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### Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type: A pragma-dialectical analysis of online forms of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically

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**Publication date**  
2010

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Lewiński, M. (2010). *Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type: A pragma-dialectical analysis of online forms of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. Rozenberg Publishers.

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## Chapter 9

### The straw man fallacy in reacting critically in Internet forums

#### 9.1 Characterising straw man as a case of fallacious strategic manoeuvring

The goal of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I will aim at tracing the impact of the conditions of online political discussion forums on the way in which antagonists manoeuvre strategically in representing standpoints and arguments of protagonists. In this empirical task, I will analyse fragments of online discussions in relation to the features of this activity type. As a result, an answer can be given to *Question 1.1.2a*: How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers' attempts at reformulating their opponents' arguments and standpoints? Secondly, I will endeavour to provide workable criteria for evaluating (as fallacious straw man attacks or as reasonable paraphrases) these strategic manoeuvres in reacting critically which involve a reformulation of the protagonist's position. To reach this theoretical aim, I will examine the principles of context-sensitive analysis and evaluation of argumentation in cases where the identification of fallacious straw man attacks is at stake. In this way, the final research question of this study will be addressed (*Question 1.1.2b*: What kind of criteria for identifying straw man attacks should argumentation analysts apply in their evaluation of critical reactions in online political forum discussions?).

In this chapter straw men attacks are analysed as fallacious strategic manoeuvres in which arguers misrepresent their opponents' standpoints or arguments in such a way that they become easier to refute. Such misrepresentations occur, for example, by more or less surreptitious changes from the original qualified quantification (e.g. 'some' or 'many') into an absolute one ('all,' 'everything'):

A: My work is progressing well, because *many* of the chapters of the thesis are completed.

B: Well, if *everything* is done, then why not submit tomorrow?

(A: student; B: supervisor)

Most actual instances of straw man attacks are less obvious than this constructed example. In more natural cases the line between critical reactions involving a reasonable reformulation of the attacked position and critical reactions involving an unreasonable misrepresentation is often blurred. That is because in choosing the most opportune presentational devices for their critical reactions, depending on contextual constraints, the antagonists can manoeuvre strategically to subtly reformulate the original position of the protagonist in such a way that the departure from the original, even if fallacious, is not immediately recognisable as a straw man. In this way, the straw man fallacy can be treacherous. This treacherousness poses a double difficulty: in the first place for the attacked arguers themselves, who in their 'naïve reconstruction' of the ongoing argumentative exchanges have to decide whether they are attacked justifiably or not; in the second place, for argumentation analysts who aim to systematically analyse and evaluate the antagonist's reformulations through a process of 'normative reconstruction.'<sup>1</sup>

Straw man attacks are a crucial fallacious way of strategic manoeuvring with presentational devices in reacting critically to the standpoint and argumentation of the opponent, and therefore they require a precise theoretical analysis. Even more important for analysing straw men in online discussions are empirical considerations: online discussions create unique conditions for the identification of straw men. It is surprising, therefore, that the study of straw man attacks in online discussions has attracted hardly any scholarly attention. One of the reasons for this may be that, even though the straw man is claimed to be 'a common, familiar, and thoroughly theorized fallacy' (Talisie & Aikin, 2006: 349), actually 'deciding whether or not an argument attacks a strawman is a complex judgement' requiring a detailed, case-by-case argumentative analysis of discourse (Jacobs, 2002: 120).<sup>2</sup> This complexity of judgment makes it hardly possible for straw man attacks to be examined within the coding schemes of wide-ranging quantitative content analysis, routinely used in assessing the quality of online disputes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the process of 'naïve' and 'normative' reconstruction was introduced by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993: Ch. 5).

<sup>2</sup> In the argumentation literature, committing the straw man fallacy is commonly seen as (at least) a two-step process consisting of: 1) 'setting up a straw man,' i.e., unjustifiably representing the opponent's standpoint (or arguments) and 2) 'attacking a straw man,' i.e., attacking the misrepresentation as if it were the actual standpoint (or argument) of the opponent. Therefore, expressions such as 'setting up a straw man,' 'attacking a straw man,' or even 'strawmanning' are often used interchangeably to indicate the straw man fallacy (or a straw man attack). 'Attacking a straw man,' i.e., committing a fallacy by the antagonist, is thus different from the protagonist's detecting the misrepresentation and 'objecting to a straw man attack,' i.e. charging the antagonist with a fallacy.

<sup>3</sup> So far, the central issue in assessing the quality of critical reactions in online discourse has been the problem of 'flaming,' i.e., of derogatory language easily escalating to ferocious *ad hominem* exchanges in the

In order to gain insight into how online arguers manoeuvre strategically to set up and attack straw men, and how argumentation analysts can identify and evaluate such manoeuvres, I will take the following steps:

First, I will present and analyse two excerpts of online discussions. Each of the two contains a dialogical episode in which the antagonist reformulates the original expression of the protagonist, who, in turn, explicitly reproaches the antagonist for distorting his arguments. In this respect, both cases contain suspected straw man attacks (section 9.2).

Second, I will give an account of the straw man attacks within the pragma-dialectical approach to fallacies. I will explain in what sense the straw man fallacy undermines the exercise of critical rationality and how it contravenes the norms for a critical discussion. What can complement the contextualised pragma-dialectical analysis of the straw man in online discussions is a stipulation of specific criteria for identification and evaluation of instances of a straw man in the argumentative activity type of online forum discussion (section 9.3).

Third, I will depict online discussions as a unique context for analysis and evaluation of the straw man fallacy. Online forums allow for interactive ‘written discussions’ and thus give protagonists an excellent opportunity to refer back to their original contributions and correct misrepresentations attempted by antagonists. Yet, even though straw man attacks seem to be easily detectable in online forums, they still occur (section 9.4).

Fourth, in order to account for the occurrence of the straw man fallacy in online discussions, I will argue that its subtle forms trade on the problems of interpretation of what is conveyed (often implicitly or indirectly) in discourse, rather than on blunt misrepresentations of what has explicitly been said. In this light, the criteria for interpreting discourse proposed by argumentative theorists—in particular the so-called ‘principle of charity’—will be discussed and critically assessed (section 9.5).

Finally, in section 9.6, I will propose criteria for the evaluation of suspected straw men in the argumentative activity type of online forum discussions. On the basis of these criteria, the cases presented in section 9.2 will be evaluated.

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anonymous and disembodied environment of text-based online discussions (see, e.g., Crystal, 2001: 55-58; Kayany, 1998; Weger & Aakhus, 2003: 31-34).

## 9.2 Two examples of alleged straw man attacks in online discussions

In this section, two cases of alleged straw man attacks are analysed. In the two fragments of online discussions presented below, the allegation of committing a straw man fallacy is made by the protagonists themselves: they openly reproach the antagonists for misrepresenting their original arguments and reacting critically to misrepresented positions.<sup>4</sup> The following examples of online discussions reveal the subtle linguistic problems those wishing to assess the accuracy of reformulations in critical reactions may face.

The historical background of the discussion (9.1) is a speech delivered by the then-president of the United States G.W. Bush on 1 May 2003, commonly known as ‘The Mission Accomplished Speech.’ In this speech Bush announced that ‘major combat operations in Iraq have ended’ and, at the same time, that ‘the war on terror is not over.’<sup>5</sup> The speech sparked a major controversy – especially the Democratic opponents of the president accused him of lacking credibility by announcing the end to ‘major combat operations in Iraq’ while in fact such operations were continued long after Bush’s speech. Amidst this broad public dispute, the following online discussion is initiated by a message sent by *jgg1000a* in which he, in turn, accuses the Democratic critics of G.W. Bush of ‘lies and spin’ about the president’s speech.

### (9.1) *The Mission Accomplish Speech*

[http://groups.google.com/group/politicalforum/browse\\_frm/thread/62948dd1dd751f13/dc2c834af58b5339?hl=en](http://groups.google.com/group/politicalforum/browse_frm/thread/62948dd1dd751f13/dc2c834af58b5339?hl=en)

**1. jgg1000a** May 1 2007, 9:17 pm

The entire text... If one reads it, Democratic PR lies and spin about it are obvious... Bush stated the WOT was continuing...

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>

**7. VT Sean Lewis** May 2 2007, 8:45 pm

The same people who told us there were WMD's [Weapons of Mass Destruction - ML] in Iraq were the same people who gave us the talking points you just repeated verbatim. Forgive me if I do not fall lockstep into place and believe the unproven facts. Truthiness is NOT the truth.

**8. jgg1000a** May 3 2007, 7:06 pm

Go re-read the UNs [United Nations' - ML] definition of WMD... Using that as a benchmark, Saddam had WMD...

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of arguers’ reproaches in terms of pointers to violations of argumentative norms has been conducted by Doury (2005, 2006). See also Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne (1998) where reproaches are discussed as one aspect of the overall ‘conduct control’ in online discussion groups.

<sup>5</sup> <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>. The link to the White House’s Web-site originally provided by *jgg1000a* in turn 1 is no longer active.

**9. VT Sean Lewis**  
Not AFTER 1992!

May 3 2007, 8:27 pm

**10. Gaar**

May 3 2007, 8:41 pm

Sure he did... [have WMD after 1992 - ML]  
Where do you think the 700 shells we found came from?  
Regards,  
Gaar

**11. VT Sean Lewis**

May 4 2007, 7:44 pm

The 700 shells that were CORRUDED and UNUSABLE! READ THE FACTS....  
[...]  
Last night, intelligence officials reaffirmed that the shells were old  
and were not the suspected weapons of mass destruction sought in Iraq  
after the 2003 invasion.

**12. Gaar**

May 4 2007, 10:29 pm

Really?  
Try telling that to the 3 Soldiers that were treated for EXPOSURE for  
just handling the SPENT SHELL!  
Obviously you haven't a CLUE!  
Try reading how the munitions were MADE in order to assess just how  
"unusable" they may have been...  
Ever heard of the "Binary" method for producing such shells?  
I didn't think so...  
[...]

**13. VT Sean Lewis**

May 8 2007, 8:35 pm

Feel free to actually posting some up to date facts backing your  
'opinion'.

**14. Gaar**

May 9 2007, 3:15 am

I already have...  
You obviously can't tell the difference between a "fact" and the  
things YOU believe to be true.  
[...]

**15. VT Sean Lewis**

May 30 2007, 8:40 am

Gaar I am curious, are you STILL claiming the 700 shells were  
manufactured after 1992?

**16. Gaar**

May 30 2007, 8:46 pm

Please point out where I EVER made such a claim.  
I'll wait here...  
Regards,  
Gaar

**22. Gaar**

May 31 2007, 5:34 pm

[...]

> Look at the  
> string it is from this string, your exact words. Wiggle all you want,  
> you said what you said.

Ok, you AGAIN have made an assertion you are unwilling to back up, so  
I will go find it this time, just so I can continue to SHOW how you  
are attempting to build Straw Men in order to not have to address the  
REAL POINT others are making.  
Regards,  
Gaar

27. Gaar

May 31 2007, 5:48 pm

> I forwarded THE post you denied you wrote.

