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Editorial

## Biases and constraints in communication: Argumentation, persuasion and manipulation

### 1. Goals

This special issue was born during the first international conference *Communication and Cognition*, devoted to 'Manipulation, Persuasion and Deception in language', which took place in January 2011 at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. The conference pursued a double goal: The first (thematic) goal was to discuss and explore the various parameters and constraints that affect the way we process communicated information in argumentative, persuasive and manipulative contexts. The second goal, beyond a primary pragmatic focus, was to decisively anchor all contributions within the larger field of cognitive science in order to stimulate interdisciplinary inquiry on these particular issues. Such a strive for interdisciplinarity was successfully reflected in the conference programme, both in the selection of contributors to the sessions and in the choice of keynote speakers: during the three days of the event, linguists, pragmaticians, cognitive psychologists, philosophers, discourse analysts, argumentation theorists and media scientists exchanged ideas and extensively discussed the determining factors of successful argumentative, persuasive and manipulative communication, thereby emphasising the existence of a rich interface between these various approaches and the stimulating input that such interdisciplinary discussions can have in the respective fields. The selected contributions gathered in this volume illustrate the kind of insights that can be gained from such an interdisciplinary exchange in order to better understand the pragmatics of human communication.

The contributors of this special issue look at communicative *influence*, which typically takes the form of argumentation, persuasion or manipulation. Drawing the boundaries between these three neighbouring notions is far from easy (see Oswald, 2010), to the extent that they often overlap and that the delimiting criteria that have been put forth do not seem to fully capture their distinctive features. For instance, some researchers consider persuasion to be a subset of manipulation (see e.g. Galasiński, 2000), while others (e.g. Blass, 2005) highlight their difference in terms of the overtness of speaker intention. Similarly, argumentation and persuasion are often intimately related in research within Argumentation Theory where the latter conventionally denotes one of the main effects of the former (see for instance how van Eemeren (this issue) reconciles the rhetorical – and persuasive – goals of speakers with their dialectical ambitions through the notion of *strategic manoeuvring*). Yet, we can argue and fail to persuade, as well as we can persuade by other means than argumentation. These are clear indications that these two notions do not mutually exhaust the range of discourse phenomena, nor do they seem to be in complementary distribution. Finally, argumentation and manipulation appear to be somehow 'naturally' related when we consider *fallacious* argumentation. Even if fallacious arguments are not necessarily manipulative (the speaker might simply have made a reasoning mistake), the possibility of intentionally and covertly using arguments we know to be somehow deficient in order to fool others is indeed one way of attempting to obtain the audience's consent – even more so when the latter is unaware of our strategy.

One way of tackling such questions and the relationships between these different discursive strategies is to envisage them in terms of their effects in the communicative contexts in which they are deployed, i.e., to envisage them from a pragmatic perspective. A relatively conservative claim would be to consider that argumentation, persuasion and manipulation impose different types of constraints on the way their audience is led to process information. The first purpose of this special issue is therefore to assess the different types of *constraints* argumentation, persuasion and manipulation impose on information processing. Within this perspective, the phenomena under scrutiny can accordingly be accounted for in terms of the specific cognitive and communicative responses they trigger.

This selection of papers focuses on the role of various cognitive processes – and the role played by cognitive biases more specifically – in successful argumentation, persuasion and manipulation. The contributions gathered in this special issue attempt to integrate different kinds of cognitive constraints in their accounts of communicative influence. Echoing the seminal work of [Tversky and Kahneman \(1974\)](#), and despite their inherent differences, their distinct perspectives and scientific backgrounds, all chapters try to tackle the idea that the success of communicative influence hinges upon the exploitation of some cognitive features of our information processing system, including some cognitive biases (see [Maillat and Oswald, 2009, 2011](#) for a discussion). The second purpose of this special issue therefore consists in setting the stage for an interdisciplinary dialogue focused on one specific range of discursive phenomena, subsumed in the overarching category of communicative influence. The various theoretical models introduced here rely on a similar set of assumptions to explain the likely successful outcomes of the communicative strategies under scrutiny. In this sense, we trust that through its interdisciplinarity, the volume takes advantage of the interplay between several approaches, and as a result constitutes a fruitful attempt to exploit the insights of different research traditions to offer new perspectives and developments in the pragmatic analysis of these phenomena.

In the remainder of this introduction we provide a short summary of each contribution and briefly discuss its relevance and relation to the main theme of the special issue, i.e. biases and constraints in argumentation, persuasion and manipulation.

