

Reply to Yu and Zenker

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Yu and Zenker (2022) argue that the oft-made distinction between convergent and linked argument structure is problematic. If their account holds, the linked/convergent distinction, at least as I have characterized it (Freeman 2011), seems to violate the dictum that structural analysis should come before evaluation. In this Reply I defend the position that we do not need to estimate or determine argument strength to determine whether the premises of an argument are linked or convergent.

Reply to Yu and Zenker

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Abstract: Yu and Zenker (2022) argue that the oft-made distinction between convergent and linked argument structure is problematic. If their account holds, the linked/convergent distinction, at least as I have characterized it (Freeman 2011), seems to violate the dictum that structural analysis should come before evaluation. In this Reply I defend the position that we do not need to estimate or determine argument strength to determine whether the premises of an argument are linked or convergent.

Résumé: Yu et Zenker (2022) soutiennent que la distinction souvent faite entre structure d'argumentation convergente et structure d'argumentation liée est problématique. Si leur explication est valable, la distinction liée/convergente, du moins telle que je l'ai caractérisée (Freeman 2011), semble violer le dicton selon lequel l'analyse structurelle doit précéder l'évaluation. Dans cette réponse, je défends la position selon laquelle nous n'avons pas besoin d'estimer ou de déterminer la force de l'argument pour déterminer si les prémisses d'un argument sont liées ou convergentes.

Keywords: argument structure, convergent, linked, relevance

Yu and Zenker (2022) argue that the oft-made distinction between convergent and linked argument structure is problematic. In (Freeman 1991; 2011) I suggested that we can contrast the structures this way: If two premises need to be taken together to understand why they give a relevant reason for the conclusion, the premises are linked. If each premise by itself constitutes a reason for the conclusion, they are convergent. The distinction is easily illustrated:

(A1) Martina scored in the 98th percentile.

(A2) Anyone who scored in the 98th percentile will get a scholarship.

Therefore

(AC) Martina will get a scholarship.

- (B1) Martina scored in the 98th percentile.
- (B2) She is a gifted soccer player. Therefore
- (BC) She will get a scholarship.

Clearly if one has no knowledge or even a hint that there is a connection between scoring in the 98th percentile and getting a scholarship, one might wonder why (A1) is relevant to (AC). (A2) readily explains the relevance. By contrast, (B2) does not show why (B1) is relevant to (BC), nor does (B1) show why (B2) is relevant to (BC). (B1) and (B2) give separate independently relevant reasons for (BC). The structure of the argument is convergent. If one premise needs the supplementation of another, putting forward just that premise to support the conclusion may very well yield an argument with a rather obvious gap.

- (C1) Some artificial satellites are not American made. Therefore
- (CC) Some artificial satellites are Russian made.

Don't we need to link (C1) with the statement (now no longer true) that artificial satellites are either made in America or made in Russia? Without this additional information linked to (C1) doesn't this argument have a rather obvious gap?

Although this distinction seems intuitive, Yu and Zenker argue that it is not adequate to distinguish these two types of argument structure. "Our main claim is that judgments of premise-dependence or relevance that inform a structural analysis depend on evaluating the argument's comparative ability to transfer the acceptability of the premises to its conclusion" (2022, p. 366). If this charge holds, the linked/convergent distinction, at least as we have characterized it, seems to violate the dictum that structural analysis should come before evaluation. First see how the components of an argument fit together, and only then consider whether the premises are acceptable and the support connections are adequate to transfer the acceptability of the premises to the conclusion. Yu and Zenker continue: "Our goal is ... to demonstrate that state-of-the-art methods by which to draw the distinction are ineffective because the definition of argument structure and its types is defective" (2022, p. 367). They assert that

the linked/convergent distinction as I have drawn it is not based exclusively on relevance, but also on dependence because the test involves considerations of strength variation” (2022, p. 377). They say this because I say “Premises which taken individually do not constitute even relevant reasons for a conclusion [may] when taken in combination [,...] constitute one obviously relevant reason.” (2011, p. viii) But what does judging that a premise is relevant to a conclusion involve? As I pointed out in (2011), it involves having in one’s store of inference licences one that permits asserting the conclusion when one accepts the premise, at least for the sake of argument. This involves no judgment on how strong is that licence. As we see it, to recognize that statement P is relevant to statement C is simply to recognize that P is a reason for C, not to make any judgment about how strong a reason for C is P. To say that P has some bearing on C makes no comment on how strong that bearing is. Likewise, to say that argument A gives more reasons for C than does argument B does not entail that A is stronger than B; the reasons may all be redundant or the additional reasons irrelevant. Likewise, saying that two premises linked give a reason for a conclusion, whereas separately they do not, makes no judgment about how strong the reason is. It simply acknowledges that to have a reason the two statements must be taken together. Consider: Does saying that all fir trees are evergreens give a reason for saying that some evergreens are objects of worship? Likewise, does saying that some objects of worship are fir trees give us reason to say that some objects of worship are evergreens? But put the two premises together, i.e. “Some evergreens are objects of worship because all fir trees are evergreens, and some objects of worship are fir trees (Copi 1961, p. 171) and we have a reason for the conclusion. Here the reason constitutes the premises of a valid syllogism. To say that a reason is obviously relevant is not to say that it is obviously weighty but to say that it is obviously a reason. It presents some evidence for the conclusion. The statement leaves open how strong that evidence is.