And you explained it out of context...

[http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse\\_thread/thread/62...](http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_thread/thread/62...)

If you go LOOK at that page you will SEE that jgg explained Saddam had WMD's according to the UN definition.

You then come out and say that he didn't have them after 1992, and

THAT is what I was responding to.

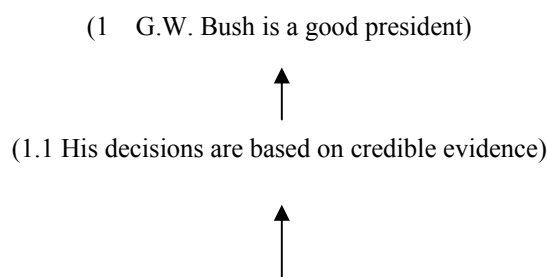
NO WHERE do you SAY ANYTHING about it being "newly made" or "made after 1992". The ONLY point you are attempting to make is that he didn't have ANY WMD's and I simply said he obviously did, according to our find.

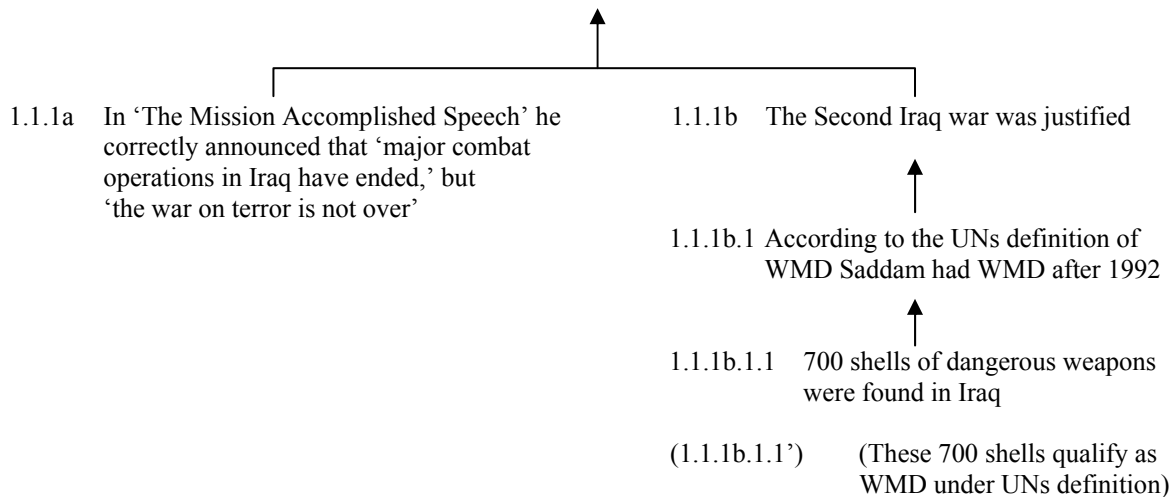
So please, stop trying to make other people's argument for them, you aren't too good making your OWN arguments, so why try to make others for them?

Regards,

Gaar

The part of the discussion pertinent to the analysis of the straw man fallacy starts at turn 7, when *VT Sean Lewis* compares the lack of credibility of Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech to the dubious justification given by his administration for the (second) war in Iraq, that is, possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein's regime. The bone of contention in the discussion following turn 7 is this very point: did Saddam have such weapons or not? The main argument in this dispute ('according to the UN definition Saddam had WMD's [after 1992]' – *jgg1000a* in turn 8) is supported by the fact that '700 shells' were found by the US Army in Iraq (*Gaar* in turn 10). While discussants agree on the fact that the shells were actually found, they disagree as to their status: were they active, dangerous weapons of mass destruction (as *Gaar* argues) or rather old, 'corrudded and unusable' shells (as *VT Sean Lewis* contends)? Before turning to *VT Sean Lewis*'s critical reaction in turn 15, the structure of his opponents' (that is, the collective protagonist comprising of *jgg1000a*'s and *Gaar*'s) argumentation can be schematically presented:





*VT Sean Lewis's* critical reaction in turn 15 is explicitly directed against argument (and sub-standpoint) 1.1.1b.1. Yet, it also addresses the issue of the criteria necessary for the shells to qualify as weapons of mass destruction. In this respect, *VT Sean Lewis* points to the implicit linking premise 1.1.1b.1.1'. The question 'are you STILL claiming the 700 shells were manufactured after 1992?' seems, at the first glance, unjustified, for—as is clear from the argumentation structure—no claims about the shells being 'manufactured' after 1992 are made by *jgg1000a* or *Gaar*.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, *VT Sean Lewis's* own arguments seems to justify his question: he argues, among other things, that Iraq indeed used to have WMD during the war with Iran in the 1980s, but these have now become 'corrudded and unusable.' So, if Saddam's Iraq were to posses WMD in 2003, the weapons would have had to be produced after the war with Iran (1980-1988) and the subsequent First Gulf War (1990-1991). In other words, only weapons produced after 1992 would qualify as active WMD under UNs definition (see: 1.1.1b.1.1'). Following this line of reasoning, *VT Sean Lewis* claims that the argument 'According to the UNs definition of WMD Saddam had WMD after 1992' equals argument 'According to the UNs definition of WMD Saddam had *manufactured* WMD after 1992.' In this way an analyst can reconstruct *VT Sean Lewis's* own argumentation in his role of the protagonist supporting the standpoint 'G.W. Bush is *not* a good president.'

However, in his role of the antagonist of *Gaar's* and *jgg1000a's* point of view, in order to be reasonable, *VT Sean Lewis* is obliged to follow *their* argumentation and react critically to the points *they* have made. *Gaar's* reproach in turn 16 explicitly addresses this very requirement: 'Please point out where I EVER made such a claim.' Further, in turns 22

<sup>6</sup> In turn 12 *Gaar* mentions 'the "Binary" method for producing such shells' but without reference to any specific time-period.



and 27 *Gaar* openly accuses *VT Sean Lewis* of mounting a straw man against him and meticulously explains the problem he perceives in *VT Sean Lewis's* critical reaction. The crux of the problem is the difference between Iraq's having weapons of mass destruction after 1992 and Iraq's having them 'made after 1992.'

Indeed, *VT Sean Lewis's* critical reaction can be seen as an attempt at a reformulation of *Gaar's* original argument which can greatly facilitate his critical objecting: more specific, and thus stronger, claim that Iraq *manufactured* WMD after 1992 is much more susceptible to a successful refutation than a claim that after 1992 Iraq only *had* such weapons (which might have been produced long before that date). Consider, for example, a hypothetical argument that 'All US military reports published up till year 2007 confirm that all the weapons of mass destruction found in Iraq were at least 15 years old.' This argument can make quite a successful *refutation* of the claim that 'Iraq *manufactured* WMD after 1992' and, interestingly, an even more powerful *defence* of the standpoint that 'Iraq *had* WMD after 1992.' And that is exactly the stake *VT Sean Lewis* is trying to manoeuvre strategically for.

In short, it seems that *VT Sean Lewis's* reaction in turn 15 is a clear-cut case of the straw man fallacy. If he indeed misrepresented his opponents' position for a rhetorical gain, then *Gaar's* reproach would be fully justified and *VT Sean Lewis's* critical reaction would have to be evaluated as a straw man. A theoretically justified evaluation of this case is given at the end of this chapter, i.e., after the nuances of the straw man fallacy are discussed.

The point of departure for discussion (9.2) are the tragic events that took place 1-3 September 2004 in the town of Beslan, The Republic of North Ossetia, Russian Federation. In result of a siege of a secondary school by a group of (mostly) Chechen rebels, and a subsequent operation of Russian security forces, more than 300 (out of estimated 1100) hostages were killed, most of them schoolchildren. In line with the general debate over the 'Beslan school siege' in the world media, in discussion (9.2) two opposing accounts of the situation emerge. On the one hand, arguers such as *Florian* blame Russian military for a gross mishandling of the hostage-freeing operation. On the other hand, posters such as *Hooda Gest* fundamentally condemn Chechen 'Islamist terrorists,' and argue that little could be done to help the civilians in face of the terrorists' determination to kill as many people as possible. Later in the discussion an analogy is drawn between the Russian response to the Beslan siege and the American handling of terrorist attacks, such as 9/11.

*Florian* and those who support him claim that the American response has been largely inadequate so far and that, in particular, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq opened a 'Pandora's Box' for the United States. In opposition, *Hooda Gest* defends the position that the American 'War on Terror,' including the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, is an altogether correct response to the 'worldwide Muslim Holy War against the West.'

**(9.2) Russian in the starting block**

[http://groups.google.com/group/misc.news.internet.discuss/browse\\_frm/thread/61349250aad68961/9f62dce4c048962c?hl=en](http://groups.google.com/group/misc.news.internet.discuss/browse_frm/thread/61349250aad68961/9f62dce4c048962c?hl=en)

**49. Florian**

Sep 14 2004, 4:06 pm

[...]

It looks like the US is using now all its power to fight the islamists.  
And although all these efforts, Bin laden is still running. I see it as  
a weakness and an encouragement for the islamists.

[...]

**50. Hooda Gest**

Sep 14 2004, 6:12 pm

[...]

In your opinion. I disagree. [...] Bin Laden is running and has been for 3 years  
now. He has no safe country in which he can hide and build training camps.  
His financing system has been dismantled and he has had to re-establish that.  
Most of his lieutenants have been captured or killed.

[...]

**51. Florian**

Sep 15 2004, 4:11 pm

[...]

> His financing  
> system has been dismantled and he has had to re-establish that.

Are you sure it has been completely dismantled. Do you have a reference?

[...]

**52. Hooda Gest**

Sep 15 2004, 6:21 pm

[...]

>> His financing  
>> system has been dismantled and he has had to re-establish that.

> Are you sure it has been completely dismantled. Do you have a reference?

I did not say "completely". Context, Florian, context. Or should I say  
"distortion and spin" on your part yet again?

[...]

**53. Florian**

Sep 16 2004, 4:56 pm

[...]

If it was not completely, what proportion of his financing system was dismantled?

[...]

