1962) suggested that in verbal communication we make regular use of words and sentences and in uttering them perform various verbal actions; John R. Searle (1969) called these 'speech acts', a form of rule-governed verbal behaviour.

According to Austin, an utterance is endowed with what he dubbed an 'illocutionary force'; this somewhat mysterious concept of 'force' determines the specific action quality of an utterance and brings about specific communicative effects. This 'force' is supposed to pervade the ordinary sentence, and it can be made explicit to a certain degree by so-called 'illocutionary-force-indicating-devices', of which the 'performative verbs' are the most prominent examples.

If, for instance, we know the meaning of these verbs as used in a certain way (first person present tense active) we can understand what kind of verbal action the speaker aims at performing and we can see what he means, that is, we can understand him (e.g. I hereby plead guilty – Ich bekenne mich schuldig).

As it is, this 'illocutionary force' brings still another level of meaning into focus which, as I see it, is often lumped together with traditional meaning – in a new general concept of 'sentence meaning'.

There are utterances without explicit indicators of illocutionary force and others well equipped with such indicating devices. Austin tackles this problem by talking of 'implicit' or 'primary utterances' and 'explicit performatives' respectively.

Both types of utterance are being used effectively in communication, but explicit performatives are less prone to ambiguity and thus to eventual misunderstanding. Austin gives a list of such clarifying devices – 'mode', 'tone of voice', 'adverbs' and 'adverbial phrases', 'connecting particles', 'headings', but also others, of a non-verbal type, like 'accompanying gestures and grimaces' or – a rather comprehensive but vague category – 'the circumstances of the utterance'.

At the end we are again confronted with the question of where to draw the line: which part of the language and consequently of the vocabulary is to be allotted a distinctive meaning of its own (as Austin sometimes says, its 'descriptive meaning') and which part is the domain of force and of illocutionary force made explicit. Searle (1979) makes a distinction between the propositional content of a sentence and the (intended) illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of the utterance – between just

‘saying something’ and ‘meaning something in uttering the sentence under specific circumstances’.

Just as sentence meaning often cannot be neatly derived from more or less determinable word meanings, the sentences and their meanings are in turn to some extent parts of higher forms of verbal organisation; they are in actual communication embedded in an interactive setting and are integrated in textual relations, and to fully understand them we are dependent on knowledge about these settings and relations.

And there again we have problems with the concept of ‘text’, how to determine it. Obviously during the 20th century the descriptive and explanatory perspectives of language have by and by been reversed in a way: instead of trying to explain language understanding starting from words’ meanings (the lexicon perspective) it now seems we have to start from communicative procedures (the use or interaction perspective).

We find hints of this reversal in the works of eminent philosophers of language:

Wittgenstein (1953: 43): “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache”.

Austin (1970: 56): “What alone has meaning is a sentence”.

Alston (2000: 312): “Sentence meaning is the illocutionary act potential of a sentence”.

Higginbotham (2003: 266): “Coming to satisfy conventional standards regarding the use of sentences depends upon coming to know about reference”.

2. *The dialogical basis of communication*

The present situation in linguistics, as I see it, is characterised on the one hand by insufficient knowledge about the ways of words (Wittgenstein: 122): “[...] dass wir den Gebrauch unserer Wörter nicht übersehen”) – and on the other hand by an urgent need for a workable and discriminating determination of the concept of ‘language use’, as a reliable starting point for linguistic analysis and explanation.

To cut matters short, I think that as theorists of dialogue we might postulate that the basic and general form of verbal communication – and this would mean of all kinds of texts and language use – is dialogue: *quod omnis lingua vel oratio procedit ex dialogo*. We share this conviction with the founder of our Society IADA, Professor Sorin Stati.

Monological speech and texts can in principle be derived from underlying dialogical structures, and even the apparent monology in the media can be reconstructed on a dialogical basis; but this would be another wide field of investigation.

In analysing the set-up of all forms of dialogue and their conditions for successful performance we will by the way get acquainted with all types of argumentation.

A basic model of dialogue structure is characterised by two instances – Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 – and a sequence of alternately addressed verbal utterances (moves).