## 2. Overview

Van Eemeren's chapter gives a detailed presentation of the contribution of Pragma-Dialectics to the study of fallacious arguments. A set of (meta-) principles is identified which should constitute the core of a sound theory of argumentation. It is argued further that these principles should be used to establish a normative account of argumentative discourse, which, in turn, will constitute the backdrop against which a model can account for fallacious discourse. He then moves on to the discussion of a tension faced by arguers as they have to maintain a reasonable stance in the argumentative exchange while at the same time strive to win the argument. The concept of strategic manoeuvring is introduced to acknowledge, describe and explain how arguers cope with this tension. In this context, fallacies are re-analysed as derailments of strategic manoeuvring. In the final section, conditions are defined under which strategic manoeuvring is predicted to derail. In a very pragmatic vein, these conditions are shown to be tightly context-bound. This contribution is firmly grounded in a well-established argumentation theory which, crucially, envisages the contextual constraints that bear on the reasonableness of argumentative exchanges, thereby illuminating our understanding of fallacious argumentation – in particular with regard to its perlocutionary effects.

Pagliari's contribution brings an interdisciplinary convergence on issues of biased communication by offering the perspective of decision theory. As a great deal of the literature on biases was influenced by the landmark work of Tversky and Kahneman on biases in decision-making (e.g. [Tversky and Kahneman, 1974](#)), this chapter brings a fresh look at the import that decision theory can have nowadays on argumentation theory. Interestingly, Paglieri looks at the impact of biases on the production of arguments as opposed to their reception, which is often the preferred approach. He proposes a taxonomy of six moments when an arguer must make decisions regarding her next move and focuses on the initial and final steps – engagement and termination. Reporting on earlier experimental evidence, the author delves into the liminal stage of his model. Thus, it is argued that personal differences do not seem to play a crucial role in the decision to engage in an argument, while contextual factors concerning the specific situation do play an important role in the decision-making process. Furthermore, rational decisions about whether to engage in an argument appear to rely mostly on a frugal evaluation of the likely outcome. As to the arguer's decision to withdraw from an on-going argument, Paglieri makes a series of theoretically motivated predictions that hinge on the duration of the exchange, claiming that duration is overall detrimental to the successful outcome of an argument. He goes on to offer precise and empirically testable hypotheses predicted from the model regarding the correlation between argument duration and perceived costs, perceived dangers, or perceived likelihood of successful outcome.

Lewiński and Oswald's contribution focuses on one particular informal fallacy, namely the *straw man fallacy*, and proposes to treat it within a pragmatic account that caters for the two issues any argumentation scholar interested in fallacies needs to address, namely a description of its features and an account of its persuasive (and manipulative) effectiveness. To do so, they combine two pragmatic theories, soliciting Pragma-Dialectics to deal with the first question from a normative perspective, and Cognitive Pragmatics to answer the second question by providing an explanatory account of the straw man fallacy's effectiveness. The first component of their account explores the pragmatic criteria which underlie the normative evaluation used in argumentation theory to determine the presence of a straw man fallacy, i.e., to determine whether we are dealing with a misrepresentation of the target's words or thoughts as rendered in the fallacious argument. The second tier of their analysis tackles pre-theoretical processes of information selection and proposes that successful straw men succeed in imposing cognitive constraints on meaning that will lead the addressee to fail to identify the fallaciousness of the argument.

In his chapter, Louis de Saussure looks at an interesting aspect of biased communication as he takes on the issue of the uses of presupposed information in persuasive and deceptive discourse. In this project, he explores the domain of background information as discussed by Sperber and Wilson (1995: 202ff). He shows that the very rational and encyclopaedic requirements set on the interpretation of an utterance to ensure its perceived relevance lead to the addition of numerous, so-called background assumptions ('discourse presuppositions' or DPs) to the interpretation. Crucially, Saussure emphasises the fact that such information is treated as given by the hearer and is therefore not a primary focus in allocating processing resources. It is argued further that inappropriate DPs can be used to deceive the hearer and achieve persuasion unduly by forcing inconsistent information in his cognitive environment. Saussure then shows how some background information needs to be posited, even though it is new, in order to ensure the proper treatment of an utterance. Through a close examination of two attested examples, the author illustrates how DPs are exploited to covertly force background assumptions into the hearer's cognitive environment.

In his chapter on the pragmatic inevitability of manipulation, Maillat argues for a theory of manipulative moves, such as fallacies, which focuses on their effect on the hearer's interpretative processes. In his account, Maillat uses a pragmatic model of manipulation which exploits the process of context selection as discussed in Relevance Theory. He argues that manipulation essentially constitutes an attempt to bend and control the hearer's context selection in order to actively prevent him from accessing a subset of contextual assumptions during his processing of a target utterance. This type of discursive move is referred to as a Context Selection Constraint (CSC). The paper carries on with a proposal for two contrastive definitions that tease out the difference between persuasion and manipulation. In the second part of the paper, Maillat shows how cognitive biases (see Pohl, 2004) can be aptly put to use in order to establish the sort of constraint on context selection which will steer the interpretative process away from an optimal processing of the target utterance. Using the example of the *ad populum* fallacy, the chapter goes on to show that what counts as a rhetorically ill-formed argument can be regarded as a cognitively valid one.