**54. Hooda Gest**

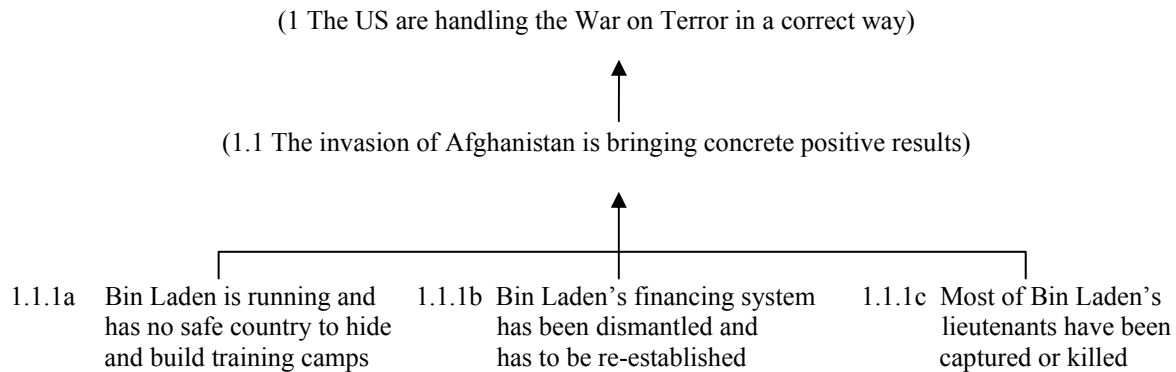
Sep 16 2004, 6:21 pm

[...]

Gee, Florian, I don't know. Why don't you tell me? I never claimed  
completely and I don't see any need to provide what percentage has been  
disrupted or dismantled. I don't know how much he has rebuilt either. Does  
that mean he has completely rebuilt it?

[...]

Excerpts of discussion (9.2) presented here contain only one of the many sub-disputes of a much more extensive discussion regarding the War on Terror. The structure of *Hooda Gest*'s argumentation can be reconstructed in the following way:



In discussion (9.2) each of the coordinative compound arguments 1.1.1a-1.1.1c becomes a subject of a separate sub-discussion. The fragment of discussion quoted above centres on argument 1.1.1b, that is, on the issue of Bin Laden's 'dismantled financing system.' In turn 51 *Florian*, in his capacity of antagonist, asks *Hooda Gest* if he is sure that the system was 'completely' dismantled. *Hooda* responds by denying he has ever claimed that it was 'completely' dismantled and reproaches *Florian* for his 'distortion and spin.'

Similarly to case (9.1), this example seems to exhibit a prototypical case of the straw man fallacy: *Florian* adds an absolutising qualification to his opponent's argument. Just as the addition of 'manufactured' in case (9.1), the addition of 'completely' makes the original argument much stronger, and thus easier to refute: if *Hooda Gest* indeed claimed that Bin Laden's financing system had been 'completely' dismantled, it would be enough for *Florian* to demonstrate some signs of functioning of the system to refute *Hooda Gest*'s argument. Analogously to case (9.1) this would have a very strong negative effect on the entire argumentation of the protagonist, since, as the above diagram reveals, *Hooda Gest*'s argumentation is built entirely of coordinative and subordinative structures. If such argumentation structures are used, it is enough for the antagonist to refute one of the arguments (sub-standpoints) to seriously undermine the protagonist's entire structure of argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: Ch. 7; Snoeck Henkemans, 1992).

The analysis of the fragments of discussions (9.1) and (9.2) clarifies argumentation structures and conversational dynamics of the exchanges of arguments and critical reactions. It also reveals an important similarity between cases (9.1) and (9.2) – they both

contain a suspected straw man attack and thus a possibly fallacious critical reaction. Still, neither of the cases can be justifiably classified as a straw man fallacy without a further investigation of the theoretical and analytic intricacies related to this fallacy.

### 9.3 The straw man within the pragma-dialectical treatment of fallacies

In pragma-dialectics, as developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst, fallacies are defined as breaches of the rules for a critical discussion – an ideal dialectical procedure aimed solely at a resolution of a difference of opinion on the merits. Since the rules regulate the reasonable performance of all speech acts necessary in a critical argumentative discussion, any violation of them indicates a departure from a critical, dialectical rationality and is thus tantamount to an unreasonable, or fallacious, argumentative move (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984, 1987, 1992a, 2004). As described in Chapter 4, this critical core of pragma-dialectics has later been extended by the notion of *strategic manoeuvring*. As van Eemeren and Houtlosser (1999, 2000, 2002a) contend, it is theoretically vital to recognise that in actual circumstances arguers do not only try to be dialectically reasonable but also rhetorically successful. For that reason, according to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003b), each fallacy can be conceptualised as a ‘derailment of strategic manoeuvring,’ i.e., a violation of one of the dialectical rules for a critical discussion committed by an arguer with a view of his rhetorical success. Whether one can say that such a derailment actually occurred or not depends, among other factors, on the context of an argumentative activity type in which argumentation takes place (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005, 2007; van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen & Lewiński, forthcoming).

Based on these considerations, van Eemeren and Houtlosser argue that a ‘systematic theoretical treatment of fallacies’ (and, by definition, a systematic treatment of sound argumentation) should comprise three interrelated conceptual levels (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b: 289):<sup>7</sup>

1. A solid philosophical rationale that allows for stipulating an ideal goal of good argumentation (in pragma-dialectics: resolution of a difference of opinion on the

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<sup>7</sup> For an earlier formulation of this approach, see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, (1992a: Ch. 8, esp. p. 104): ‘Which requirements should an adequate theory of fallacies, in our view, fulfill? First, it should provide norms for distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable moves in argumentative discourse. Second, it should provide criteria for deciding when such a norm is violated. Third, it must provide interpretation procedures for determining whether an utterance satisfies these criteria.’

- merits by way of a critical testing of fallible standpoints). On this most abstract level, fallacies are argumentative moves that inhibit the realisation of the ideal goal.
2. Norms that are conducive to achieving this goal (in pragma-dialectics: rules for a critical discussion). Only after the norms of argumentation are given a clear shape in the form of explicit rules, each fallacy can be precisely defined as a contravention of a concrete rule. The rules for sound, reasonable argumentative discussion are thus a crucial element of the pragma-dialectical theory of fallacies: it is a violation of one of the rules that makes a given move in an argumentative discussion fallacious.
  3. 'Specific and workable criteria that make it possible to decide in specific instances whether a certain norm has been violated or not.'

The pragma-dialectical account of the straw man fallacy can be neatly fitted into a systematic treatment which requires that fallacies be considered on these three interdependent levels. Pragma-dialectics, thus, has so far explained: 1) why the straw man is an unreasonable argumentative move, and 2) which norm a straw man violates (and what major types of straw man can be distinguished):

Ad 1. Primarily, straw man attacks are fallacious because they are attempts to illegitimately increase 'the possibility of falsification' of the opponent's standpoint (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 128) by means of 'representing the other party as weaker than he actually is' (*Ibidem*: 131). In this sense, attacking straw men seriously hinders critical testing: by resorting to misrepresentations, the antagonist purports to genuinely test the protagonist's opinions in a critical way, while in fact practicing nothing more than a made-up falsification aimed at a rhetorical victory (traditionally termed a 'sophistical refutation'). This creates a situation in which the standpoint defended and the standpoint attacked are different. As a result, opponents argue at cross-purposes and instead of a reasonable resolution of disputes on the merits they can reach only 'a spurious resolution' (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 125).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A similar account is given by Walton (1996: 121): 'The failure to engage with the real position of your opponent in a type of dialogue like a political debate, in a way, defeats the whole purpose of your arguments. It is what Aristotle would classify as a failure of real refutation. From this perspective, the outcome is that your opponent's (real) position has not been challenged at all by your argument. It is a kind of failure of an argument to succeed in its real purpose of refuting or critically questioning the opposed point of view.'

Ad 2. On the level of concrete rules, the straw man is fallacious because a violation of rule 3 for a critical discussion occurs: *A party's attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party*. This rule explicitly spells out one of the requirements for reasonable critical reactions – they must not misrepresent the position advanced by the protagonist. Even though literally this rule concerns only the attacks on *standpoints*, it applies equally well to all the *arguments* advanced by the other party in support of the standpoint.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the straw man fallacy can be seen as a fallacy of critical reacting – any critical reaction of the antagonist, in any of the stages of an argumentative discussion, can derail into a straw man as soon as the reaction is targeted at a misrepresented position.<sup>10</sup> (This applies, in particular, to any type of critical reactions distinguished in the dialectical profile for the argumentation stage (see figure 7.1).) Moreover, according to van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992a: 124-131) there are two basic ways in which rule 3 can be violated: the antagonist can either impute an altogether fictitious standpoint (or arguments) to the protagonist or he can distort the protagonist's standpoint (or arguments) originally advanced in a different way.

Ad 3. The final level of straw man fallacy analysis yet to be developed in the extended pragma-dialectical theory focusing around the concept of strategic manoeuvring is the level of 'specific and workable criteria that make it possible to decide in specific instances whether a certain norm has been violated or not' (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b: 289). Once the 'specific and workable criteria' are worked out, actual cases of alleged straw man abuses, such as those in fragments (9.1) and (9.2) presented above, can be evaluated in a theoretically and empirically satisfying way.

The task of developing clear-cut criteria for deciding whether a fallacy has been committed in a given instance is not an easy one. Fallacies, apart from being unreasonable, are also treacherous: they are argumentative moves which often pass unnoticed, which may lead to their being persuasive. This happens largely because in some contexts, or even in certain unique situations, certain arguments are indeed sound, while in other contexts similar, or even identical, arguments are unreasonable. In short, the very crux of the

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<sup>9</sup> In the pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentation every argument supporting the (main) standpoint contested at the main level of a discussion can become a 'sub-standpoint' supported by further sub-arguments in a 'sub-dispute.'

<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the straw man fallacy (i.e. violation of rule 3 for a critical discussion) may be similar to cases of the fallacy in which the antagonist is magnifying a premise which is left unexpressed by the protagonist (violation of rule 5 for a critical discussion) and the fallacy of falsely presenting a premise as a common starting point (violation of rule 6 for a critical discussion). See van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: Ch. 13 and 14.

treacherousness of fallacies lies in their resemblance to impeccably reasonable arguments: fallacies are persuasive because they look as if they were good arguments and discussants tend to credit them with the presumption of reasonableness (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2003b).<sup>11</sup>

In van Eemeren and Houtlosser's account, in principle fallacies are rhetorically motivated abuses of the dialectical norms of good argumentation. They are designed to be persuasive, often in ways sophisticated enough to cover up the breach of one of the norms of reasonableness. This cover-up is possible because fallacious manoeuvres are deceptively related to their sound counterparts on which they are, so to speak, parasitic. In actual argumentative exchanges the line between sound and fallacious strategic manoeuvres is thus often difficult to grasp, and the derailment of strategic manoeuvring can easily pass unnoticed.

The elucidation of fallacies in terms of derailments of strategic manoeuvring sheds a new light on the analysis and evaluation of actual instances of the straw man. The fallacy is rhetorically attractive to the antagonist, and at the same time treacherous for the protagonist, exactly because it may easily go unnoticed. The difficulty of pinning down actual cases of the straw man fallacy has been attributed in the literature on this fallacy to two basic reasons.<sup>12</sup>

Firstly, the straw man, as a fallacy of critical *reactions*, is by definition related to the standpoint or argumentation of the other party in a dispute. Therefore, the precondition for evaluating suspected straw men is access to the 'detailed, more localized record of what the [original] speaker actually said as he developed his point of view' (Walton, 1996: 127, 118). This precondition is commonly met only in the case of written texts, which preserve the original argument, and can in principle be consulted as soon as a possibly fallacious critical reaction has to be compared with the attacked original.<sup>13</sup> It is not met, however, in

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<sup>11</sup> See also Jackson (1995) for an explanation of this phenomenon.