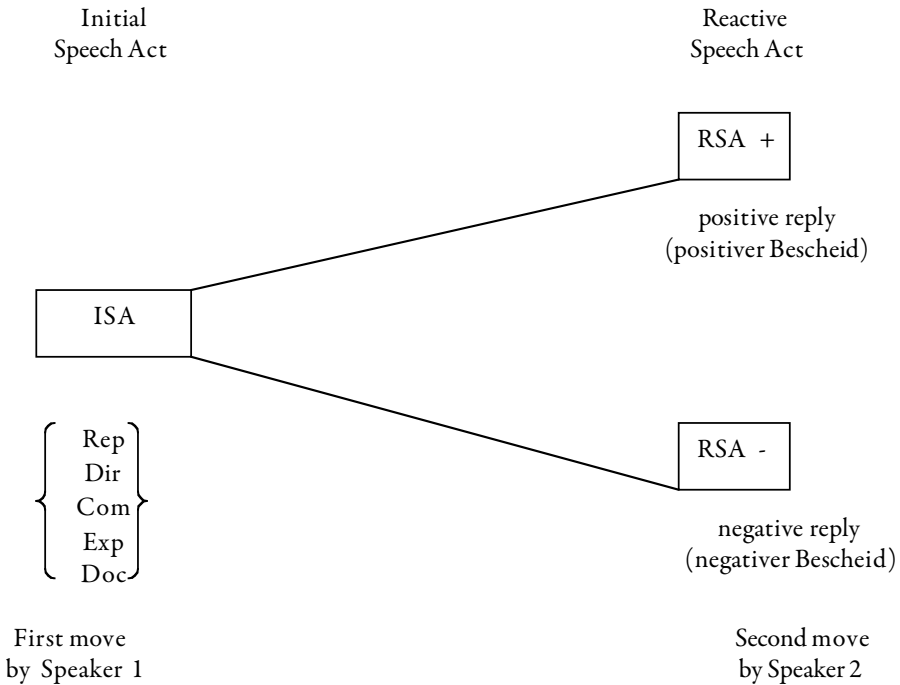
This constellation is situated within a frame of certain action conditions and a

general communicative purpose which one might call ‘knowing about’ (Am. ‘to be in the knowing’; Germ. ‘Bescheid wissen’); the point of verbal communication is giving and getting relevant information in order ‘to know what is at stake’ (‘Bescheid zu wissen, worum es geht und was auf dem Spiel steht’).

So our starting point is similar to Austin’s – an inquiry into the overall mode and purpose of speaking. Austin initially criticised the traditional standard opinion that the only and proper way of language use was to tell the truth and to talk about truth conditions, and all this ought to be aimed at instructing and convincing others and showing them the way to find truth mainly by argumentation. All other talk was deemed rather idle and not worth considering seriously. But Austin has successfully shown that language does have other uses as well and that these are of interest, too. So, if we go by Austin’s and Searle’s fundamental types of language use, we have five domains of argumentation:

- Representative – saying what one thinks is the case
- Directive – saying what one wants to be done by others
- Commissive – saying what one intends to do oneself
- Expressive – saying how one feels
- Declarative – saying what is to be in force

Here is a very simple model for the first two moves in a dialogical sequence:

