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## It Is Easy to Miss Something You Are Not Looking For

### A Pragmatic Account of Covert Communicative Influence for (Critical) Discourse Analysis

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#### 1 Introduction

**T**he study of discursive influence is possibly the most striking unifying factor in all Critical Discourse Studies (henceforth CDS) research since its inception. Taking on board the Habermasian assumption according to which ‘language is [. . .] a medium of domination and social force’ and that ‘[i]t serves to legitimize relations of organized power’ (Habermas, 1969: 259), many researchers in the critical paradigm of discourse analysis have devoted scholarly effort to describing and explaining how discourse can become – or, in some cases, simply is – an instrument of ideology, power and domination. In other words, the critical strand of discourse analysis has always explored how language can be used to influence people’s minds and behaviours by conveying ideologically loaded contents and persuasive or deceptive messages of various kinds. One of the earliest systematic attempts to tackle this issue by resorting to linguistic theory can be traced to the Critical Linguistics movement, which originated at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s. Through

the study of public discourse and of the way particular representations are conveyed by linguistic structures, Tony Trew, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress and Roger Fowler have paved the way, with *Language and Control* (1979), for what turned out to be an extremely prolific new direction of research at the interface between language and society.

While being typically concerned with the social implications of language use, the critical paradigm in discourse studies has gradually incorporated over the past 20 to 30 years cognitive insights as an additional layer of analysis, mainly through the study of conceptual metaphor and of the cognitive processes at play when humans build representations which lead them to acquire new beliefs or modify them on the basis of communicated information (see e.g. Chilton, 1996, 2004; Hart, 2010; Charteris-Black, 2006a, 2006b; Musolff, 2004, 2006; Van Dijk 2008). The idea behind this cognitive turn was, to quote Chilton, to account for the type of mental constructions 'taking place in the minds of interacting individuals' (Chilton, 2005: 24) when they are processing discourse, and in particular ideologically loaded discourse. In other words, the research question introduced by cognitive approaches to discourse seeks to address the psychological side of discourse processing and to provide an account of why and how such discourse can come to be effective in the first place.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the development of the cognitive turn in CDS by exposing and illustrating some of the advantages of a cognitive pragmatic approach to discourse and its relevance to CDS more generally in answering the above-mentioned question. The focus of the analysis will be the relationship between language and beliefs in communicative settings in which language users are trying to influence their addressee (and also, more largely, an audience). I will start by concentrating my attention on the phenomenon of deception as one particular type of communicative influence and characterize it as the covert exploitation of basic cognitive mechanisms at play behind the (naïve) interpretation of discourse. In doing so, I will be led to construe influence in 'operational' terms, as a type of interpretative constraint bearing on information selection. The primary goal of this chapter is therefore to explain how deception manages to covertly steer the audience's interpretation of a speaker's given message so as to obfuscate the deceptive intent. In the second stage of the theoretical exposition, I will extend the model in an attempt to capture further phenomena of communicative influence, such as persuasion.

In order to introduce some of the main issues related to the study of deception, section 2 will briefly discuss some descriptive problems involved in its definition. Section 3 will develop some arguments to defend a pragmatic take in what regards the *explanation* of deceptive communication; I will spell out a cognitive pragmatic take on deception and highlight how it can be relevant to discourse analytical research. Section 4 will extend the model to argumentation and illustrate it with the analysis of an excerpt of the French presidential debate that took place in May 2012 between Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande.

## 2 Defining and analysing deception

Conceptualizing deception is not an easy task.<sup>1</sup> Researchers from traditions and disciplines as varied as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, discourse analysis, sociology and communication science have discussed its properties and tried to identify its necessary and sufficient conditions (see Oswald, 2010, chapters 1 and 2 for a review). In this effort, criteria such as speaker interest, covertness, truth, social inequality (or power relationships) and intention have been put forth to describe the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this chapter I will opt for a characterization that takes into account three recurring defining features of deceptive communication across the literature, namely that deception is necessarily covert, intentional, and purposeful.<sup>3</sup> I consequently adopt the following *descriptive* definition of deception:

- (a) An utterance is deceptive if it is intentionally used as a means to attain a perlocutionary goal the speaker is covertly pursuing.

This definition echoes that of Puzynina (1992), itself referred to in Galasiński (2000) and Blass (2005) for instance, and highlights the three defining properties just mentioned. I consider it to be a phenomenon of perlocutionary interest because like many researchers I take deception to be a means to attain a goal. This brings to the fore the idea that deception is a type of language *use*, thereby capturing the idea that deceptive speakers do something in particular in communication. We will see shortly that the explanatory contribution of a cognitive pragmatic account of communication precisely rests on an elaboration of this very idea (section 3).

