

Project description: *The Pragmatics of Straw Men. An experimental approach.*
(working title)

The communication of fallacious arguments plays an important role in most models of argumentation theory. For this reason, I have decided to assess the linguistic and cognitive factors that increase or decrease the effectiveness of the straw man fallacies, defined as the ability of an audience to detect them. The straw man is often described as a distortion or misrepresentation of the opponent's argument in order to make it easier to attack. However, it appeared from a literature review that the classic definitions of this fallacy are rather simplifying. In order to get a more fine-grained understanding of its linguistic structure and cognitive functioning, I will design a series of experiments, each assessing the role of specific linguistic and cognitive variables for the effectiveness of a straw man.

The first experiment analyses if there is a difference of acceptability when the distortion is carried out on the argument itself or when the misrepresentation applies to the general standpoint presented by the speaker. I expect that the fallacy will be more effective when the distortion concerns the standpoint, since the argument is linguistically more salient and therefore its distortion more visible. The second study tests whether an audience is more likely to accept a straw man when the fallacious argument is introduced by the connective *puisque* or when it is conveyed implicitly by a juxtaposition of the two linguistic segments. In French, *puisque* is a causal connective with an echoic marking indicating common ground. I therefore expect that fallacies conveyed explicitly with a connective will be more easily detected because they make the attributed content more salient. The third experiment will focus on the distinction between distortions referring to the argument explicitly stated by the speaker or to an implicit argument. I make the hypothesis that a fallacy which misrepresents the argument in an implicit way has a higher acceptability rate due to the fact that it is less linguistically salient. All these studies will follow the same structure, and make use of a between-group design.

Based on the results of these experiments, subsequent studies of the straw man will be designed to assess 1) the role of other causal connectives (e.g. the French *comme*) on the acceptability of the straw man fallacy, 2) the impact of social biases on the communication of straw men, 3) the acceptability of straw men from a cross-linguistic perspective with studies in French, Italian, English and German.

All these studies taken together will give us a more fine-grained understanding of the factors that influence the straw man's acceptability.

Selective bibliography on the theoretical framework

Argumentation Theory

- Van Eemeren, F. H. (ed.) (2001). *Crucial Concepts in Argumentation Theory*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: SicSat.
- Van Eemeren, F. H. & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: the pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Eemeren, F. H. et al. (2014). *Handbook of Argumentation Theory*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Van Eemeren, F. H. & Snoek Henkemans, A. F. (2017). *Argumentation: analysis and evaluation*. New York, USA: Routledge.
- Oswald, S. (2011). From interpretation to consent: Arguments, beliefs and meaning. *Discourse Studies* 13 (6), 806-814.

Fallacies

- Correia, V. (2011). Biases and fallacies: The role of motivated irrationality in fallacious reasoning. *Congency* 3 (1), 107-126.
- Hamblin, C. (1970). *Fallacies*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Eemeren, F. H. van (2013): Fallacies as derailments of argumentative discourse: Acceptance based on understanding and critical assessment. *Journal of Pragmatics* 59, 141-152.
- Hansen, H. V. & Pinto, R. C. (eds.) (1995). *Fallacies. Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Pennsylvania, USA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Walton, D. (1991). Hamblin on the standard treatment of fallacies. *Philosophy* 24 (4), 353-361.

Straw Man Fallacy

- Aikin, S. F. & Casey, J. (2011). Straw Men, weak men and hollow men. *Argumentation* 25 (1), 87-105.
- Aikin, S. F. & Casey, J. (2016). Straw men, iron men and argumentative virtue. *Topoi* 35 (2), 431-440.
- Bizer, G. Y., Kozak, S. M. & Holterman, L. A. (2009). The persuasiveness of the straw man rhetorical technique. *Social Influence* 4 (3), 216-230.
- Lewinski, M. (2011). Towards a critique-friendly approach to the straw man fallacy evaluation. *Argumentation* 25 (4), 469-497.
- Oswald, S. & Lewinski, M. (2013). When and how do we deal with straw men? A normative and cognitive pragmatic account. *Journal of Pragmatics* 59, 1-23.
- Talisso, R. & Aikin, S. F. (2006). Two forms of the straw man. *Argumentation* 20 (3), 345-352.

Design of the first study

The participants have to read 40 short dialogues between Barbara and Alexandre. The initial part of the dialogue (always expressed by Barbara) remains identical in all four conditions, the second part of the dialogue (always expressed by Alexandre) contains the variables. The different conditions are assigned to four different lists by using a Latin square design, so that every participant reads ten items in all four conditions (AF = fallacious argument; AN = non-fallacious argument; SF = fallacious standpoint; SN = non-fallacious standpoint).

Barbara : Je pense qu'on pourrait ne plus rendre l'armée obligatoire parce que cela permettrait de réduire les coûts.

Alexandre (AF) : Abolissons l'armée entière puisqu'il ne faut plus dépenser un centime pour notre politique de défense.

Alexandre (AN) : Réduisons tout simplement le contingent puisque nous devons économiser de l'argent.

Alexandre (SF) : Autant laisser entrer tout de suite les terroristes puisque la sécurité de notre pays ne compte pas.

Alexandre (SN) : Proposons une armée de métier puisqu'on ne devrait forcer personne à faire un service militaire.

The participants then have to respond to four questions for each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "No, absolutely not" to "Yes, absolutely", with an additional option ("I don't know") they can select when they are not able or willing to give an answer. Each question is oriented towards another element linked to the fallacious nature of straw man fallacies. The first question aims at the exaggerative nature of the fallacy, the second question targets the logical link between Barbara's and Alexandre's statements, the third question assesses the agreement with Alexandre and the fourth and last question the agreement with Barbara.

- (1) Est-ce que la conclusion tirée par Alexandre est proportionnée par rapport à ce qu'a affirmé Barbara ?

Do you think the conclusion given by Alexandre is proportionate to what Barbara has said ?

- (2) Est-ce que la conclusion tirée par Alexandre découle de ce qu'affirme Barbara ?

Do you think the conclusion given by Alexander logically derives from what Barbara has said?

- (3) Êtes-vous d'accord avec Alexandre ?

Do you agree with Alexandre?

- (4) Êtes-vous d'accord avec Barbara ?

Do you agree with Barbara?