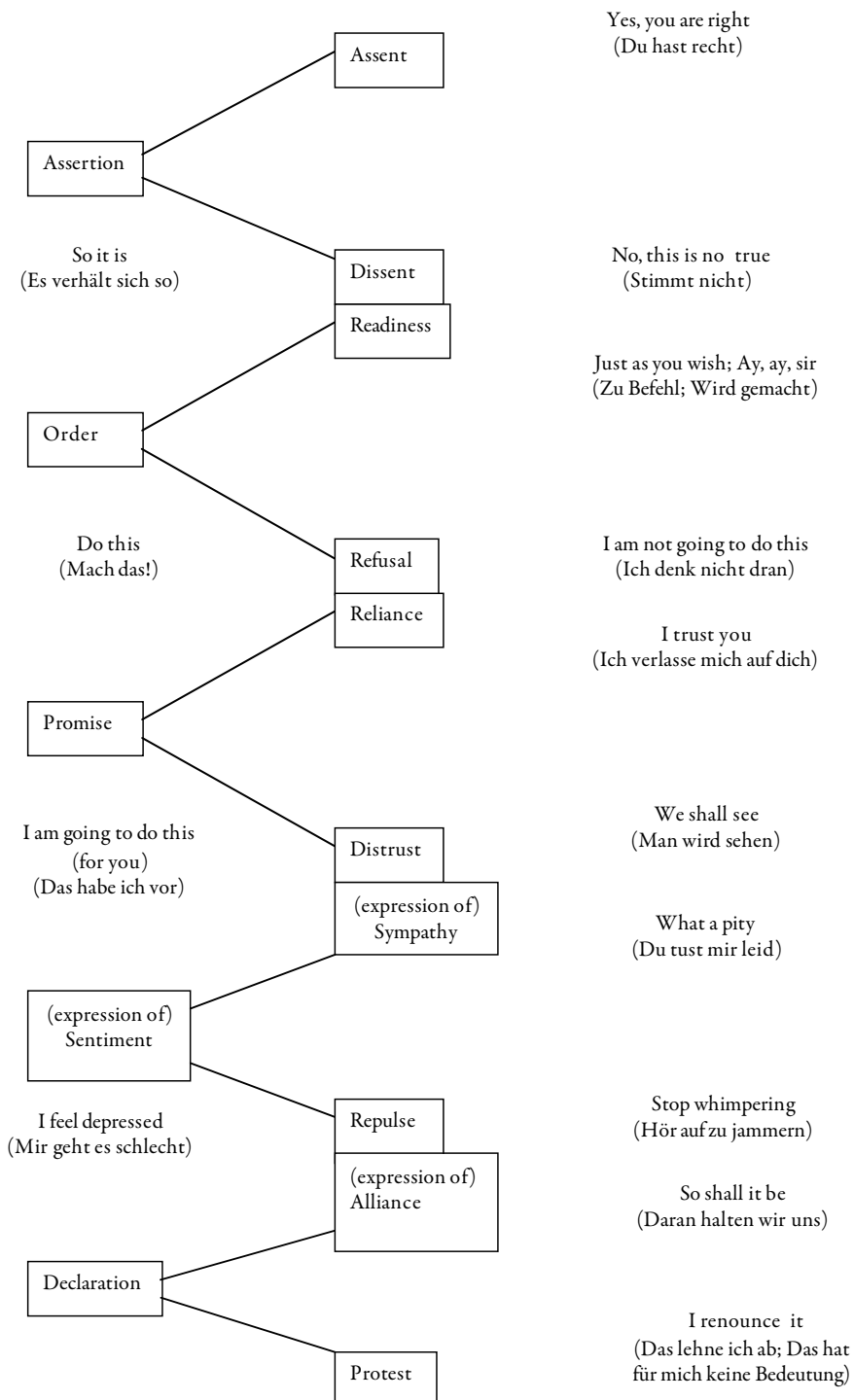


In performing the initial speech act, Speaker 1 lays open his communicative interest to Speaker 2, and, if Sp 2 gives a positive reply, then the communicative purpose of the verbal interaction is attained, that is, Sp 1 and Sp 2 'have come to an understanding'; by giving a positive reply, Sp 2 – according to the initial speech act's illocution – signals back to Sp 1

- that he is of the same opinion as Sp 1,
- that he is willing to do what Sp 1 wants him to do,
- that he trusts Sp 1 to carry out his intention,
- that he is in sympathy with Sp 1's feelings,
- that he validates Sp 1's speech act.