<sup>12</sup> Arguing similarly to Jackson (1995), Bizer, Kozak and Holterman claim in their recent experimental study that 'the straw man technique seems not to be universally effective. Rather, [...] the straw man may only be effective among people who lack the motivation to carefully scrutinize a persuasive message [...]' (2009: 224, 227). These researches thus point to the impact of the arguers' *willingness* to 'carefully scrutinize' a suspected straw man on the effectiveness of the fallacy. What I discuss in the following is the impact of a more fundamental factor, that is, the arguers' *ability* 'to carefully scrutinize a persuasive message.'

<sup>13</sup> This is not to dismiss an important observation made by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992a: 128): 'A knowledge of the maneuvers that may be carried out in distorting a standpoint can be helpful to recognizing a straw man. Among the devices that are employed here are simplification, exaggeration, absolutization, generalization, and the omission of nuances and qualifications.' All such linguistic cues, however 'helpful to recognizing a straw man,' are conditional, since simplifications, exaggerations, etc., may occur, in the first

most cases of spoken discourse, such as ordinary conversations, classroom discussions, etc. These types of activity, where no record of argumentation is kept, are susceptible to futile “You remember when you said that!”—“No, I never did!” disputes. Therefore, as Walton concludes, ‘if the conversation was never witnessed or recorded, or if there is no other record of it, independent of the sayso of the two primary disputants, the issue may not even be possible to resolve’ (Walton, 1996: 126-127). Such difficulties, thus, may prevent many suspected cases of a straw man from being clearly identified and sanctioned as fallacies.

At the same time, written discourse creates another problem in identifying alleged straw men due to the lack of immediate presence of the original protagonist. In the context of written disputes the antagonist’s straw man attack may be powerfully persuasive to the members of a third party audience exactly because the attacked arguer is not immediately capable of correcting the abuse (Walton, 1996: 126-127). In such cases, the fallacious refutation of the misrepresented standpoint reverberates, as it were, and may give the antagonist a perceived, putative rhetorical victory in a dispute. By contrast, the protagonist’s position in the context of written polemics, whether academic or journalistic, is rather disprivileged: his re-reaction, in which he corrects the unjustified misrepresentation of his original position, may come too late to be of any rhetorical significance to the audience.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the first reason why straw man attacks may be hard to identify and thus treacherous, is that either the record of the original argumentation is not available (typical of oral discourse) or the original arguer is not present to correct the abuse in critical reactions immediately when they are advanced (typical of written discourse).

The second main reason why straw man attempts are difficult to detect by actual arguers and external analysts alike is that straw men often trade on general problems of interpretation in actual argumentative language-in-use. Before a well-justified evaluation of a given critical reaction can be given, both the protagonist’s original standpoint (or argument) and the version attacked by the antagonist have to be carefully reconstructed. Similarly to all other fallacies, simple examples of the straw man fallacy, such as those usually given in textbooks, serve their didactic purpose well, since they reveal the basic

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place, in the original protagonist’s standpoint or argumentation, which is then faithfully reflected in the antagonist’s critical reactions.

<sup>14</sup> Not coincidentally, Plato’s famous ‘critique of writing’ (*Phaedrus*, *Letter VII*) is based on acknowledging the force of this very problem: writing detaches the arguer from his arguments, therefore the arguments are vulnerable to unjustified attacks, which—if at all—can be rebutted or corrected by the absent arguer only belatedly. Plato saw this difficulty as a great disadvantage of written argument over the lively exchanges of spoken arguments, such as those practiced by Socrates.



mechanism behind a straw man. However, easily reconstructible, blatant misrepresentations, such as the example given at the beginning of the chapter, would probably not be attempted in ordinary circumstances:

A: My work is progressing well, because some of the chapters of the thesis are completed.

B: Well, if everything is done, then why not submit tomorrow?

In such obvious instances, the antagonist simply runs the risk of an immediate detection of the abuse, and the misleading function of the fallacy cannot be realised. Moreover, simplistic rules of thumb, such as: ‘whenever the original standpoint is misquoted, the straw man fallacy is committed,’ do not always work. On the one hand, a non-verbatim quotation may actually amount to a justifiable paraphrase of the original claim. This may, for example, be due to semantic equivalence: the expression ‘the current president of the United States of America’ (uttered in 2010) and the expression ‘Barack Obama’ have the very same meaning and there is nothing wrong in replacing the one with the other. On the other hand, argumentation of the protagonist may be quoted and attacked verbatim, yet taken out of context and hence distorted anyway.<sup>15</sup>

Difficulties in arriving at an unequivocal interpretation of both the original and the attacked standpoint in any given case are exactly what skillful antagonists can opportunistically rely on in their misrepresentations:

In practice, the differences between the attacked standpoint and the original standpoint will often be quite subtle. By design, the opponent’s words are so twisted that it becomes at the same time easy for the distorter to tackle and difficult for an outsider to tell whether justice is being done to the original standpoint. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 127-128)<sup>16</sup>

Because pragma-dialectics analyses argumentation as a phenomenon of natural discourse, rather than crystal clear artificial language, it recognises the complexities and difficulties of language-in-use. In ordinary discussions, standpoints or arguments can be stated vaguely, without a clear, explicitly expressed sense and force, allowing for many plausible interpretations and thus for many justified critical reactions. Such lack of exactness is usually not problematic in daily discourse, so that discussions can develop smoothly

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<sup>15</sup> See Walton and Macagno (in press) for the most recent discussion about the ‘wrenching from context’ version of the straw man fallacy.

<sup>16</sup> A similar problem is pointed out by Walton, but without any thorough attempts to grasp it in a theoretically satisfying manner: ‘Because of the various kinds of problems and trickiness in determining what an arguer’s position really is in a given case, it can be easy to get this wrong, and to mistake an arguer’s real position for something else that is not her real position, but only appears to be. This is the essence of the deception or error inherent in the straw man fallacy as a distinctive type of sophisticated tactic’ (Walton, 1996: 125).

without constant specification of meaning and force of what is being said. However, as soon as problems arise, only a precise reconstruction and evaluation of discourse can solve them. In the task of evaluating critical reactions as reasonable or fallacious, knowledge of ‘how the participants themselves understand what is going on’ (van Eemeren et al., 1993: 43) may be of great help to the argumentation analyst, but is not decisive. Arguers (in their role of protagonists) may, for example, deny previously incurred commitments or otherwise implausibly interpret their own words, as well as reproach others for fallacies which in fact have not been committed.

Acknowledging the fact that imprecision of ordinary discourse may lead to misunderstandings between arguers, the pragma-dialectical theory stipulates that in a reasonable argumentative discussion every speaker has an unconditional right to request his interlocutor to perform a ‘language usage declarative’ such as a definition, clarification, or amplification (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 156-157). In this way, a sub-discussion may develop in which a mutually acceptable interpretation of an unclear standpoint or argument is established.<sup>17</sup> Arguers should be free to agree on an interpretation of a standpoint or argument and, in principle, the original protagonist should have a final say on what he has actually meant. Yet, the scope of such an intersubjective sub-discussion should be constrained by the limits of a contextually plausible interpretation of what has been said. If the protagonist reinterprets his own words in an unjustified way, for instance by backing down from his previous commitment, then he denies what he himself has claimed, and thus commits a fallacy. If the antagonist interprets the protagonist’s expressions beyond the limits of plausibility, then he commits a straw man.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the ‘specific and workable criteria’ for identifying and evaluating cases of alleged straw men in actual discourse are dependent on two factors related to the conditions of a given activity type: (1) the availability of the record of disputes, and the opportunities for the protagonist to respond to and, if need be, correct unjustified reformulations of the antagonist; (2) the criteria for interpretation of contextualised argumentative discourse. These two factors are discussed in the following two sections.

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<sup>17</sup> Bart Garssen suggested that this type of argumentative sub-discussion may be termed an ‘intersubjective interpretation procedure.’

<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, arguers may also agree to start a completely new discussion on a substantially (i.e., beyond the limits of contextually plausible interpretations) reformulated standpoint. In this case, however, one cannot speak anymore of a sub-discussion within the same discussion. See van Laar (2007) for a detailed analysis of this possibility.

#### 9.4 Constraints on reformulating standpoints and arguments in discussion forums

As argued in the previous section, it may sometimes be quite easy for the antagonist to get away with straw man attacks for at least two reasons. First, the protagonist may find it hard to prove that a fallacious misrepresentation took place, either because his original position is not recorded (characteristic of spoken discourse) or because he is simply not present to correct misrepresentations (characteristic of written discourse). If the fallacy is not identified as a fallacy, the argumentative move concerned may be deceptive and thus seriously derail the course of a reasonable argumentative discussion. Secondly, non-straightforward cases of suspected straw man attacks, such as those in (9.1) and (9.2), are ordinarily not fringe or far-fetched, but rather illustrative of the way in which actual arguers (in their role as antagonists) try to benefit from possible imprecision in ordinary use of language.

In these respects, online discussions create rather unique conditions for setting up and identifying straw men: the record of exchanges is kept and the protagonist is in a position to object to straw man attempts. This is basically because the discourse of online discussion forums, such as Usenet, ‘bridges characteristics of written and oral language norms’ (Baym, 1996: 319; see section 7.3.3).

To start with, online discussions share many of the characteristics of the traditional written texts. Messages sent to online discussion groups are typed by discussants and may comprise elaborated, well thought out (and even proof-read) arguments. Dahlberg, in his general analysis of argumentative conditions in asynchronous online discussions, observes that:

[...] the effort it takes to put forward arguments in written form, in comparison with spoken communication, often encourages participants to think more carefully about their positions. This reflection is aided by the record of exchanges often available to participants in online debate which allows careful consideration of the development of ongoing arguments. Furthermore, online interactions are largely asynchronous exchanges and thus provide participants with time for reflection before presenting their own contributions. (Dahlberg, 2001a: online)

Still, as Ferrara, Brunner & Whittemore (1991: 14, 25) claim, even though computer-mediated discussions give possibilities to revise or edit texts before they are sent, ‘th[e] “first draft quality” appears to be an accepted convention of interactive written discourse.’ Whether carefully edited or instantaneously sent, messages in most asynchronous online forums are stored by the system. Therefore, the entire previous discussion is available for

inspection, what allows for an interpretation of ongoing exchanges to be based on a detailed, verbatim record of what has been said. Moreover, the availability of the record of exchanges may also prevent arguers from imputing overtly distorted positions to their opponents. The attacked protagonist can simply always go back to his past arguments, compare them with the antagonist's critical reaction and, if necessary, reproach the antagonist for a distortion. As discussed above, in case of interpretative doubts, a sub-discussion may evolve in which exact meanings of what has been communicated can be settled between arguers. In recorded online forums, such a sub-discussion can hardly fall into the trap of a futile chain of 'I never said that!'–'Yes, you did!' exchanges, which may seriously imperil the progress of any ordinary conversation. Yet, as argued by Baym (1996), the immediate physical context of oral interaction that allows for catching 'nonverbal nuance,' so important in getting at the indirect and implicated meanings, is not available in text-based online discussions. Because of that, 'there is greater pressure on the Usenet writer than on the conversationalist to make referents and implied meanings explicit' (Baym, 1996: 317).