Given that intentions are private (or externally inscrutable, as Papafragou, 2006 puts it) and that any communicative phenomenon construed in terms of intentionality inevitably runs the risk of being tagged as a speaker category and left out of the analysis for that reason, one could consider that the deceptive intention seems to be such that it falls outside the scope of phenomena captured by pragmatic inquiry. To put it bluntly, how could a theory positing that communication is a matter of intention recognition capture a phenomenon whose success precisely rests on the concealment of an intention? There are two ways of going about this puzzle: the first is to consider that deception is not a communicative phenomenon and to conclude that it cannot be approached by pragmatics, as it falls outside of the range of phenomena covered by the discipline. I am reluctant to consider that such is the case, to the extent that deceptive communication is still communication: contents go through in deception, even if they are uncooperative *in a certain respect* (which is, as we will see next, what needs to be precisely characterized), and deceived addressees still do understand something from the speaker's message. The second option enjoins us to distinguish between the types of intentionality involved here: in standard cooperative communication, what a speaker wants to communicate is 'doubly' intentional in the sense that she intends her addressee both (i) to recognize

the contents she wants to convey,<sup>4</sup> and (ii) to recognize that she wants to share those contents with him.<sup>5</sup> In deceptive exchanges, the speaker certainly wants to communicate something and indeed makes manifest that she does, but she crucially does not want her addressee to recognize one particular intention, namely that she is pursuing a covert perlocutionary goal. Once we take stock of these two layers of intentionality distinguished according to their communicative status (i.e., whether they are meant to be identified by the hearer as being meant by the speaker or not), we can treat deception as a communicative phenomenon, because regardless of how we look at it, it is part of a communicative exchange – albeit only as a by-product or some sort of add-on. Recognizing that deceptive communication still qualifies as communication will allow us to proceed in its analysis, as we shall see further along.

Reflecting on the intentional nature of deception will however not allow us to inquire about how deception works, but rather about what it is and whether there are ways to detect it. In other words, research along these lines seeks to answer the ‘what’ questions: what is deception, what are its properties, and can we use our knowledge of those properties to identify deception in someone’s discourse? While much can be said on these particular questions, the purpose of this chapter is to tackle a separate set of questions. I will accordingly move on to fleshing out an account meant to address complementary preoccupations, which are more relevant in my view to discourse analysis. I will suggest, as part of an on-going effort to explore another facet of the phenomenon (see Maillat and Oswald, 2009, 2011; Oswald, 2010, 2011; Maillat, 2013), that even if a cognitive pragmatic approach to communication does not take us very far in identifying deception in discourse, it has significant advantages when it comes to answering the ‘how’ question that should account for the mechanisms responsible for successful deception.

### 3 The pragmatics of deception

#### ***3.1 What it means to account for deception from a cognitive pragmatic perspective***

The goal of any (linguistic or discursive) explanatory account of deception is to identify why and how the phenomenon comes about. This ideally takes the shape of a predictive model grounded on identified causal relationships that allow us to understand the phenomenon in its ‘natural environment’. What I am advocating to this end is a naturalistic – and to a certain extent mechanistic – perspective. Whereas identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions of communicative deception only takes us so far, trying to account for its success constitutes a perhaps more fruitful direction of research. For this we need to elaborate an operational definition of deception so as to highlight the processes at its core that need accounting for.

From (a) above, we will retain the idea of covertness because it represents a feature of deception that can be exploited and further elaborated in the type of account defended here. When something is hidden from someone, it means that s/he has no access to it. From the perspective of the cognitive processes taking place in the mind of the deceived addressee, this means that some information sets which could have led him to postulate that something about the speaker's discourse was problematic have not been accessed or mobilized. In the case of deception, the information sets that have to remain concealed are presumably those which contain critical information that would lead him to question the message or the speaker's motives and intentions. Consequently, the information sets a deceptive speaker has to conceal are those which could bring to the fore – i.e., get the hearer to represent:

- (i) Internal inconsistencies within the message, such as logical or pragmatic contradictions and infelicities.
- (ii) Inconsistencies between the message's content and the addressee's values and beliefs, the realization of which might trigger further processing about the reasons these inconsistencies are present.
- (iii) Critical information the addressee had not previously represented and which he can use to invalidate or question the content of the message.
- (iv) Reasons to doubt the speaker's benevolence and/or competence.

In sum, any piece of critical information that puts the addressee in a position to question the speaker's message or her willingness to be cooperative is a potential threat to the success of deception.<sup>6</sup>

Managing to prevent *access* to critical information is thus arguably a significant part of the deceptive process; but in order to increase its chances of being successful, deception also needs to make sure that what the message communicates is accepted by the addressee as reliable, relevant and true information – people are not gullible to the point of believing just anything, and therefore the deceptive message's content itself must remain within the boundaries of what is contextually plausible. It proves quite difficult to precisely characterize the notion of acceptance given that it may denote a range of different things, such as holding something to be true, morally acceptable, convenient, etc. In order to group the different items into one consistent category, I will construe acceptance as the situation in which an individual has included a mental representation in her/his cognitive environment, independently from her/his reasons for doing so; that is, the situation in which the individual holds the representation to be true or probably true (in the terms of Sperber and Wilson, 1995).<sup>7</sup> The parameter at stake here to determine whether such representations will make it to the cognitive environment of language users is the extent to which said representations are believable, and this can be envisaged in terms of the epistemic *strength* of information: the stronger the assumption, the more chances it has of entering the cognitive

environment. Critical discourse analysis, through the study of legitimation strategies and argumentation (see e.g. Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999; leřcu-Fairclough, 2007; Richardson, 2004) has already identified a number of such discursive strategies. What can be added from a cognitive perspective is that these are meant to make sure that the target assumptions are perceived to be very likely: in other words, legitimation strategies try to boost the epistemic strength of target assumptions in order to increase their chances of belonging to the addressee's cognitive environment.