Yu and Zenker have read the concept of strength into the concept of relevance. They point out correctly that I hold that one recognizes that one statement is relevant to another because one has among one’s inference habits one which conveys one from the first statement to the other. To express additional information about the

strength of the connection beyond saying there is a connection, one might use a modal word. Now to give several reasons for a conclusion may justify modifying the connection of reason to conclusion with a stronger modality than giving just one reason for the conclusion, but this does not gainsay that recognizing the reasons as relevant is different from judging how strong a reason they give for the conclusion.

Yu and Zenker contrast the following arguments:

A: 1. His swimming suit is wet.
2. His hair is plastered down. Therefore
C. He's been swimming.

B. 1. His swimming suit is wet.
1-C. A wet swimming suit implies one has been swimming.
Therefore
C. He's been swimming.

On my proposal, (A) is convergent while (B) is linked. Yu and Zenker comment "On this understanding of relevance, anyone who agrees that A is convergent should grant an inference rule—e.g. if one's swimming suit is wet, then one has been swimming" (2022, p. 384). This is wrong. The absence of a modal qualifier suggests a conclusive connection.

But a relevant connection need not be a conclusive connection. One need only grant that if one's swimming suit is wet, one has probably been swimming. One may allow that the connection is defeasible.

We can push the point even further. Suppose a proponent gave an argument where both premises were apparently totally irrelevant to the conclusion and considering them together gave one no intuitively recognizable reason for the conclusion either. But let us say that each premise was introduced by 'because' and the conclusion with 'therefore.' Should the structure of this "argument" be seen as linked or convergent? One might argue that the question is of little moment. But might one have a reason to link the premises together, to see

them as linked? To justify such a judgment, one would have to point to some connecting concept linking the premises together.

The notion of a connecting concept introduces a better way to distinguish linked from convergent arguments, one which we proposed in (2011, p. 307).

Consider the form of a categorical syllogism in Barbara:

All S are M
All M are P Therefore
All S are P

The two premises share a concept which links them together. Clearly, any argument sharing a concept this way has a linked structure just because its premises share a mediating element. But how do we define a mediating element? In (2011) we characterized “a mediating element in a multipremised inference rule as a predicate (or predicate schema) shared by at least two premises of the rule and which does not occur in the conclusion. Arguments involve linked structure just when a subargument instances a multipremised inference rule with a mediating element” (Freeman 2011, p. 137). Notice that this definition of a mediating element, and thus of linked structure, is purely syntactic. To say that a concept is shared by two premises but does not occur in the conclusion says nothing about how strongly the premises support the conclusion.

Does contrasting linked and convergent structure this way agree with our intuitions about whether premises are linked or convergent? Let us test our characterization against certain examples, considering first a pair proposed by Yu and Zenker:

His swimming suit is wet.
His hair is plastered down. Therefore
He has been swimming.

His swimming suit is wet.
A wet swimming suit implies one has been swimming. Therefore
He has been swimming.

Intuitively, one would think that the first argument is convergent; the second, linked. The premises in the first argument give separate, independently relevant reasons for thinking he has been swimming. By contrast the second premise of the second argument explains why the first is relevant to the conclusion. In the first, “his” is not a mediating element but a shared part of two different subject terms. “Swimming suit” definitely is a mediating element.

Not everyone would agree with drawing the linked/convergent distinction as we have. We have already discussed the proposals of Stephen Thomas in *Dialectics and the macrostructure of arguments* and *Argument Structure* and the proposals of Douglas Walton in *Argument Structure* in light of our proposal for distinguishing these structures. We cannot repeat those discussions here. As we point out in *Dialectics and the macrostructure of arguments* and *Argument Structure*, we can distinguish linked from convergent arguments through two different dialectical questions. In a two-premise argument, if the second given premise answers the question “Why is the first premise relevant to the conclusion, the structure is linked. Alternatively, if the first question is “Can you give me an additional reason” the premises are convergent. Notice that neither of these questions requires one to assess the degree of strength the first stated premise gives to support the conclusion. Although one may ask the convergent structure generating question if one senses that the first premise needs to be supplemented to have an adequate case for the conclusion, this does not mean that one needs to judge how much supplementation that premise needs. Contrary to Yu and Zenker, we do not need to estimate or determine argument strength to determine whether the premises of an argument are linked or convergent.

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