At the same time, online discussions exhibit many features traditionally associated with oral interactions. Most notably synchronous chat rooms, but also many asynchronous forums, are venues for interactively developing conversations, in which arguers take turns, respond to one another, and thus expand their exchanges in chains of arguments, reactions and re-reactions. This means that online 'writers' who argue in asynchronous systems such as Usenet 'are not completely distanced from the readers.' Therefore, there is ample room for relatively quick feedback and 'continued interactions between writers and readers in which positions are affirmed and challenged, clarified and modified' (Baym, 1996: 318).

The availability of the record of ongoing argumentative exchanges and, at the same time, the possibility for quick reactions, are distinctive conditions of online discussions as instances of written speech. These conditions on the one hand impose restrictions on the antagonist's attempts to advantageously reformulate the protagonist's standpoints and arguments and, on the other hand, create opportunities for the protagonist to quickly investigate and detect possible straw man fallacies. In the following, an analysis is presented of how the arguers in the fragments (9.1) and (9.2) make use of these technical restrictions and opportunities.

It is noticeable that in discussion (9.1), *VT Sean Lewis*, in his crucial critical reaction (turn 15), comes back to the issue of the '700 shells' of suspected Iraqi weapons of mass destruction after a time-gap of almost a whole month (discussion started on May 1;

*Gaar's* post 10, to which *VT Sean Lewis* reacts, was sent on May 3; turn 15 was posted on May 30). Such a late re-opening of discussion is possible in the online forums studied here. They are asynchronous, so users can respond with a considerable time-lag, just like with e-mails (even if it is rather unusual to do so). Moreover, the record of the entire discussion is saved, so the new contribution can be precisely fitted into the old discussion. Taking this into account, *VT Sean Lewis'* move is surprisingly conversational: it seems as if he is trying to 'trick' *Gaar* with a stratagem that may be quite effective in ordinary (oral) discussions – after all, who can precisely remember what was said a month ago in the heat of a prolonged debate? As *Gaar's* response shows ('Please point out where I EVER made such a claim'), this trick may not work so well in online discussion forums, where the convention of precise referencing, afforded by the record of the previous dispute, applies. Indeed, after some technical sub-dispute (*Gaar*: 'Why would you not supply a link to the post and only quote it out of context?' – *VT*: 'You can't link to the same string you are posting from.'), *Gaar* explicitly accuses *VT Sean Lewis* of committing the straw man fallacy (turn 22: '[...] I will go find it this time, just so I can continue to SHOW how you are attempting to build Straw Men in order to not have to address the REAL POINT others are making'). Further, *Gaar* retraces the whole month-long part of a discussion, provides a link to the relevant message, and explains in precise detail why *VT Sean Lewis'* critical reaction should be taken as a straw man (turn 27: 'If you go LOOK at that page you will SEE that [...]'). However, even after this well-grounded reproach, *VT Sean Lewis* does not acquiesce, but rather applies his own reasoning to the case of weapons of mass destruction, thus trying to make his critical reaction justifiable. The issue remains unresolved, and the discussion continues up to a turn 302.

Example (9.2) is not so sophisticated as far as meta-communication regarding the conventions of proper argumentation in online discussions is concerned. Interesting, however, is the way in which both arguers (*Florian* and *Hooda Gest*) divide their long messages into precise chunks, addressing selected claims made by each other. In this way, the original argument, critical reaction to it, re-reaction, etc., are always put next to each other. To this aim, the automatic quoting function, signalled by angled brackets (>) is used.<sup>19</sup> In effect, the 'detailed, more localized record of what the [original] speaker actually

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<sup>19</sup> In a discussion forum message, expressions without any brackets are poster's own reactions. Those with one bracket (>) are his opponent's claims to which the poster responds. Those with two brackets (>>) are, in turn, the claims to which the opponent's claim responded. That means that very often claims marked by '>>' may be the present poster's previous claims.

said as he developed his point of view' (Walton, 1996: 127) is copied-pasted right next to the critical reaction of the current arguer.

In conclusion, one can say that discussions which are written and allow in addition (contrary to printed polemics, e.g., in newspapers) for instantaneous interactions are an ideal context for spotting straw men, since they fulfil all the necessary conditions for the straw man identification. As the reproaches of *Gaar* in (9.1) and *Hooda Gest* in (9.2) show, attacks on straw men may still be attempted. This is because the availability of the text of the entire discussion and the chance for protagonists to quickly respond to suspicious criticisms are, obviously, not sufficient conditions to decide whether the straw man fallacy has been committed. To pass a well-justified fallacy judgment one has to delve into the problems of argumentation interpretation.

## **9.5 Interpretation and reconstruction of alleged straw man attempts**

### ***9.5.1 Pragmatic plausibility as a basic criterion for the interpretation of critical reactions***

In this study a straw man is defined as a fallacy of reacting critically which consists in the antagonist's misinterpreting (and misrepresenting) the protagonist's standpoints or arguments. The notion of *misinterpretation*, obviously, presupposes certain criteria for a correct, legitimate, or sound interpretation. Therefore, the 'specific and workable' soundness criteria for critical reactions which may allow for unambiguous evaluation of alleged straw men can only be formulated after the principles of interpretation of ordinary argumentative discourse are examined. In the pragma-dialectical treatment of argumentation interpretation, an important distinction is made between ordinary arguers' ongoing 'naïve reconstruction' (or 'interpretation') and an analyst's critical, theoretically grounded 'normative reconstruction' of argumentative discourse (van Eemeren et al., 1993: Ch. 5).

In the case of evaluation of critical reactions these two kinds of interpretation are interwoven in a particular way. Every episode of reacting critically, whether reasonable or fallacious, consists of at least two obvious steps: (a) the protagonist puts forth a standpoint (and/or argument); and (b) the antagonist reacts critically to this standpoint (or argument),

which characteristically involves a representation of the protagonist's original position.<sup>20</sup> In the antagonist's representation a certain interpretation of the original position is expressed. This interpretation is a 'naïve' rendering of what the protagonist might be taken to have meant. Needless to say, naïve interpretation is prone to all kinds of mistakes: it may be deliberately distorted, it may result from a misunderstanding, etc. It is a task of an argumentation analyst to judge in a methodical way whether the critical reaction in question is indeed fallacious or not. To this end, provided that the text of an argumentative discussion is available, and that the arguers can have their say as to the accuracy of critical reactions, an argumentation analyst should take the three following steps: first, he should (normatively) reconstruct the position of the original protagonist; second, he should (normatively) reconstruct the antagonist's critical reaction (which in itself already includes naïve reconstruction of what the protagonist has communicated); and, third, he should compare the two versions (the protagonist's and the antagonist's) and see if the antagonist's reformulation is justifiable in a given context.

This evaluative procedure consists of unobjectionable, or even self-evident, steps which are necessary in identifying cases of straw men. However, among some argumentation theorists, such as Walton and authors of textbooks on argumentation and informal logic, there is a tendency not to pay close attention to the first two steps (reconstruction) and to focus instead on the last one (comparison). In this task, the use of a strict formal language is advocated, since it allows for precise comparisons of various propositions. As a result, the analysis of a straw man in terms of logical symbols is propounded (Johnson & Blair, 1994: 96; Walton, 1996: 116). Examples of the fallacy are thus explained in abstract terms:

A:        *S*

B:        *T*?        (or:  $\sim T$ )

(A: student, B: supervisor, *S*: standpoint of A, *T*: simulated standpoint questioned or attacked by B)

Such an approach may be simple, elegant, and didactically useful. But, in an important respect, it begs the question: it presupposes what is to be proven, i.e., that *T* is different from *S* in a crucial and, whenever a straw man is involved, unjustified manner. This kind of logical treatment, at best, takes into scrutiny different categories of relations that can hold between distinct propositions, symbolised by abstract *S* and *T*, and evaluate some of

<sup>20</sup> Further steps such as the protagonist's accepting or objecting to the antagonist's representation of the standpoint/argument, the antagonist justifying his reformulation or backing down from it, etc. are possible. Discussions (9.1) and (9.2) are both examples of such extended episodes.

the relations as legitimate reformulations, while others as fallacious straw men (see van Laar, 2007). Even if such studies might be useful in categorising relations between symbolically represented propositions, they expose the weakness of logical analyses of ordinary language use: their abstract character leaves largely unaddressed the question of how to justifiably assign logical symbols to actual utterances of ordinary language users. Therefore, a logical approach is not immediately helpful to the task of proposing specific criteria for deciding if concrete instantiations of strategic manoeuvring in reacting critically have got derailed or not.

In search for applicable criteria, one has to go back to the crucial problem of reconstruction of actual discourse. Obviously, the first question to be addressed in the analysis of the *straw man* is: what is the ‘*real man*’ (‘*real point*,’ ‘*real position*’)? Pragma-dialectics, avoiding theoretical complications related to the concept of ‘*real*’ positions or ‘*real*’ interpretations, stipulates that critical reactions, in order to be reasonable (or sound), have to be directed at ‘the standpoint that has *indeed* been advanced by the other party’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 125; italics added). This criterion, formulated in rule 3 for a critical discussion, can be seen as the basic soundness condition for critical reactions.

In order to get at what ‘has *indeed* been advanced,’ pragma-dialectics resorts, in the first place, to a contextually sensitive reconstruction of argumentative discourse (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993; Snoeck Henkemans, 1992). Such a reconstruction takes into account not only semantic, but also pragmatic aspects of argumentative language-in-use. To consistently grasp these elements, pragma-dialecticians proposed a concept of a ‘disagreement space,’ that is, ‘a structured set of opportunities for argumentation’ (Jackson, 1992; van Eemeren et al., 1993: 95). The disagreement space consists of all the reconstructible commitments an arguer may be held accountable for on the basis of what he said. These commitments include such pragmatic phenomena of language use as implicatures, pragmatic presuppositions, and felicity conditions related to performance of particular speech acts (see Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969). The key point here is that the disagreement space of any position (standpoint or argument) delineates a space of justifiable attacks on that position.