Providing an answer to the question of how discursive influence works, from the cognitive perspective adopted here, therefore consists in identifying the parameters that are responsible for the inclusion of an assumption in an individual's cognitive environment. Two such parameters can be identified: on the one hand information accessibility and on the other epistemic strength. If we now link them with the issue of communicative deception and its success, we can elaborate a definition of what deception does, from the perspective of information-processing. Successfully deceived addressees are those (i) who have failed to access critical information or who have deemed it epistemically weak and (ii) who have been led to easily access the content of the message and furthermore who deem it epistemically strong. I can now formulate the following working definition which characterizes what deceptive communication does, in terms of the cognitive phenomena at play during its operation:

- (b) Deceptive communication is successful when the addressee has accepted the content of the utterance, which he perceives as epistemically strong, while simultaneously having been prevented from representing critical information that would have allowed him to question said content (provision: such critical information exists and could be accessible to him).

Deceptive discourse is thus a twofold cognitive process: on the one hand it prompts the hearer to easily infer a specific content which he does not realize is problematic, while on the other it drives him away from spotting that that content (including the intention with which it was formulated) and its acceptance by the hearer is instrumental to the satisfaction of one of the speaker's covert perlocutionary goals.

Let me get back, for methodological purposes, to the difference made earlier between accounting for what manipulation is and accounting for how manipulation works. Answering the 'what' question requires the analyst to study deception as an object envisaged from the perspective of the speaker. However, the account is not informative and explanatory enough if we limit ourselves to looking at things from that perspective, mainly because we can never be 100 per cent certain about a speaker's intentions. Alternatively, gaining insights into the way deception works will allow us to apprehend the phenomenon more exhaustively; when it comes to answering the 'how' question, as we try to specify the conditions under which deception is successful, the perspective must be shifted *to that of the hearer*. Deceptive discourse is only effective if its addressees process it in such a way that it goes unnoticed; the answer

to the question 'why can deception be effective' is therefore likely to be answered by looking at how information-processing can be constrained to fulfil deceptive goals. The question at stake seeks to elucidate the relationship between language and beliefs; this is typically an object of psychological inquiry and therefore calls for a theoretical framework that is able to combine insights from both linguistics and psychology. In short, we need an information-processing model that will provide criteria to determine under which conditions information becomes more and less salient (salience being understood as a common property of both accessible and strong information), assuming that salience positively affects selection and inclusion in the cognitive environment. Relevance Theory provides such a model.

### 3.2 *Relevance theory*

Initially defined by Charles Morris as the study of 'the relation of signs to interpreters' (Morris, 1938: 6), and very broadly as the discipline dealing with the 'biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological and social phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs' (1938: 108), research in pragmatics has come to explore over the years the different directions of research anticipated by Morris – and more. As a consequence, the field of pragmatics nowadays includes philosophical, psychological, anthropological, sociological and cognitive approaches to language use. The most recent trends in pragmatics are informed by cognitive science and aim to account for the cognitive underpinnings of human communication, both theoretically and, more recently, experimentally (see Noveck and Sperber, 2004).

Relevance Theory (see Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012; henceforth RT) represents one of the most evolved alternatives within the field, and I will now attempt to show how its account of information-processing mechanisms can provide a valuable framework for the development of an explanatory account of discursive influence.<sup>8</sup> I should also note that although CDA has resorted to pragmatics in the past, notably by borrowing some of its concepts for analytical purposes, no principled account has been elaborated to consistently assess and illustrate how issues of meaning (and their handling by a cognitive pragmatic theory) can be theoretically, methodologically and epistemologically grounded within the Critical Discourse Studies agenda.<sup>9</sup>

As a general theory of human cognition, RT focuses on the cognitive mechanisms at play in communication, with the goal of explaining how it is that people manage to understand each other through the use of verbal stimuli. Within the theory, the process of understanding language is conceived as the main task of a specific mental module, the comprehension module, dedicated exclusively to processing verbal material and delivering representations about the meaning (which is taken to correspond to speaker meaning) of a given utterance. RT models the comprehension process by construing it as an input-processing-output mechanism. Its input is constituted by a minimal representation of the

speaker's/writer's utterance that is derived from the linguistic material chosen by the speaker to express it: this representation is the result of syntactic parsing, disambiguation, reference resolution, and concept retrieval processes. It is subsequently combined with implicit and explicit available contextual assumptions. The representation arrived at after this inferential step is the output of the process – the interpretation – and is taken to correspond to speaker meaning. The task of the comprehension module is thus to process the input utterance in order to identify the contextually intended meaning, that is, the most relevant meaning given the circumstances.

Probably the most crucial feature of RT, for our purposes, is that it posits clearly identified constraints on how information is selected in the interpretative process: information selection is driven by considerations of relevance, relevance being technically defined in terms of two extent conditions:

#### **Extent conditions of relevance:**

Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small.

(Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 125)

The second condition stipulates that the contents that are more likely to be selected as relevant during the comprehension procedure are those which do not require significant effort to be represented (i.e., those which are easily accessible in terms of processing effort) and the first condition identifies as relevant those assumptions which yield significant contextual effects (i.e., those which are useful to the cognitive system because they are deemed reliable and epistemically strong). The assumptions that best satisfy this effort/effect ratio are those that our cognitive system will deem most relevant.<sup>10</sup>

Such an account of meaning is tailored to explain how addressees infer relevant interpretations. The process itself is not assumed to be error-proof, to the extent that the meaning derivation procedure is heuristic, and therefore fallible. Extent conditions of relevance obtain in standard communication, but this does not mean that they guarantee systematic extraction of the intended meaning: misunderstandings do occur, and one of the ways RT accounts for this is by postulating, in those cases, a mismatch between the contextual assumptions intended by the speaker and those that the addressee actually mobilizes. However, the strength of RT is that it provides clearly formulated hypotheses about the parameters which determine the inclusion of any given assumption in the cognitive environment of an addressee, as he processes the speaker's utterance. In what follows I turn to articulating how such a framework can be used to explain why and how deception can work.



### **3.3 Deception and cognitive constraints on relevance**

In (b) above, I characterized deception as a double cognitive constraint: it manages to keep critical information under the radar and 'favourable' information salient.<sup>11</sup> As previously mentioned, deception takes advantage of the inherent fallibility of information-processing mechanisms. Specifically, it implements cognitive constraints in order to make sure that certain information sets are processed at the expense of other information sets, the mobilization of which would be required to defeat the attempt to deceive. The cognitive underpinnings of this mechanism have been detailed by Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011) through their pragmatic model of the Contextual Selection Constraint, in which they frame manipulation as a double constraint characterized along the dimensions of accessibility and epistemic strength. More precisely, deception is a strategy in which critical information is made less accessible and/or epistemically weaker, while 'favourable' information is rendered more accessible and epistemically stronger. The same cognitive operations can therefore constrain the (perceived) relevance of information by maximizing it or by minimizing it alongside epistemic strength and accessibility variation. The advantage of this model is to be found in its simplicity, as it postulates a single principle, that of informational (ir) relevance, to explain how information sets can be backgrounded (sometimes to the extent that they might even fail to be represented at all) or foregrounded. To summarize, deception can under this perspective be construed as a cognitive constraint on informational attention: it works by driving people's attention away from information that would defeat it and by focusing their attention on information that will not. The model thus holds that you may fall prey to deception because it is very easy for you to miss something you are not led to look for.

### **3.4 A cognitive framework for discourse analysis**

The cognitive pragmatic account of deception advocated here is not designed to cover all aspects of deceptive communication – it has in fact little if nothing to say about the social and institutional aspects of deception. Instead, it limits its focus to the operational linguistic and pragmatic aspects of information processing involved in successful deception. Its usefulness within CDS is therefore to be found in its ability to assess the relationship between linguistic material (together with its informational context of occurrence) and the inferences that it licenses, alongside its perlocutionary effects. The idea is that the more an addressee will be led to represent critical information, the more deception is likely to be unsuccessful; in parallel and simultaneously, the more an addressee is led to fail to represent critical information, the more deception is likely to be successful. What I want to highlight at this point is that if we turn to (classical and mainstream) CDS, we will find converging accounts, albeit not cognitive accounts, of many discursive strategies that do just that.

As I said, the usefulness of this model of deception for CDS is that it allows us to ground the study of deceptive strategies on an explanatory cognitive model. We can thus reasonably expect this cognitive framework to be able to revisit many of the linguistic and pragmatic strategies that have been identified in the study of deceptive, persuasive and ideologically-loaded communication over the years, thereby opening the field to their cognitive reinterpretations. An established area of research, namely the subfield of argumentation theory which studies fallacies, is already being explored through this new lens: Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011), Oswald (2011) and Oswald and Hart (2014) provide some general pointers on how fallacies can be approached from a cognitive perspective; Maillat (2013) applies the framework to the *ad populum* fallacy; Oswald and Lewiński (forthcoming) and Lewiński and Oswald (2013) develop an account of the straw man fallacy; Oswald and Hart (2014) explore source-related fallacies; and Oswald (forthcoming) takes a more global perspective to flesh out a cognitive pragmatic account of rhetorical effectiveness. The example that will be discussed in the next section proceeds with this line of study by focusing on a complex instance of fallacious political discourse.

Alongside argumentative fallacies, many other discursive strategies can be cognitively reinterpreted in this vein. In fact, any communicative or discursive strategy meant to draw the audience's attention away from the problematic nature of the message while at the same time foregrounding specific representations would be in principle interpretable within the proposed model. That is, any strategy used to constrain the meaning that an addressee may derive from a speaker's message so as to mislead him into entertaining problematic contents can be envisaged as the result of weakening or strengthening constraints on the relevance of information. Let me mention some of them:

- Early literature in critical linguistics on phenomena such as *passivization* or *nominalization* (see Fowler et al., 1979) can be revisited: to the extent that these 'transformations' achieve obfuscation of critical information, they can be described as weakening strategies. In the case of passivization, one could construe the removal of the agent's responsibility in the semantic structure of the clause as the result of a cognitive constraint meant to diminish the accessibility of the agentive role in the representation of the event. As far as nominalization is concerned, the loss of information resulting from the transformation of a predicate into a noun can also be seen as the result of a strategy meant to decrease the accessibility of said information without losing anything in terms of syntactical appropriateness and semantic interpretability.
- Similarly, abundant literature on the strategies of *positive self-representation* and *negative other representation* (see e.g. Van Dijk, 1994; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2006; KhosraviNik, 2008, 2010) constitutes another area of CDS research amenable to cognitive pragmatic explorations: negative other representation and positive self-representation strategies are successful when they are able

to conceal their illegitimacy, i.e., when they are able to be perceived as epistemically strong, while the critical reasons that could undermine them go unnoticed.