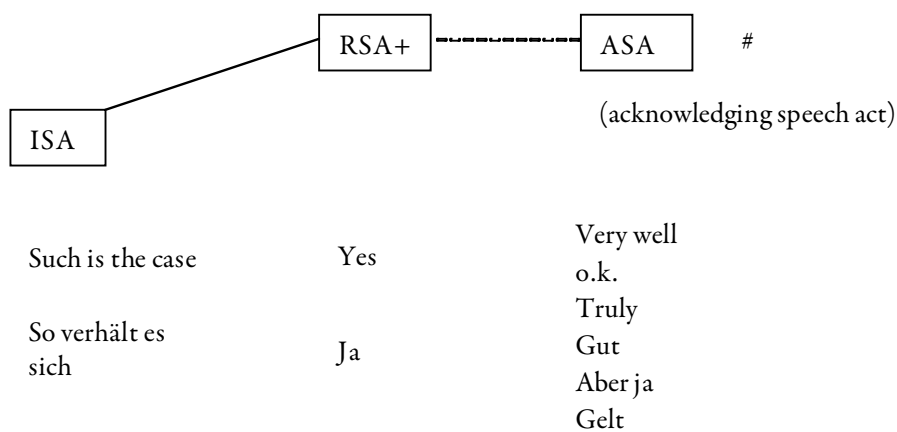
With a negative reply, Sp 2 signals back to Sp 1 that he does not comply, and this also is relevant information for Sp 1 – that he meets with resistance and that they have not come to an understanding. The initial speech act determines to some extent the illocutionary character of the ensuing dialogical sequence; its force is mirrored in the quality of the positive and the negative reply respectively. Although the conventional utterance forms for replication are, trivially enough, 'Yes' or 'No', their specific act quality will vary according to the illocution type of the initial speech act.

So, if we run through the illocutionary types, we will discern illocutionary subtypes accordingly, accompanied by differing utterance forms:



What I want to show by these examples is that both the initial and the reactive moves do have a great variety of sequence-specific utterance forms, most of them idioms, not easily translatable word by word.

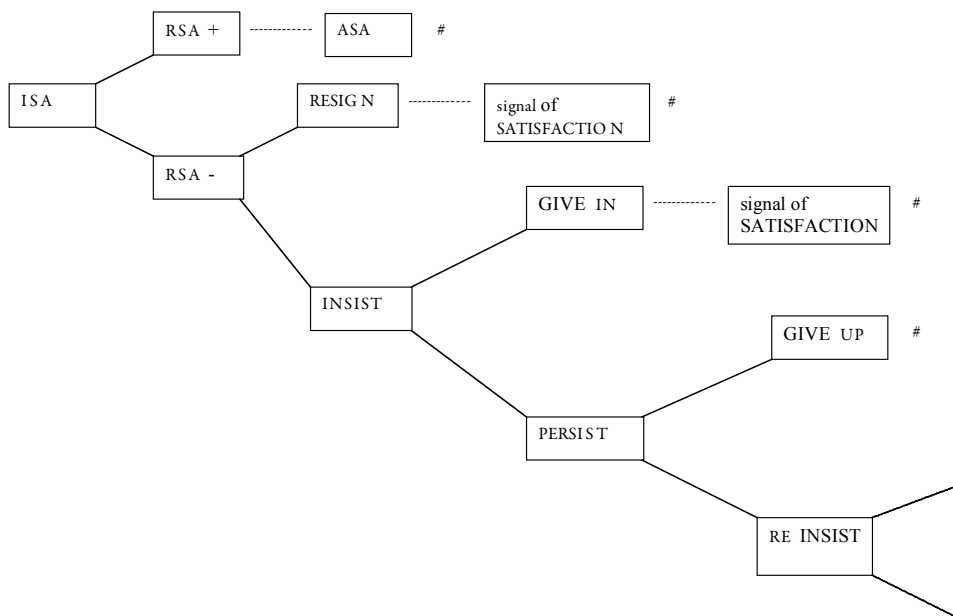
If an initial speech act by Sp 1 is met with a positive reply by Sp 2, the dialogical sequence seemingly comes to an end – both speakers having reached their respective communicative goals – they have come to an understanding and are d'accord (sie wissen gegenseitig Bescheid und sind damit einverstanden); Sp 2 knows what Sp 1 is interested in, and Sp 1 knows that Sp 2 at least does not object. There may sometimes be a third move by Sp 1 explicitly expressing satisfaction at Sp 2's reply and in a way acknowledging and confirming it:



The negative branch of the minimal dialogue is even more interesting:

If Sp 1 meets with a negative reply by Sp 2, he is in fact confronted with a dilemma – he either contents himself with the setback, which means waving his original communicative goal of reaching an understanding with Sp 2 by showing signs of resignation or Sp 1 will not take ‘No’ for an answer and ventures to try again, that is, he renovates his initiative by insisting. One might say that argumentative dialogue sets in with the third move.