Chris Hart's contribution proposes an account of why argumentative and manipulative discourse can be convincing, and in doing so it offers a defence of the relevance and usefulness of cognitive and evolutionary approaches to communication for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Typically, mainstream CDA seldom resorts to cognitive explanations in its analysis of phenomena such as discursive power, discrimination, domination and ideology; Hart's paper discusses, documents and illustrates how the success of argumentation, persuasion and manipulation in discourse is a function of their ability to trigger evolved cognitive heuristics. He first surveys how argumentation is typically dealt with in CDA (in particular within Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, Wodak, 2001) in order to present the type of discursive phenomena under scrutiny, namely arguments appearing in anti-immigration discourse, which he illustrates through several attested examples found in British newspapers. Hart then builds on literature on evolutionary cognitive science to explain the mechanisms underlying specific argument forms and *topoi*. He thus seeks to connect cognitively grounded accounts of information processing (work on heuristics and biases in particular) with discourse analysis and thereby offers a cognitively grounded explanation of why resorting to certain types of arguments in anti-immigration discourse may be successful in convincing one's audience.

Metzger and Flanagin's chapter is focused on biases and constraints in human communication and looks at online communication from the standpoint of cognitive heuristics (see Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999). The authors survey the cognitive strategies that human beings rely upon when assessing credibility in the informational maze of the Internet. Their approach evokes two main dimensions in the information evaluation procedure, namely accuracy and credibility. These notions are reminiscent of the recent proposal made by Sperber et al. (2010) regarding epistemic vigilance, which captures both content-oriented and source-oriented vigilance. Metzger & Flanagin show how the specificity of Computer-Mediated-Communication on the internet affects and redefines the way we, as information consumers, can evaluate the credibility of a source, which constitutes one of the key constraints that bear on the way we interpret the information. They argue that the internet, with its 'levelling effect' on information accessibility – whereby all information is equally accessible –, induces a similar levelling effect on credibility. The authors then discuss a series of empirical studies that put the model to the test and interestingly highlight the relative discrepancy between the increased difficulty to judge credibility online and the rather shallow credibility evaluation procedure observed in empirical studies. These results are analysed in the light of adaptive cognitive heuristics crucially hinging on an optimisation between cognitive efforts and effects. A range of credibility heuristics – cognitive shortcuts – is then shown to be at work in the assessment of web sites. Metzger and Flanagin conclude on the need to assess the relative, rational, and objective merits of the different heuristics, as well as the principles which oversee the selection of one heuristic over another. In that sense, the last section of their chapter can be regarded as a stimulating source of inspiration for further interdisciplinary investigations at the interface between cognitive-heuristic theories and pragmatics.

Dezecache, Mercier and Scott-Phillips' contribution deals with the function and evolutionary origin of emotions in communication. This account opens a particularly interesting area for this special issue as it extends the range of phenomena analysed to cases of non-ostensive communication, thereby complementing existing accounts of deception and persuasion, which traditionally concentrate on ostensive communication. Dezecache et al. offer an evolutionary

account of emotional signals as typical features of non-ostensive communication and discuss the communicative status of emotions to make a case for the existence of a suite of mechanisms for *emotional vigilance* (which are conceived as an addition to epistemic vigilance mechanisms, as defended by Sperber et al., 2010). Emotional vigilance is taken to explain the stability of emotional communication, and particularly non-ostensive communication, despite the risk of deception. The authors thus explore a fundamental constraint in communication and provide an in-depth assessment of its evolutionary basis. This interdisciplinary discussion accordingly presents a new stance at the interface between emotion research and pragmatics, crucially treating emotions as a form of constraint affecting communication and language use.

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**Steve Oswald** received his PhD from the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland in 2010. He is now a post-doctoral fellow at the Cognitive Science Centre of the same university. His main area of interest is the relationship between language and belief and his research is located at the interface of discourse analysis, cognitive pragmatics, argumentation theory and cognitive psychology. In his doctoral dissertation he studied manipulative communication and developed a cognitive pragmatic model accounting for its potential success. He is currently investigating the cognitive underpinnings of rhetorical strategies, in particular fallacious arguments and humour. More information on <http://www.steveoswald.tk>.

**Didier Maillat** received his PhD from Oxford University. He has worked as Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, since 2006. His research focuses on pragmatic models at various interfaces. He has published several articles on the pragmatics of spatial reference frames using an experimental framework. More recently, his interest in empirical pragmatics has taken him within the realm of manipulative discourse. His most recent publications include two theoretical discussions of a pragmatic account of manipulation (2009, 2011; with Steve Oswald).

Didier Maillat,  
*University of Fribourg, Switzerland*

Steve Oswald\*  
*Cognitive Science Centre, Université de Neuchâtel, Espace Louis-Agassiz 1,  
CH-2000 Neuchâtel, Switzerland*

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 32 718 18 35.  
E-mail address: [steve.oswald@unine.ch](mailto:steve.oswald@unine.ch) (S. Oswald)

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