

Situations, Boundaries, and the Ties that Bind

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On the often-blended disciplinary border between argumentation and pragmatics lies the total speech situation, a space common to both, but understood (if at all) in quite different ways by each. For Austin, the *only* thing to be described was the total speech act within the total speech situation. But he left vague the nature and dimensions of that situation. In a similar manner, argumentation theorists will speak of the total argumentative situation, and do so in ways that relate it to rhetorical situations. Two terms invite reflection here: ‘total’ and ‘situation’. This is not an inconsiderable matter. As Walter Cerf noted of Austin’s speech act theory, “The situation as a whole must be seen in order for the speech act, as part of the situation, to be understood properly.”

In considering how different scholars understand this common interdisciplinary space, this talk explores how fundamental an understanding of such situations is for an appreciation of argumentative success.

An exploration of such situations invites discussions of ideas drawn from a range of sources and theories, and from figures as different as Lloyd Bitzer and Mikhail Bakhtin. From the former we inherit the problem of whether situations are found “out there” or created by our own expectations. From the latter, we puzzle over the claim that utterances are not part of any situation, but rather the situation is a constitutive element of the utterance.

In reflecting on these sources, I aim to elucidate (Austin’s term) these situations both in terms of their constituents or features and their boundaries.

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