The basic model of minimal dialogue structure gives the relevant correlations:



Sp1	Sp2	Sp1	Sp2	Sp1
First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
move	move	move	move	move

Insisting is not just a repetition of the initial speech act, but a renewal of it that takes into account the experience of having been thwarted; this knowledge determines the conditions of performance for Sp 1's third move; it is responsible for a change of tone and quite often for a change of utterance form with additional emphasis; by Sp 2's negative reply it has become clear for Sp 1 that his communicative interest will meet with reservation and objection.

3. Argumentation words

To return to the question of 'word meaning in argumentation' we have to take a closer look at the conventional utterance forms in the minimal dialogue sequence.

So and *that* are characteristic words in connection with the initial speech act, a sort of demonstrative PRO-forms for the proposition underlying the initial speech act:

<i>So</i> it is.	<i>So</i> ist es
<i>That's</i> what I wish you to do	<i>So</i> will ich, daß du handelst
<i>That's</i> what I'm going to do	<i>So</i> werde ich handeln
<i>That's</i> how I feel (about...)	<i>So</i> ist mir zumute
<i>So</i> shall it be	<i>So</i> soll es sein

In the first move the proposition has to be made explicit somehow in order to function as the basis and reference ground of what is to be argued for or against.

In the second move Sp 2 makes known his attitude towards Sp 1's interest by uttering *Yes* or *No* (or equivalent replies). The lexical status of these primitive words is not clear in linguistic literature; they have been taken to be one-word sentences or full-fledged assertive speech acts; I take them to be conventional utterances with expressive force, relating to the preceding speech act.

The critical position in verbal interaction, as mentioned before, is marked by a negative reply in the second move. Being aware of Sp 2's disinclination, Sp 1 may desist from pushing things further and scratch his attempt at communicating or he may stick to his initial goal, i.e. insist. In German there is a special utterance form for this, namely *doch* (*oh yes; but of course*). In infantile talk one can sometimes observe insisting sequences of a simple sort:

No – Of course – Not at all – But of course – Not in the least

ISA

Nein – Doch – Aber nein – Aber ja doch – Nein, auf keinen Fall

And it is interesting to observe how in such cases emotions rise step by step and how utterances vary in expressiveness accordingly. This may be a kind of quarreling, but one can be in doubt whether it does in fact belong to the realm of argumentation proper, i.e. of advancing reasons for or against something.

This verbal procedure of advancing reasons will set in sometimes with the performance of the initial speech act already, and there it takes the form of so-called sentence conjunction (Konjunktionalsätze):

I think Peter is ill, because he did not show up this morning.

which in dialogical expansion might take the form of

Peter is ill – Why do you think so? – Because he didn't show up this morning.

As Ernest Lepore (2000: 6-7) points out, argumentative passages in spoken and written texts can to a certain extent be recognised as characterised by specific verbal means as premise indicators:

if, since, because, for, after all, given, whereas, although, suppose, assume, granted;

let us presume, here are the facts,...

as conclusion indicators:

consequently, therefore, so, hence;

it follows; (this) proves, (this) shows, (this) implies;

we can now infer, it cannot fail to be, let us conclude, these facts indicate, this supports the view or claim, let us infer, as a consequence we can deduce,...

These words make explicit the functions of the clauses they belong to, as premises or as conclusions, and thus may be likened to what in speech act theory is called “illocutionary force indicating devices”. This does make sense if we look at argumentation as a special form of complex verbal action of which the stating of premises and the drawing of conclusions are crucial components (Teilhandlungen). As to illocutionary force indicators in general, these might, as Austin (1962: 71-72) ventures to guess, be the result of a general evolution of language towards clarity of expression in special fields, notwithstanding the fact that in everyday speech implicit or primary utterances with equivalent illocutionary force stay in use.

If all language use were aimed at offering deductively valid arguments and all verbal communication could be represented in some standard format of propositional logic, then one could easily maintain that there is a special class of function words such as *yet (doch)*, *if (wenn)*, *then (dann)*, *because (weil)* etc. with meanings well definable in the respective formalism of propositional logic.

But these words do have uses besides those of premise or conclusion indicators; and there are subtle distinctive uses for each word, that will not be caught by postulating a general indicator meaning for them.