Pragmatic attentiveness to the entire ‘disagreement space’ extends the scope of what can be taken to have ‘indeed been advanced’ by an arguer beyond the limits of his explicitly stated truth-conditional propositions. This has serious implications for a *pragma-*



dialectical analysis of cases of alleged straw men. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst make clear before discussing different ways of committing the straw man fallacy:

It is, of course, quite another matter that the antagonist should – in line with the Principle of Communication – respond to *what the protagonist may be taken to have said rather than to what he has literally said*. (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 125, n.1; italics added)

‘What the protagonist may be taken to have said’ amounts to any plausibly reconstructible commitment belonging to the disagreement space. Precise procedures for reconstructing such elements have been developed in contemporary pragma-linguistics (see, e.g., Levinson, 1983, 2000), and pragma-dialectics has consistently incorporated and refined such procedures for a specifically argumentative reconstruction.

Taking the pragmatic aspect of argumentation into account, one can formulate the first and necessary soundness condition for critical reactions in the following way: the antagonist’s doubts and criticisms have to be directed against pragmatically plausible commitments belonging to the disagreement space reconstructed on the basis of what the protagonist has actually said in the context of a given argumentative activity type. Critical reactions which go beyond so delineated boundaries of sound interpretation of what the protagonist has communicated are straw man attacks.

### ***9.5.2 The principle of charity in reconstructing argumentative discourse***

Considering pragmatic features of language in the reconstruction of argumentation, however useful, also brings along a certain difficulty. As argued by pragma-linguists, in natural discourse ‘every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded’ (Wilson, 1994: 44). Because of that, a simple situation of a fallacious straw man replacing *the* real man (i.e., the one and only correct interpretation of what the protagonist intended to say) hardly ever occurs in ordinary discourse. Instead, in many less-than-obvious cases, in the identification of the straw man an analyst has to take into account ‘a variety of possible interpretations,’ that is, a variety of possible real men. In this task, taking contextual considerations into account is indispensable: it is one of the basic assumptions of pragmatics that contextual features help in specifying the otherwise indeterminate linguistic meaning of utterances.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Among others, Levinson (1992 [1979]) proposed the concept of ‘activity types’ in order to account for the regularities in getting at the meaning of utterances in certain recurring types of contexts. See also section 4.3.

In some cases, however, in one and the same context different (or even competing) interpretations of what the protagonist has communicated may still be plausible. This happens especially when contextual information is scarce and an argumentation analyst cannot unambiguously decide on just one, ‘best’ interpretation that would rule out other possible options. All the same, in such an ‘emergency’ situation, an analyst’s choices in his normative reconstruction of discourse cannot be random: normative reconstruction by definition has to be carried out in a consistent, theoretically justified manner. In order to solve the problem of how to methodically decide on one favoured reconstruction in the situation where multiple reconstructions are plausible, the argumentation theorists’ last resort is the *principle of charity*.<sup>22</sup>

When an utterance is analysed in the context of a discussion aimed at resolving a dispute, the analyst should not just check whether his interpretation is *plausible* in the light of pragma-linguistic conventions, but he should also make sure that this is the interpretation of the utterance that is most likely to be *successfully defended* by the arguer. Only if the latter is ensured is his interpretation, seen from a pragma-dialectical perspective, the most charitable. [...] Therefore, if different interpretations of the standpoint are equally possible, a pragma-dialectical analysis favours, in principle, the least far-reaching interpretation. (Snoeck Henkemans, 1992: 104; italics original)

In short, in case of insurmountable doubt (that is, when more than one reconstruction is still plausible despite a careful contextual analysis), the principle of charity guides an argumentation analyst into the choice of ‘the analysis that is most beneficial to the speaker’ (Snoeck Henkemans, 1992: 17). In their specification of how the principle of charity should be followed in the practice of argumentative reconstruction van Eemeren and Grootendorst proposed that analysts follow three so called ‘maximal strategies’: *maximally argumentative interpretation*, which in case of doubt leads an analyst to interpret speech acts as argumentatively relevant (1992a: 49); *maximally dialectical analysis*, according to which a (fragment of) discourse which may or may not be taken as a critical discussion should be reconstructed as a critical discussion (1992a: 105); and *maximally argumentative analysis*, in which in unclear cases the protagonist’s

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<sup>22</sup> The principle of charity was first used in the philosophy of language, most famously by Quine and Davidson. Its main role was to provide a basis for a general semantic theory, in particular, to explain how an interpreter of a language can in principle understand ‘native language users’ (see Glüer, 2006 and Pagin, 2006 for a recent discussion). In Davidson’s account, the principle of charity amounts to ‘assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right as often as plausibly possible,’ which makes it a ‘methodological device to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement’ (Davidson, 1973: 324). Without the necessary background of the principle of charity, so Davidson’s argument goes, a coherent and meaningful interpretation of any language is impossible. See Govier (1987) for a discussion about the application of the principle of charity in the study of argumentation.

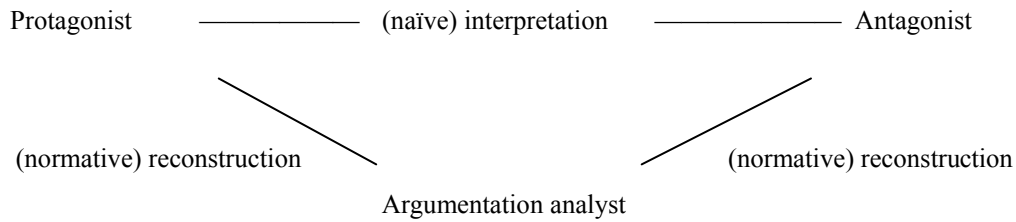
argumentation is given the maximum of argumentative force by the analyst's reconstruction of argumentation structure as multiple, rather than coordinative (1992a: 81).<sup>23</sup> Maximal strategies are to be followed by a pragma-dialectical analyst only in exceptional cases, where a univocal reconstruction cannot be reached on the basis of strong textual and contextual empirical evidence. Hence, they function as 'emergency services' that do not apply to ordinary circumstances in which discourse can be reconstructed without recourse to normative principles.

Two points are noteworthy in the pragma-dialectical formulation of the principle of charity. First, the principle is to be applied by an analyst in his normative reconstruction of argumentation, rather than by the arguers themselves in an ongoing process of 'naïve' interpretation. The principle does not, then, have a status of a rule for good argumentation—similar to the rules for a critical discussion—which has to be followed by ordinary arguers in order to preserve the reasonableness of their disputes. Instead, it is a meta-theoretical directive that guides the choice of the analysis carried out by an argumentation critic. Second, the principle of charity pertains to a reconstruction 'in the context of a discussion aimed at resolving a dispute.' This is crucial, for the principle is usually formulated and applied monologically, that is, in an analytic situation in which an argumentation analyst reconstructs commitments of only one party to a discussion (a speaker, an arguer, the protagonist). The situation gets much more complicated as soon as the contributions of both participants to an argumentative discussion—the protagonist and the antagonist—are taken into account. In such a case, a consistent application of the principle may face serious difficulties.

Figure 9.1 illustrates these two points: it shows the situation of an argumentation analyst who has the task of reconstructing and evaluating contributions to an ordinary dispute. These contributions include both the protagonist's arguments and the antagonist's critical reactions:

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<sup>23</sup> If an argumentation structure is *multiple*, then every single argument is on its own sufficient to support the standpoint. In *coordinative* structure only all single arguments taken together lend sufficient support to the standpoint. Therefore, multiple argumentation is stronger than coordinative, and opting for a multiple reconstruction is in principle more charitable to the protagonist (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 81-82; Snoeck Henkemans, 1992: *passim*).

**Figure 9.1 Naïve interpretation and normative reconstruction**

In the following two sub-sections the intricacies of the functioning of the principle of charity in the process of naïve and normative reconstruction is discussed.

*(1) Strategic manoeuvring in naïve interpretation: plausibility vs. charity*

In the pragma-dialectical view, the principle of charity is not a rule for argumentation which the protagonist and the antagonist *have to* follow. Taking a pragmatic view on ordinary argumentative discussions means that the protagonist and the antagonist are involved in an ongoing process of ‘naïve’ interpretation of each others’ arguments and critical reactions (van Eemeren et al., 1993, Ch. 5). In every step of a discussion each of them needs to get at what the other has just communicated by interpreting his utterances. In this task arguers follow ordinary rules of language use, and draw on contextual information and (general and specific) background knowledge. Such interpretation is ‘naïve,’ and thus pre-theoretical, since arguers do not employ any of the concepts of argumentation theory.

Moreover, looking at the arguers from a dialectical perspective implies that they are by definition seen as being in a situation of disagreement and engaged in the process of critically testing the protagonist’s standpoint. Extended pragma-dialectics clearly recognises that each of the arguers attempts to manoeuvre strategically to be successful in his dialectical role. The antagonist’s dialectical task is to react critically against the protagonist’s position in order to mount as thorough as possible attempts at its falsification. If these attempts are to be efficient, the antagonist should follow what can be termed ‘the strategy of the easiest objection.’ In terms of the choice from the topical potential, that means that the antagonist should first react critically to those elements in the protagonist’s argumentation that seem most vulnerable to criticism (see section 7.3.2). For instance, if the overall structure of the protagonist’s argumentation consists of a combination of coordinatively and subordinatively compound argumentation structures, as is the case in

both discussions (9.1) and (9.2), the antagonist who aims at being rhetorically efficient should start his reactions with the attack on the argument he finds most easily refutable.

It is important to note that there is nothing inherently wrong with strategic attempts to refute the protagonist's standpoint in the most efficient way, that is, to attack these elements of the protagonist's argumentation which the antagonist finds weakest. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with trying to win a game of chess in the shortest possible sequence of moves by attacking the most vulnerable, weakest points of the opponent's strategy. The obvious limitation is, of course, that both parties have to play by the rules: in the case of argumentation, the rules of a critical discussion which embody requirements of reasonableness for argumentative exchanges. In an argumentative discussion, unlike in the chess game, violations of the rules are sometimes difficult to spot.<sup>24</sup> In fact, there are many distinct ways in which the antagonist can breach the rules of reasonable argumentation in his drive to prove the protagonist wrong – one of these ways is the straw man fallacy.

In order to get a better account of straw man abuses, the functioning of the strategy of the easiest objection can be described at the level of naïve interpretation of argumentation, that is, as pertaining to the aspect of an expedient choice of presentational devices in strategic manoeuvring (see section 7.3.3). From the perspective of strategic manoeuvring, a shrewd arguer involved in an agonistic argumentative discussion, such as the discussions taking place in online forums, is supposed to interpret the protagonist's argumentation in a way which is: (1) dialectically reasonable by virtue of fulfilling the basic soundness criterion of pragmatic, contextual plausibility and, at the same time, (2) rhetorically efficient in bringing the strongest possible criticism. The antagonist's rhetorical goal of defeating the protagonist, and doing so in an efficient manner, may be achieved by a choice of presentational devices which is still reasonable, yet *uncharitable*.

