

5th Annual EALTA Conference, Athens, 8-11 May 2008

A taxonomy of argumentative thesis statements:

The testing perspective

Gyula Tankó
Eötvös University
Budapest

Gergely J Tamási
International Business School
Budapest

The aims of the presentation

- (1) Introduce the proposed taxonomy of argumentative thesis statements.
- (2) Outline a research study conducted with the use of the proposed taxonomy.
- (3) Discuss the findings and their implications for teaching and testing argumentative writing skills.

The proposed taxonomy

Non-relational theses

Simple Evaluation

Simple Policy

Relational theses

Categorical thesis

Similarity thesis

Complex Evaluation

Sign thesis

Causal thesis

Complex Policy

Non-relational theses: Simple Evaluation

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that a single element can be characterised with a specific property.

X is Y (Y – adjective expressing value judgement)

Unfortunately, the strict welfare standards planned or introduced by the European Union or other organizations seem to be highly hypocritical.

X is not Y

As a result, even the best graduates from good universities are not determined in what to do.

Non-relational theses: Simple Policy

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that a specific course of action should be taken.

X should be done (about Y)

Therefore all the people should become vegetarians.

X should not be done (about Y)

And I strongly believe that tuition fees should not be introduced in Hungarian state education for three reasons.

Relational theses: Categorical thesis

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that an element (the subject) can be fully or partially placed in or excluded from the category of another element (its predicate).

X is Y

Therefore, welfare is a fundamental right of animals as well.

X is not Y

It seems that we have not found the right solution for this problem yet.

X is partly Y

Private tertiary institutions often overcharge.

Relational theses: Similarity thesis

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that two elements are similar or different.

X is like Y

The story of Harry Potter is hauntingly similar to that of Arabella, the Czechoslovak fairytale and fantasy TV series for children made in 1979.

X is not like Y

Harry Potter is not like the Charmed.

Relational theses: Complex Evaluation

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that two or more elements can be evaluated on the basis of a specific property.

X is more Z than Y

I claim that learning soft skill is (for example, communication and team work) is more important than the technical knowledge.

X is less Z than Y

It means then, that unemployed people over 40 have fewer possibilities for getting employed again, than do newly graduated students.

X is as Z as Y

A lot of people believe that Americans are stupid, dumb and simplistic. Yet, I am convinced that this view is just as one-sided and simplistic as any other prejudices are.



Relational theses: Complex Evaluation

X is the most Y

However, there are still facts proving that our country's higher education is one of the best systems in Europe.

X is not the most Y

Vegetarianism is not the most natural diet for humans.

Relational theses: Sign thesis

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that the presence of one element can be taken as the sign of the presence of another element (which is not directly observable for some reason).

X can be taken as a sign that Y is the case

Receiving unordered credit cards is a sign of identity theft.

X can not be taken as a sign that Y is the case

The success of the Harry Potter series does not mean that children are interested in the occult.

Relational theses: Causal thesis

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that of two elements one is the cause and the other one is the effect.

X causes Y

This process of globalisation will create a better life and better world for all.

X does not cause Y

The introduction of such a system would not have a longlasting and benevolent impact on people's health.

Relational theses: Causal thesis

Y is the effect of X

The roots of the problem of the falling standards of literacy are to be found in the low level of elementary school teaching.

Y is not the effect of X

The measure taken in 1997, that is the operation of the financial burden to supply institutions with extra money for their budget, can by no means have persuaded many to give up their idea of doing a degree for three reasons.

Relational theses: Complex Policy

An arguable statement in which the arguer proposes that a specific course of action should be taken rather than another one.

X should be done rather than Y

Books should be given more attention than their adaptations.

Research questions

- Can the proposed taxonomy of argumentative theses be used reliably to identify the type of the thesis statements taken from a subset of the Hungarian Corpus of Learner English?
- If so, what type of thesis statements do students use in the subset of the corpus under investigation?
- Does the prompt affect the type of thesis statement students select for their essays?