- Meaning constituents such as *presuppositions* or *implicatures*, for instance, are also among the set of pragmatic phenomena that have been taken by discourse analysts to fulfil strategic functions in discourse and which can also be cognitively reinterpreted: implicatures may very well make certain contents salient by playing on contextual constraints and presuppositions might lead addressees to take for granted or simply fail to question information that should be questioned (see Saussure, 2012; Polyzou, 2013), which cognitively amounts to managing to decrease the perceived relevance of said information.
- *Metaphor* is another cognitive and discursively exploited phenomenon whose persuasive and even manipulative potential has been discussed at length in cognitive linguistics (see Chilton, 2005; Charteris-Black, 2006a, 2006b; and Hart, 2010 for illustrative studies). Extended metaphors in particular can be argumentatively exploited to confer epistemic strength to specific propositions because they provide ideal discursive structures that can be used for argumentative purposes (Oswald and Rihs, 2014).

Examples of discursive strategies that can be cognitively reinterpreted can be multiplied as long as they are concerned with meaning and representation, illustrating how the model advocated here can enrich existing accounts by grounding them in a psychologically-plausible framework. In what follows I turn to exemplifying the type of analysis that can be performed with this model with a concrete example taken from political discourse. We will see in what respect a construal of influence in terms of cognitive constraints on information processing can prove useful and thereby offer an original contribution to extant accounts of discursive influence.

## 4 Analysing deception and fallacious argumentation

### 4.1 Fallacious ≠ deceptive

Let me here make some cautionary remarks in order to avoid potential misconceptions about the type of phenomena this model is able to capture, which should not be limited to deceptive communication. Even though it is in principle designed to capture deception, the cognitive pragmatic model referred to here and presented in more detail in Maillat and Oswald (2009, 2011), Oswald (2010) and Maillat (2013) is in principle extendable to cover additional phenomena of discursive influence.

I have provided in sections 2 and 3 above two distinct yet complementary definitions of deception: definition (a) is descriptive and defines deception from a phenomenological

perspective while definition (b) provides an operational definition of deception which specifies when successful deception occurs in terms of information processing. However, (b) denotes deception only when (a) also obtains. This means that an utterance can be qualified as deceptive only under the condition that (b) specifies how (a) is achieved in a given discourse.

The analytical usefulness of (b) is nevertheless not restricted to cases of deception: when one observes that a given discourse implements the cognitive constraints of (b) without the conditions specified in (a) obtaining, the discourse under observation cannot be deemed deceptive; nevertheless, it does not follow that whatever happens in terms of discourse processing is irrelevant for the analyst interested in discursive influence. Fallacious argumentation may or may not be deceptive: this depends on whether the speaker is pursuing a covert perlocutionary goal – i.e., it depends on the presence of a deceptive intention. In case she is not (for instance, in case she simply makes a reasoning mistake in the argument she formulates), we can still analyse her discourse in terms of the parameters specified in (b). This means that whether argumentative fallacies are deceptive or not in a given context has no incidence on the possibility of performing an analysis informed by the specifications of (b). Weakening and strengthening *effects* in the addressee's processing of information can still occur without deception being present, that is, without the presence of a deceptive *strategy*.

These considerations bear at least two important consequences for (cognitive) discourse analysis, especially if we recall the difference between identifying deception in a given discourse and explaining how it works. First, the study of discursive influence so construed will allow the analyst to explain how an addressee can be persuaded by a given discourse without necessarily needing to settle the thorny question of establishing whether the discourse is deceptive or not.<sup>12</sup> Second, as mentioned above in section 3.4, it allows us to address the complex variety of discursive influence strategies within one single framework. As a consequence, it should not be claimed that fallacies are necessarily deceptive, even if they can be analysed with the same tools that were designed to analyse deceptive communication.

## **4.2 Analysing an argumentative debate from a cognitive pragmatic perspective**

The data I will be analysing comes from the French presidential debate that took place after the first round of the election, on 2 May 2012, between François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, the remaining two candidates. The particular passage I will be focusing on concerns a discussion about the presidential balance sheet of Sarkozy's first term. As expected in such circumstances, Sarkozy had previously taken credit for many positive outcomes of his action as French President while Hollande accused him of not wanting to acknowledge his failures. Here is the exchange:<sup>13</sup>

- (1) Hollande: You are always happy with yourself, which is extraordinary. No matter what happens, you are happy. The French people are not, but you, you are happy. I therefore have to add, since you mention it, regarding growth, that we are . . .
- Sarkozy: You are shamelessly lying, and I should accept it?
- Hollande: For now, I haven't said anything that would justify this expression.
- Sarkozy: It's a lie.
- Hollande: What is?
- Sarkozy: It's a lie.
- Hollande: What is? What is? What is?
- Sarkozy: You are lying when you say that I'm always happy with myself and that I do not acknowledge my responsibilities. It's a lie.
- Hollande: So you are very unhappy with yourself, I must have made a mistake. I must have committed an error and I am therefore apologizing to you: you are very unhappy with yourself.
- Sarkozy: This is not a small joke contest.
- Hollande: No, it is no joke. I cannot let you call me a liar here.