Naïve interpretations which are at the same time reasonable and uncharitable are possible, because plausibility and charity are two separate variables in the strategic manoeuvring regarding critical reactions.<sup>25</sup> Interpretative plausibility is a requirement of

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<sup>24</sup> This difference can be elucidated with the help of the distinction between analytically relevant and evaluatively relevant moves (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992b). In the game of chess, every move in which the rules of the game are not followed is at the same time evaluatively irrelevant (because the rule is breached) and analytically irrelevant (because such move does not belong to the game). In argumentation, a fallacious move violates a rule (and thus is evaluatively irrelevant), but still belongs to the argumentative exchange (therefore, it is analytically relevant).

<sup>25</sup> It is surprising, in this context, that Govier defines the principle of 'moderate charity,' as she calls it, by reference to plausibility: 'When other indicators (context, logical pattern, professed intention, indicator words) count equally in favor of several distinct interpretations, we adopt that one which generates the most plausible argument' (Govier, 1987: 148). An example taken from Snoeck Henkemans (1992: 123-125) may

the pragma-dialectical reasonableness; charity between arguers (or rather lack thereof) is a rhetorical choice which can be made one way or another. The antagonist who is cable of producing compelling criticisms against the protagonist's position *may* opt for a very charitable interpretation of the protagonist's argumentation, for example by saying: 'even assuming that by saying "destroyed" you mean *partly* and not *completely* destroyed, I still think you are wrong. The most recent reports say that...' Such a charitable interpretation used in a critical reaction may be rhetorically motivated by the aim of an advantageous audience adaptation and, indeed, can be a powerful refutation of the protagonist's position.<sup>26</sup> However, the antagonist who does not have many strong objections at hand can also opt for an uncharitable interpretation – and in principle there is nothing wrong with such an interpretation as long as it is pragmatically plausible. In this case, the antagonist is less of a pleasant arguer displaying confidence and chivalry, but lack of charity may be his only way to successfully (and still reasonably) refute the protagonist's point. In short, depending on the argumentative activity type in which arguers participate (see below), interpretative charity between arguers themselves is not a rule to be followed, but rather a choice that can be made for strategic reasons, depending on the particulars of a given argumentative situation.

## (2) *Dilemma of charity in normative reconstruction*

The simple scheme presented in figure 9.1 exposes a dilemma that an argumentation analyst may face in his normative reconstruction: whenever there is doubt regarding one correct interpretation of a standpoint or argument, and the arguers themselves are in disagreement over their naïve interpretations (both of which seem equally plausible), should the analyst be charitable with the protagonist's or the antagonist's (naïve) interpretation?

When it comes to the normative reconstruction of the protagonist's (and the antagonist's) expressions, an argumentation analyst's position is quite different from that

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demonstrate the confusion: An arguer sets out to defend a standpoint that 'Tom is a liar.' In this case, conventions of ordinary language use would suggest that the most *plausible* interpretation is that 'Tom is a *habitual* liar,' that is, he has repeatedly lied in the past. At the same time, the most *charitable* interpretation would be 'Tom is an *incidental* liar,' that is, he has lied once (or on very few occasions). In order to defend the latter claim the protagonist needs but one example of Tom's lying; to defend the former, he would have to give many cases in which Tom lied.

<sup>26</sup> Deliberately providing an advantage to a rival is conventionally seen as a clear display of strength and confidence, and has traditionally been part of codes of chivalry, e.g., in medieval duels between knights.

of the arguers. An analyst's task is to systematically reconstruct all the commitments of an arguer by following certain theoretically stipulated guidelines and applying precisely defined concepts of argumentation theory. General interpretative charity and more concrete 'maximal strategies' are among the guidelines of a normative reconstruction: if a given formulation of a standpoint or argument allows for many interpretative options, and neither contextual considerations nor background knowledge indicates a solution, then an analyst should take that option which is most charitable to the arguer. In the case of a normative reconstruction of the protagonist's contributions, the reconstructed commitments should be the ones he can defend most easily. In this way, a situation may emerge in which an analyst, following the principles and guidelines of argumentation theory, reconstructs a charitable version of the protagonist's position, while the antagonist interprets the very same position in an uncharitable way, also abiding by the rules. As a result, two competing, and seemingly correct, interpretations of the same standpoint (or argument) may be taken.

A simple example used before can illustrate the point. A student's standpoint: 'my work is progressing well,' when confronted with an expression of doubt by a supervisor, can be supported, for example, by the following argument:

A:       *Some* of the chapters of the thesis are completed.

This utterance is rather uncomplicated, but can still be interpreted in a number of ways, some of them contextually plausible, some not. The problem with the interpretation of the argument '*Some* of the chapters of the thesis are completed' is that the quantifier 'some' is not precise and remains indeterminate. Logically speaking, 'some' is an existential quantifier and means 'at least one' ('one or more'). However, as the pragmatic study of the so-called 'scalar implicature' shows, in the ordinary use of language 'some' conveys the meaning 'more than one and not all' (Levinson, 2000). Therefore, the minimal number of objects plausibly referred to with 'some' is two. However, three or more is much more plausible (Levinson, 2000). At the other end of the continuum lie hardly plausible interpretations such, 'most of' or 'all but one.' Accordingly, the following critical reaction is an example of the straw man fallacy:

A:       My work is progressing well, because *some* of the chapters are completed.

B:       I haven't seen *most* of your chapters so far, so I doubt things are as good as you claim.

A straw man fallacy is also committed in the following crystal-clear example, which is not a real possibility in ordinary life, but a didactic exaggeration of the kind used in handbooks:

A: My work is progressing well, because *some* of the chapters are completed.

B: Well, if *everything* is done, then why not submit tomorrow?

Such examples are uncontroversial because they clearly violate some commonly accepted principles of ordinary language use. Moreover, since they assign a heavy burden of proof to the protagonist (the student), and thus make his standpoint much more vulnerable to a successful refutation, they can be taken to be motivated by the rhetorical goal of an easy falsification. If this is the case, the strategy of the easiest objection takes the upper hand over pragmatic constraints, and the strategic manoeuvring derails. But what about the case:

A: My work is progressing well, because *some* of the chapters are completed.

B: Great! So why don't we discuss these *at least three* chapters you completed during our next dissertation meeting?

This critical reaction, may be plausible in most circumstances but, at the same time, is not the most charitable of all plausible options: an interpretation in which 'some' amounts to 'two or more chapters' is more charitable, since student A would only have to produce two chapters in defence of his standpoint, rather than 'three or more.' Therefore, B's critical reaction in this case overtly contravenes the principle of charity: the best choice of an analyst following the principle of charity is the case when 'some' is justified as soon as two chapters are completed. Yet, at the same time, the 'at least three' interpretation is the best choice of an antagonist implementing the strategy of the easiest objection: it gives him better chances to demonstrate that the student's work is not progressing as well as the student suggests. What is at stake here is the evaluation of critical reactions: is reacting critically to the protagonist's argument that 'some chapters are completed' with the interpretation that 'at least three chapters are completed' a straw man or not in this particular case?

To answer this question, an argumentation analyst is routinely advised to decide by applying the principle of charity (see, e.g., Scriven, 1976: 71-73). But attempts to consistently follow the principle may yield paradoxical results. If the analyst reconstructs charitably only the protagonist's argumentation, and thus takes 'some' as 'two (or more),' than a critical reaction containing 'at least three' is a straw man. In this case, in accordance



with the principle of charity, the analyst optimises chances for a *successful defence* of the protagonist's position. That is, he shows a certain 'constructive bias.' If, on the contrary, the analyst reconstructs charitably only the antagonist's naïve interpretation (expressed in his critical reaction) and thus allows for 'at least three chapters' to be a legitimate interpretation of 'some chapters' (even if A sticks to 'two (or more)' and denounces 'at least three' as a fallacious misinterpretation), then, obviously, B's reaction is *not* a straw man. In this case, in accordance with the agonistic spirit of critical rationalism, the analyst optimises chances for a *successful falsification* of the protagonist's position by the antagonist. That is to say, he shows a 'critical bias.' Simply put, it seems that being charitable to only one of the arguers amounts to taking sides.<sup>27</sup>

What about being charitable to both A and B at the same time? That would mean, in the case above, that the student would be allowed to defend as his argument that 'two (or more)' chapters are written, while the professor would be allowed to attack the argument that 'at least three' chapters are complete. Because both these interpretations are plausible and charitable (to either of the arguers), and thus follow the basic rules of normative reconstruction, then no fallacy of misinterpretation can be detected in the contribution of either of the arguers. Yet, at the same time, arguers evidently talk at cross-purposes: the defence and the attack pertain to different propositions. That means that a consistent reconstruction of the dispute between the student and the professor can become impossible: the analyst would obtain two separate discussions with two divergent (sub-)standpoints.

In face of such complications, one may wonder if the application of the principle of charity in the reconstruction of vague argumentation should not be limited even further than the already exceptional application of the pragma-dialectical maximal strategies. Indeed, a consistent reconstruction and evaluation of critical reactions, such as those above, may put a critical analyst in a certain predicament. Nevertheless, there is a way out of this predicament in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation.

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<sup>27</sup> Despite this obvious difficulty, Walton, for example, calls for applying the principle of charity exclusively to the protagonist (in his terminology 'the respondent'): 'If the respondent is not present, as is typically the case with the kinds of cases cited as examples of the fallacy in the logic textbooks, and evaluated in a logic class, or case study, then the evaluators should be required to go very strictly by the existing discourse, using the principle of charity in fairly interpreting that text of discourse. Here, the respondent must be given the benefit of the doubt, where competing interpretations may be more or less possible' (Walton, 1996: 127).

### ***9.5.3 Conventions of discourse reconstruction in various argumentative activity types***

So far, the following points regarding the identification and evaluation of suspected straw man attacks have been made. First, the basic soundness criterion for critical reactions is, according to rule 3 of a critical discussion, their pragmatic plausibility: any antagonist's attack on a contextually plausible (naïve) interpretation of the protagonist's position is, in principle, sound and should not be evaluated as a straw man. Therefore, second, arguers in their role of antagonist can manoeuvre strategically to formulate their critical reactions in such a way that they remain within the bounds of plausibility, while at the same time trying to implement the strategy of the easiest objection, for example by being less-than-charitable in their naïve interpretation. Third, if a (normative) reconstruction of a given standpoint or argument leads to interpretative doubts which cannot be solved by additional textual or contextual data and background information, an argumentation analyst may resort to the principle of charity. The problem which seems to have been completely overlooked by argumentation scholars is that a consistent application of the principle of charity may be problematic: in contrast to purely monological arguments, in a context of dialectical exchanges between opponents, following the principle of charity may amount to taking sides, since being charitable to the protagonist means being uncharitable to the antagonist, and the other way round. This is especially the case when one considers critical reactions which are plausible but not charitable to be straw man attacks (see esp. Scriven, 1976: 71-73).