The study

- Corpus: 484 argumentative essays taken from the Hungarian Corpus of Learner English (HuCLE)
- Taxonomy of argumentative thesis statements: based on classical rhetorical categories adapted for the fields of written (Graves & Oldsey, 1957; Eckhardt & Stewart, 1979; Fulkerson, 1996; Fahnestock & Secor, 1990) and oral (Meany & Shuster, 2002; Trapp, 2003; Freeley & Steinberg, 2004; Trapp & Hanson, 2005) argumentation
- Coders: all theses coded independently by two coders following a standard coder training protocol

Results of the coding: percentage agreement

(2) Coder (1)	N1.1	N1.2	N2.1	N2.2	R1.1	R1.2	R2.2	R3.1.1	R3.1.2	R3.1.3	R3.2.1	R4.1	R5.1.1	R5.1.2	R5.2.1	R5.2.2	R6	Total
N1.1	51	0	0	0	9	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	2	0	0	67
N1.2	1	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
N2.1	6	0	223	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	234
N2.2	1	2	0	25	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	30
R1.1	4	1	0	0	31	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	41
R1.2	3	3	0	0	2	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	19
R2.2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
R3.1.1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
R3.1.2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
R3.1.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
R3.2.1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
R4.1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
R5.1.1	4	0	3	0	4	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	40	0	2	0	0	57
R5.1.2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
R5.2.1	2	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	10	0	0	20
R5.2.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
R6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4
Total	78	11	227	26	51	14	1	10	7	1	12	0	53	0	14	1	3	509

Percentage agreement = 0,821

Thesis types in the corpus

Non-relational theses:	Simple Evaluation – positive
	Simple Evaluation – negative
	Simple Policy – positive
	Simple Policy – negative

Thesis types in the corpus

Relational theses:

- Categorical thesis – all-in connection
- Categorical thesis – all-out connection
- ✗Categorical thesis – partial connection
- ✗Similarity thesis – positive
- Similarity thesis – negative
- Complex Evaluation – superiority
- Complex Evaluation – inferiority
- Complex Evaluation – equative
- Complex Evaluation – superlative – positive
- ✗Complex Evaluation – superlative – negative
- ✗Sign thesis – positive
- ✗Sign thesis – negative
- Causal thesis – cause-to-effect – positive
- ✗Causal thesis – cause-to-effect – negative
- Causal thesis – effect-to-cause – positive
- Causal thesis – effect-to-cause – negative
- Complex Policy

Student preferences for thesis types (Main categories)

Type	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
N2	259	49,8	49,8	49,8
N1	84	16,2	16,2	66,0
R5	76	14,6	14,6	80,6
R1	65	12,5	12,5	93,1
R3	31	6,0	6,0	99,0
R6	4	0,8	0,8	99,8
R2	1	0,2	0,2	100,0
Total	520	100,0	100,0	

N2 – Simple policy

N1 – Simple Evaluation

R5 – Causal

R1 – Categorical thesis

R3 – Complex Evaluation

R6 – Complex Policy

R2 – Similarity thesis

Problems with thesis statements

- Thesis question

Today's society is divided into three parts. The first - bigger - part loves Harry Potter. The second - smaller - hates him. And the third - a very small one - that becomes rich because of him.

What can be the motive that caused people to put J.K. Rowling's books on fire - the biggest book burning since the 1930s - and made others to spend lots and lots of money to buy everything with the young would-be sorcerer's face on it? (Direct question)

Education all over the world has gone through considerable changes in the past two or three centuries, and this process has been accelerating since the Second World War. As increasing number of people have professed their beliefs in humanistic ideology and in a social and welfare state, the need to open higher education to the general public was acknowledged by politicians. But the question is, whether more university graduates mean the lowering of quality or not. (Indirect question)



Problems with thesis statements

- Vague thesis

In order to prevent them from the addiction to those annoying little machines, which can be harmful even to their health, the adults' behaviour should serve as example how the youngsters conduct themselves without offending some basic social rules.

Problems with thesis statements

- Bifurcated thesis

I strongly believe that more humane conditions should be provided for the animals / and alternative testing methods should be introduced.