To take Lepore’s (200: 92) examples:

I’ll leave the window open *since* it is not raining.
(Ich lasse das Fenster offen, *denn* es regnet (ja) nicht.)

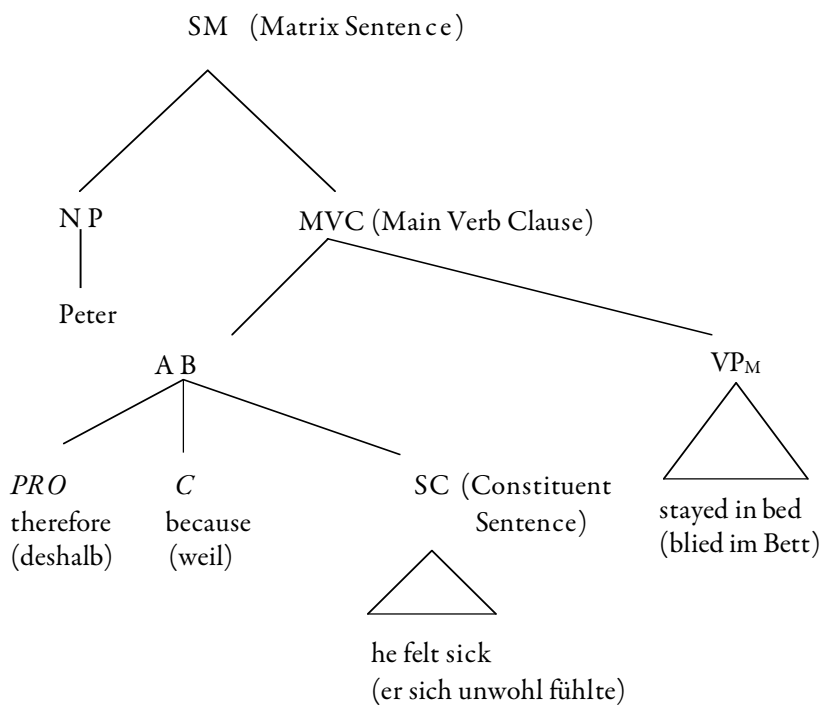
I’ll leave the window open *because* it is not raining.
(Ich lasse das Fenster offen, *weil* es (bei uns) nicht regnet.)

I’ll leave the window open, *if* it is not raining.
(Ich lasse das Fenster offen, *falls* (für den Fall, dass) es nicht regnet.)

In ordinary language, the standard form for argumentative patterns, perhaps under the influence of written discourse, is to be found in the grammatical system of compound sentences, that is, sentences with adversative, causal, concessive, temporal, consecutive, instrumental, purposive and other clauses.

Taking the causal nexus as an example, the general structure of the compound can be shown to be rather flexible with regard to linear order, formal variation and explicitness of indication. W.-D. Hartung (1964) has given a syntactic analysis of compound sentences that differs from Lepore’s propositional logic approach: Hartung postulates a premise–embedding structure that works well for German.

This structure gives the syntactic positions (PRO for premise–related PRO–form and C for conclusion conjunction) that can be used to make explicit the argumentative relations of the component clauses:



Here we have part of the problem of word meaning in argumentation: argumentation can be done by mere juxtaposition of premise and conclusion, without extra words; it can be done by explicit indicators of either one-word-structure or phrasal structure (*because – on account of*), and explicit indicators can turn up either in the premise or in the conclusion or in both. Where meaning is bound up with illocutionary force in complex speech acts, the allocation of meaning to linguistic forms will be facing this type of problem all along.

4. Concluding remarks

When people argue they try to persuade each other of some point that is of interest for them, but they will not always succeed in convincing the other party by means of deductively valid arguments. Persuasion can be pursued for various purposes and by very different means, ranging from physical force and bribery to subtle rhetorical ruses.

There are verbal means like flattering, threatening, lamenting, boasting, exaggerating, belittling and so on, and, of course, there are euphemistic and pejorative words that are instrumental in achieving what one aims at. It is most probable that in assessing such aspects of word meaning we will also have to take into account the types of communicative actions involved in dialogic dispute.

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