A general pragma-dialectical solution to the problem of sound interpretation of unclear or vague standpoints is that in such cases a fallacy lies on the side of the protagonist who may deliberately present confusing argumentation, for example, by leaving out precise quantifiers. 'The omission of quantifiers can [...] be one of the protagonist's devices to cover himself against criticism. It is then, in effect, a variant of the [fallacious – ML] immunization strategy' (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 130). In pragma-dialectics, a critical exchange of arguments should always be based on a double responsibility – not only should the antagonist be careful in his interpretations of the position of the protagonist, but also should the protagonist formulate his arguments as clearly and unambiguously as possible. This double duty is embodied in pragma-dialectical rule 10 for a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992a: 196): 'A party must not use formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous and must interpret the other party's formulations as carefully and accurately as possible.' Unclear

formulations of the protagonist may be strategically exploited by the antagonist in his critical reactions. It is then not only a dialectical fallacy but often also a rhetorical blunder of the protagonist to leave room for interpretative doubts.

A further, more specific pragma-dialectical solution to the interpretative problems is based on the concept of argumentative activity types. A crucial element in approaching argumentation in various activity types is the institutional goal of the activity. The goal specifies what is at stake in carrying out a given activity. Some activities, because of their importance in the context of the institution, require a very high standard of proof for the standpoints advanced by the protagonist. Such is the case, for example, with legal trials and academic reviews in which the correctness of the propounded standpoints has to be established ‘beyond reasonable doubt,’ if they are to be institutionally accepted. ‘Reasonable doubt’ includes doubt regarding the interpretation of particular terms and entire expressions used. That is because a high level of precision is a necessary condition for realising the aim of the activity, such as a ‘fair and independent judgment of complaints and accusations’ in accordance with the codified procedures in the case of legal trials, or a critical testing of knowledge claims which allows for ‘maintaining a scholarly communicative infrastructure’ in the case of academic reviews (van Eemeren, 2010: Ch. 5). In these contexts, the protagonist (prosecutor, the author of an academic article) is expected to face tough criticisms which are meant to expose weaknesses of his argumentation, including weaknesses in formulations. At the same time, the critical antagonist (judge, peer reviewer) is expected to point out these weaknesses. When it comes to interpretation, that means that the antagonist is expected to be *uncharitable*, because charity (or giving the benefit of the doubt) would amount to accepting unwarranted claims. And this risk is not allowed in activity types such as legal adjudication or academic review.

For these reasons, many activity types, especially these which are institutionalised in the strong sense, comprise specific rules for interpretation of discourse. For example, in legal trials only the explicitly stated commitments count as legitimate elements of the disagreement space. The rules of a legal trial require that arguments can be critically tested only after they are explicitly and directly stated. Therefore, elements of pragmatic meaning such as conversational implicatures, even if derived in accordance with general pragmatic principles, cannot be directly attacked by the parties to a dispute (see Jacobs & Jackson, 2006).

In short, in activity types which require precise and critical exchanges, conventions of interpretation limit the plausibility to strict interpretations but, at the same time, allow

for uncharitable critical reactions. Owing to such conventional preconditions of some activity types, a critical analyst reconstructing and evaluating discourse in the activity concerned should, as it were, be charitable with the antagonist's lack of charity. In this category of activity types, there is only one criterion, which is necessary and sufficient at the same time: every critical reaction has to be targeted against an interpretation of the protagonist's standpoint (or argument) which is pragmatically plausible, according to the standards of precision prevalent in the given activity. Therefore, uncharitable attacks are not fallacious as long as they are plausible.

On the other hand, in many informal types of activity, in which the stakes are not very high and the risk of error is not of crucial importance, a certain imprecision in formulations is condoned and expected to be met with charitable interpretations. Such discussions tend to be conventionally polite and consensual, as discussants are expected to comply with the rules of ordinary communication, such as preference for agreement and the general cooperative principle (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; see section 6.2.2).<sup>28</sup> That is to say that in activity types such as a classroom discussion or a chat in a pub participants do not usually get fiercely adversarial, but instead tend to be charitable with one another: the protagonist is credited with the benefit of the doubt in making his case. The antagonists who are persistently pushing for plausible, yet uncharitable interpretations are viewed as being nit-picking or even malicious. In agreement with such native communicative conventions, in case of interpretative doubts an argumentation analyst should apply the principle of charity to the protagonist. As a result, the attacks on interpretations which are plausible, but less than charitable, can be seen as attacks on straw men. In other words, there are two basic criteria for the straw man fallacy judgment: contextual pragmatic plausibility (necessary condition) and the charity (sufficient condition) of the interpretation. Critical reactions which do not meet both these criteria are straw men.

These distinctions can clarify how the above-mentioned predicament that the analyst may face when considering to apply the principle of charity does not come into force. Pragmatic plausibility in interpreting others' arguments is always required from arguers across various activity types, even if the criteria of what actually counts as plausible may considerably differ from one activity type to another. By contrast, the

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<sup>28</sup> On a basic level of communication, where mutual understanding rather than full agreement is at stake, the Gricean maxims of cooperative communication, Davidson's principle of charity of interpretation, and Pomerantz's preference for agreement apply to all types of activity, including contentious ones.

principle of charity should be applied as a last resort only in case of interpretative doubts of an argumentation analyst in accordance with the prevalent activity-type-specific conventions of interpretation. In some activities it is the protagonist who should be granted the benefit of the doubt, in other the antagonist.

Considering the distinctions made above, online political discussions are a unique kind of activity type. As argued in Chapter 6, even though they are informal and free-wheeling, they can be seen as uncooperative and even characterised by a preference for disagreement. In other words, critical testing may be tough and persistent, just like in legal trials, yet at the same time it is not regulated by precise rules for interpretation. This means that arguers can be expected to explore the semantic ambiguities and the pragmatic disagreement space as extensively as possible. As a consequence, spotting weaknesses in one another's formulations may be an important and legitimate way of strategic manoeuvring. This leniency in argumentative criticisms in online political forum discussions is related to the very institutional goal of this activity type. As concluded in Chapter 5, online political discussions are aimed at informal opinion-formation, rather than time-constrained effective decision-making. In decision-making procedures, the proponent of a given solution should be allowed to make the strongest possible case, which is subsequently compared to other solutions. Therefore, granting him the benefit of the doubt can be an important means to reaching a constructive decision, whereas taking a persistently uncharitable stance in interpreting his position may obstruct the whole process of arriving at one, positively argued-for decision. Hence, a 'constructive bias' should be in place. On the contrary, if decisions do not need to be taken, the danger that uncharitable conventions for interpretation will derail the process is limited. The clarity of expressed opinions can be actually increased if the ambiguities of interpretation are clearly exposed and attacked. That is to say that in the process of opinion-formation, a 'critical bias' can be taken.

## **9.6 Soundness criteria for identifying straw men in Internet discussion forums**

On the basis of the discussion in this chapter, the final two research questions can be answered. First, question *1.1.2a* (How do the restrictions and opportunities of online political forum discussions affect the arguers' attempts at reformulating their opponents' arguments and standpoints?):

Online discussions give the protagonist an opportunity to compare his original standpoint and arguments easily with the antagonist's version and, if need be, to expose and correct any illegitimate reformulation. This opportunity is a restriction on the antagonist's manoeuvring with presenting the protagonist's standpoint and arguments: what the antagonist risks by implausibly reformulating the attacked position is not only a fallacy, but also an easily detectable rhetorical blunder. For this reason, it can be hypothesised that arguers will resort to sophisticated ways of advantageously presenting their opponents' argumentation, rather than to patent, explicit distortions. As the examples analysed in the chapter show, presentational manoeuvres in which arguers play on implicit pragmatic meanings may be employed to this end. At the same, an opportunity for the antagonist to react critically in the contentious and informal online political discussions requires a precision of formulation from the protagonist. That is to say that what can be easily exposed are not only antagonist's suspicious reformulations but also protagonist's vague formulations.

Second, when it comes to question 1.1.2b (What kind of criteria for identifying straw man attacks should argumentation analysts apply in their evaluation of critical reactions in online political forum discussions?), in general, an argumentation analyst should in case of doubt reconstruct standpoints and arguments in the antagonist's favour, that is, he should follow a critical bias.

The specific criteria for the straw man evaluation in the activity type of Internet political discussion forums can be stipulated in the following way: if the original formulation of the position of the protagonist leaves space for plausible interpretative manoeuvring, then the antagonist is allowed to explore this disagreement space and to object directly to any of the positions that this disagreement space contains. Therefore, even if such attacks do not make use of verbatim quotations of the original standpoint, they are not straw men: the attacker is not trying to topple a straw man, but rather the weakest available real man. And this is the whole point of strategic manoeuvring: an arguer should remain reasonable, in this case by being pragmatically plausible in his interpretations, and at the same time should be aiming for rhetorical effectiveness, for example by attacking the weakest possible position that the protagonist may be held accountable for.

In view of so formulated soundness criteria for the straw man evaluation, VT Sean Lewis's critical reaction in case (9.1) ('are you STILL claiming the 700 shells were *manufactured* after 1992?') can be evaluated as a fallacious straw man. Assigning to the

shells the quality of being manufactured after 1992 is a contextually implausible, and thus illegitimate addition, as meticulously pointed out by *Gaar* (see sections 9.2 and 9.4).

At the same time, a seemingly identical manoeuvre of Florian in (9.2) ('Are you sure it has been *completely* dismantled?'), should be evaluated as reasonable. The basic reason for such an evaluation is that the original protagonist, *Hooda Gest*, has not been specific enough in the first place. The predicate of his argument—'dismantled'—can be read in two plausible ways: (1) As a polar term that acquires value only within a yes-no opposition, analogically to expressions such as 'the goal has been achieved' (or not), 'the system has been destroyed,' 'mission accomplished' or 'he has been killed.' If this is the case, however, 'dismantled' should be read as 'completely dismantled,' just like 'killed' means 'completely killed.' (2) As a scalar terms which allows for degrees of force such as 'it has been damaged' or 'it has been burnt.' In this case, however, the extent to which the dismantling has gone should be explicitly stated, but is not. What is missing, is a qualifying adverb, such as 'partially,' 'largely,' or 'completely,' or more exact data, such as the percentage of the dismantling. The point is, that if someone omits such qualifiers, he may justifiably be taken as either being vague and evasive or as suggesting the yes-no opposition (dismantled – not dismantled). And this is exactly what *Florian* tries to point out. He adds a qualification which is surreptitiously implied in *Hooda's* argument. Moreover, he does not directly attack his opponent but expresses critical doubt instead ('Are you sure it has been completely dismantled. Do you have a reference?'). True, this critical doubt is not a request for a language usage declarative, but it finally leads to such a request (turn 53: 'If it was not completely, what proportion of his financing system was dismantled?'). In short, *Florian* manoeuvres strategically with the formulation of his opponent's argument by attributing to him a qualification which the opponent himself has not expressed, but can justifiably be taken to have implicated. A polite question about the exact meaning of *Hooda's* words has not been initially asked (for example: 'Do you mean "completely dismantled"?'), but the doubt raised by *Florian* has exactly the same function in the discussion and, even if somewhat more contentious, is allowable in this particular context. Therefore, even if not charitable, *Florian's* critical reaction can be seen as a legitimate strategic manoeuvre.