- Trifurcated thesis

The Harry Potter books not only push young people to read, / but encourage the use of imagination / and will probably cause a boom in cultural life by the time these children reach adulthood.

Problems with thesis statements

- Descriptive thesis

This essay will consider arguments that have been put forward for giving more information about food products and will point to views that shows that people need to know more about the food they eat in order to stay healthy.

In this essay I will point out some arguments for a need to introduce obligatory and general tuition fees in the Hungarian system of higher education as one cornerstone of reforms.

Problems with thesis statements

- Discursive thesis

Among all the answers from various parts of the world, I would like to discuss the difference between American and European responses to the crisis of modern man's philosophy.

Problems with thesis statements

- General agent thesis

However, most people agree that consumers should know how and where their meat, eggs and dairy products were produced.

- Implied/Missing thesis

Problems with thesis statements

- Various grammatical and vocabulary problems

*[But unfortunately in Hungary tuition fees are so inefficient, that the young people who are not backed by their families financially, cannot manage to devote three to five, or even more, years to studying.]
This is why tuition fees should be raised in Hungarian Universities.*

(tuition fee = scholarship)

Relationship btw. prompts and thesis types

Final coding * Semester Crosstabulation

			Semester					
			Jan 2001	Jun 2001	Jun 2002	Jun 2003	Jun 2004	Total
Final coding	N1	Count	23	15	24	7	15	84
		Expected Count	15.0	12.3	19.5	13.7	23.4	84.0
		% within Semester	24.7%	19.7%	19.8%	8.2%	10.3%	16.2%
	N2	Count	29	36	43	56	95	259
		Expected Count	46.3	37.9	60.3	42.3	72.2	259.0
		% within Semester	31.2%	47.4%	35.5%	65.9%	65.5%	49.8%
	R1	Count	14	13	20	8	10	65
		Expected Count	11.6	9.5	15.1	10.6	18.1	65.0
		% within Semester	15.1%	17.1%	16.5%	9.4%	6.9%	12.5%
	R2	Count	0	0	0	1	0	1
		Expected Count	.2	.1	.2	.2	.3	1.0
		% within Semester	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.2%	.0%	.2%
	R3	Count	8	2	13	4	4	31
		Expected Count	5.5	4.5	7.2	5.1	8.6	31.0
		% within Semester	8.6%	2.6%	10.7%	4.7%	2.8%	6.0%
	R5	Count	18	9	20	9	20	76
		Expected Count	13.6	11.1	17.7	12.4	21.2	76.0
		% within Semester	19.4%	11.8%	16.5%	10.6%	13.8%	14.6%
	R6	Count	1	1	1	0	1	4
		Expected Count	.7	.6	.9	.7	1.1	4.0
		% within Semester	1.1%	1.3%	.8%	.0%	.7%	.8%
	Total	Count	93	76	121	85	145	520
		Expected Count	93.0	76.0	121.0	85.0	145.0	520.0
		% within Semester	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Fisher's test
 $p < 0.001$

Cramer's V =
 0.173

References

- Graves, H. F., & Oldsey, B.S. (1957). *From fact to judgement*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Eckhardt, C., & Stewart, D. (eds.). (1979). *The Wiley reader: Designs for writing*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Fahnestock, J., & Secor, M. (1990). *A rhetoric of argument* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw.
- Freeley, A. J., & Steinberg, D. L. (2004). *Argumentation and debate: Critical thinking for reasoned decision making*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Fulkerson, R. (1996). *Teaching the argument in writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Meany, J., & Shuster, K. (2002). *Art, argument and advocacy: Mastering parliamentary debate*. New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.
- Trapp, R. (2003). Introduction. In *The debatabase book* (pp. 7-18). New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.
- Trapp, R., & Hanson, C. (2005). Debating comparative propositions of policy. *idebate*, 5(4), 29-37.

Thank you

tanko@dunainfo.net

tamasig@t-online.hu

The study was supported by

OTKA Foundation (Registry no: F 047017)

British Council Hungary