#### 4.2.1 Argumentative reconstruction

An argumentative analysis of this sequence requires a minimal reconstruction of the argumentative exchange in order to identify its key meaningful argumentative movements; the reconstruction yields the following paraphrase:

- (2) Hollande: You are always happy with yourself.
- (3) Sarkozy: You are shamelessly lying.
- (4) Hollande: I am not lying because I haven't said anything that would justify this expression.
- (5) Sarkozy: You are lying when you say that I'm always happy with myself and that I don't acknowledge my responsibility.
- (6) Hollande: I must have made a mistake; you are very unhappy with yourself.
- (7) Sarkozy: This is not a small joke contest.
- (8) Hollande: I cannot let you call me a liar here.

This sequence can be further broken down into four movements corresponding to what the participants do in terms of argumentative significance. A first movement can be identified as Sarkozy's attack, in (3), of Hollande's standpoint (2) in which he states that Sarkozy is always happy with himself. Immediately after the attack, Hollande attempts to rebut it in (4) with a counterargument ('I haven't said anything that would justify this expression').

The second movement starts in (5), where Sarkozy reformulates the counterargument he just provided in (3). In so doing, he specifies the nature of his objection by introducing

a conjunction, thereby making his counterargument a complex one. These two movements are argumentatively interesting in themselves (to the extent that one could see (5) as setting the stage for a straw man fallacy in case we fail to ascertain that Hollande accused, albeit implicitly, Sarkozy of not wanting to take responsibility), but I will focus on the rest of the exchange instead, which is particularly prone to receiving an analysis within the above-mentioned cognitive framework.

The third argumentative movement lies in Hollande's apparent acceptance, in (6), of part of Sarkozy's reformulation in (5); Hollande further specifies his thought by acknowledging that he 'must have made a mistake'. From a strictly literal perspective, Hollande's utterance thus amounts to a resolution of the dispute, since he apparently concedes that his standpoint (2) should be rejected. However, the utterance is ironic, which indicates that Hollande is in fact pursuing his argumentative strategy. He does this by adding that Sarkozy is very unhappy with himself, which amounts to an indirect attack on Sarkozy's credibility: a president who is extremely unhappy with himself cannot come across as a reliable candidate for an additional term, which is why (6) can be said to play an argumentative role in the exchange as well.

In the final movement, Sarkozy, in (7), attempts to counter the attack by calling into question the seriousness of (6), which thereby simultaneously counts as an attempt to undermine Hollande's sincerity by explicitly exposing the joke. Finally, in (8), Hollande only apparently rebuts (7): even though the rebuttal seems to respond to the immediately preceding utterance, it is in fact replying to the charge of lying that was present in (3) and (5).

The sequence is therefore quite complex and can be summarized as follows:

- 1st movement: standpoint by Hollande (2), counterargument by Sarkozy (3), rebuttal of the counterargument by Hollande (4).
- 2nd movement: reformulation of the standpoint and subsequent specification by Sarkozy (5).
- 3rd movement: apparent concession of the counterargument by Hollande (and therefore apparent resolution of the dispute), indirect attack on Sarkozy (6).
- 4th movement: attempt by Sarkozy to counter the indirect attack (7), apparent rebuttal by Hollande of the counterattack and final counterargument (8).

As already mentioned, the remainder of my analysis will focus on the 3rd and 4th movement.

#### 4.2.2 Fallacy fest

The analytical significance of Hollande's contribution has to be found in the quality of his argumentative moves. From the perspective of argumentative validity or soundness, (6) displays features of three different well-known fallacies, namely the straw man fallacy, the false dilemma and the *ad hominem* fallacy.

The straw man is a 'fallacy of argumentative discussion in which an arguer misrepresents her adversary's standpoint or arguments in such a way that they become easier to refute, and then attacks the misrepresented position as if it were the one actually defended by the adversary' (Lewiński and Oswald, 2013: 165). In (6), Hollande abusively misrepresents Sarkozy's thoughts by claiming that the latter is very unhappy with himself, which is not straightforwardly equivalent to repeating what Sarkozy had previously said in (5), namely that it is not true that he is always happy with himself. In order to construct this misrepresentation, Hollande furthermore relies on an abusive simplification of an alternative emerging from Sarkozy's negative formulation in (5): in particular, Hollande tries to force mutually exclusive contents in the alternative by implicitly establishing that if one is not always happy with oneself, then one must be very unhappy with oneself. This is typical of the fallacy known as the false dilemma, which consists in reducing an alternative to two mutually exclusive options when in fact a whole range of other options could be relevant. Finally, by virtue of the ironic tone of (6), Hollande can also be said to launch a personal attack on Sarkozy's *ethos*, leading the audience to infer that Sarkozy's unhappiness with his own performance is symptomatic of his unreliability and incompetence as a head of the state.<sup>14</sup> With one single utterance, Hollande's contribution to the argumentative exchange engages three different fallacies. We will now look at the formulation of the utterance and at the pragmatic significance of these three fallacies in order to show how they can act as constraints on information processing geared at driving the audience's attention away from spending time on their fallacious nature.

With (6), Hollande is responding to Sarkozy's complex reformulation of a previous counterargument. By uttering (5), Sarkozy was indeed negating a conjunction, in this case amounting to something like 'it is not true that I am always happy with myself and that I do not acknowledge my responsibilities'. Now, a natural and reasonably expected defence, in line with Hollande's previous defence in (4), would be for him to argue that he is not a liar and that what he said is indeed true. However, in (6), Hollande opts for a concession instead, with the particularity that he concedes only something which resembles the first conjunct of Sarkozy's refutation: Hollande only responds on Sarkozy's degree of satisfaction with respect to his action. So instead of continuing with the same line of argument, Hollande is apparently conceding something Sarkozy allegedly said, as a way of superficially resolving the dispute. From the perspective of argumentative resolution, we could thus at first sight infer that Hollande abandons his initial standpoint. But this apparent resolution serves an additional argumentative purpose, namely setting up the straw man. The negation of 'not being happy' is semantically compatible with many interpretations: depending on the context, it could mean 'being sometimes happy', 'never being happy', 'being in a state where happiness/unhappiness is irrelevant', 'being sometimes unhappy', 'being always unhappy', etc. So when one says that one is not happy with oneself, it does not necessarily mean that one is unhappy with oneself, which is nevertheless the proposition which Hollande attributes to Sarkozy. The misattribution at the core of the straw man therefore relies

on a false dilemma, for a complex alternative is reduced abusively to only two mutually exclusive options in (6). Moreover, (6) focuses on the first conjunct of (5) under the scope of the negation while disregarding the second; a reasonable reaction to (5) would need to address the latter as well.

A textbook straw man consists in misrepresenting an opponent's words so as to *refute* them easily. Hollande, somewhat surprisingly, does not do this, as he concedes what he presents as corresponding to Sarkozy's counterargument and subsequently acknowledges his own mistake instead. If we compare the role of (6) and its literal meaning, a first problem arises: (6) functions as an attack, and yet a concession cannot by definition be interpreted as an attack, since it is supposed to grant an opponent's point. As a consequence, since Hollande appears to agree with Sarkozy (if only at face value), his previous obligation to defend himself from the charge of lying (which he contracted in (4)) is no longer perceived as relevant, which means that the dispute about lying seems to be resolved. Of course, this part of the exchange should precisely not be taken at face value, because Hollande is issuing only a 'pretend-concession': on the one hand he concedes a misrepresentation of (5), which is, as we have just seen, based on a false dilemma, and on the other hand the concession is in fact ironic. Furthermore, (6) is used to discredit Sarkozy, which is why it can be counted as an *ad hominem* attack.

Sarkozy recognizes the damaging potential of the irony of (6), and tries, in (7), to counter it by meta linguistically highlighting its inappropriateness in the debate. But, again, Hollande attempts to steer things to his advantage: his serious answer in (8) is actually misdirected. While we would expect it to respond to Sarkozy's immediately preceding charge of trying to be funny (7) – and we have actually no clear indication at first to infer that such will not be the case – in fact it relates to (3) and (5), namely the charge of being a liar, which is off-topic at this point, given Hollande's previous (apparent) concession. Yet, defending oneself from a serious charge such as that of lying may pass for legitimate defence; after all, he was just accused of lying, and he can still go back to that accusation because he has previously admitted a mistake, but not a lie. After having pretended to settle the discussion about lying, he makes it relevant again – technically, indeed, he has not responded to it yet.

### 4.2.3 Rhetoric, weakening and strengthening strategies

The overall rhetorical strategy of Hollande could be described as twofold: on the one hand he produces a 'multi-fallacious' argument which, due to the ironic tone of (6), is also presented as a joke (we will shortly see how this plays out to his advantage); on the other, he manages to divert attention away from a critical evaluation of his fallacious move. This requires him to manage to constrain not only Sarkozy's cognitive processing, but also his audience's (i.e. millions of TV viewers).

Let us first discuss the way Sarkozy's reactions are constrained by Hollande. The ironic attack in (6) leaves Sarkozy with two choices: either he addresses the



misrepresentation to show that his opponent is abusively representing his words or he tries to counter the attack because he perceives how damaging it can be for his *ethos* to be the butt of the joke. This is the solution he opts for in (7) and his reaction can thus be seen as fulfilling face-work to restore his own image. Instead of going for a defence, he accuses his opponent of not being serious, hoping to neutralize the threat on his own face: if he manages to discredit Hollande this way, chances are that he will also manage to defuse the threat. Retrospectively, this means that (6) has favoured a face-repair priority, and it is therefore fair to assume that it has strengthened the need for repair (or counter-attack), in cognitive terms, by making this need a priority. But we still need to justify why this is so. *Ad hominem* attacks are typically described as unreasonable owing to the type of reaction they bring about, which constitutes a derailment from the argumentative discussion about the initial standpoint (see Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1996; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2008): victims of such attacks usually feel the need to justify themselves and try to restore their image. It is not hard to see how this can become a priority particularly in political communicative contexts such as a presidential debate: the potentially disastrous consequences, in terms of image, generate a trouble that urgently needs to be resolved and thereby legitimizes the expenditure of efforts in view of that goal. We can thus assume that it cognitively translates into the high salience of the trouble perceived, and that it *ipso facto* focuses the cognitive system's attention towards resolving it. Among the options at Sarkozy's disposal, the need to repair or to counter-attack to highlight his opponent's inappropriateness (one should not joke in a presidential debate), is consequently strengthened.

Once Sarkozy counter-attacks by threatening Hollande's *ethos* in (7), Hollande has a more advantageous choice, to the extent that his opponent has accused him of two different things in the exchange: in (3) and (5) he called him a liar, and in (7) he accuses him of not being serious. Of the two charges, Hollande can therefore select the one that he feels will be rhetorically more useful. He opts for defending himself from being a liar, even though that particular accusation seemed (but only seemed) to have been settled in the preceding exchange. By responding to it, however, he can still present himself as a victim of unfair treatment: a response to an accusation of being a liar is potentially more serious and damaging for the author of the accusation than a response to an accusation of trying to be humorous. Hollande is therefore attempting to undermine Sarkozy's image by making his first accusation relevant again. Hollande is therefore controlling what is relevant in the exchange: at first he constrains Sarkozy's choices by pushing him to counter-attack, which then allows him to defend himself with more room for manoeuvre; it just so happens that he, unlike his opponent, has a choice, which allows him to select the accusation that best fits his strategy.

In the debate, Hollande also needs to manage the way TV viewers judge him and his contribution to the exchange. I suggest that the ironic joke embedding the *ad hominem* in (6) has cognitive repercussions for the audience: it keeps the audience

busy processing the joke instead of devoting resources to a potential argumentative evaluation that would reveal its fallaciousness and its poor argumentative relevance (from the perspective of argumentative reasonableness).

Irony is typically a phenomenon managed by the comprehension module which solicits cognitive resources to be understood: irony triggers an implicit meaning that cannot be made explicit without losing its effect. What I suggest is that in the example processing the irony takes precedence over the evaluation of the *ad hominem* argument, which is only represented after the irony has been perceived and understood. This means that before the audience can even begin to recognize (6) as an *ad hominem*, a prior cognitive task has to be carried out, namely understanding the ironic nature of Hollande's statement. Now, a specific likely effect of irony is the perception of humour, which involves complex cognitive processing (see Baldwin, 2007; Wild et al., 2003; Ruch, 2001): I suggest that this weakens the chances of critical evaluation of the argument. Once (6) has been understood, in principle the representation that was yielded can be picked up for several other purposes, including critical evaluation, which is what happens in standard and reasonable argumentative settings. However, in this case I claim that the humorous nature of (6) might take over and become more relevant, i.e. more cognitively salient, than its critical evaluation.<sup>15</sup> The attack conflates humorous and argumentative functions (the former being more enjoyable, more accessible and more relevant with respect to the interpretation of irony) and this weakens the chances of the *ad hominem* being defeated, simply because its argumentative nature might no longer appear to be relevant.

Once Hollande has joked around, he goes back to being serious by (illegitimately) reacting to (3) and (5) instead of (7). He takes the opportunity offered by Sarkozy's previous accusation to divert the audience's attention away from the fallacious nature of his own intervention by foregrounding his status as a victim of a false accusation, which, as he implies, is a very serious matter. Again, this is meant to obfuscate the fallacious nature of (6), whose relevance is thereby weakened: the discussion is no longer about being funny or serious, but about having been called a liar. In other words, even if he indulged in the non-seriousness of humour, he is perfectly able to return to a serious conversational attitude by setting the pace and managing to impose the topical contents of the exchange. The perception that he may be legitimated to do so probably results from his timely recalling of the accusations against him. We can consequently take (8) to implement a twofold constraint; on the one hand it increases the relevance of contents related to a serious attack by making them accessible and epistemically significant: after all, Hollande is responding to a serious charge about his honesty, thereby raising expectations for contents which are relevant to that particular goal. A politician who is called a liar in a political debate of such importance is expected to defend her/himself; Hollande knows that his audience expects those contents to be formulated one way or another, and since he has previously conceded only a mistake, he can

now take the opportunity to firmly oppose Sarkozy on his charge. On the other hand, but also simultaneously, this allows him to drive the audience's attention away from the evaluation of the ironic personal attack he has previously launched. In other words, he weakens the chances of his audience spotting the fallaciousness of (6), because (8) relates to (3) and (5) – and crucially not to (6). The relevance of his joke, which could prove to be disadvantageous with respect to his credibility as a debater, is thereby weakened as (8) brings to the fore the seriousness of a grave accusation.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to give a coherent picture of how research in cognitive pragmatics can contribute to the (critical) study of discourse. It has outlined a cognitive model of deception postulating in a nutshell that deception has some prospects of being successful only when its target is unaware of its operation; this can be achieved by manipulating information focus in the meaning comprehension procedure so as to weaken the likelihood of critical scrutiny on behalf of the deceived addressee. Deception therefore works, in sum, because you are not looking for it.

More specifically, I have characterized the cognitive constraints unfolding in deception as constraints on relevance, amounting to constraints on informational accessibility (related to processing effort) and on the strength of information (relating to cognitive effects). While the model was originally aimed at accounting for deceptive communication, its operational focus allows us to extend it to non-deceptive instances of discursive influence. I have presented and illustrated how it can be used to analyse argumentative discourse so as to gain insights into the reasons that make argumentative fallacies effective. The basic claim behind this discussion is that they work precisely because they manage to lead us away from their critical evaluation.

One of the advantages of the type of approach presented here is its explanatory power: it is grounded on recent developments in cognitive science and consequently affords experimental testing (within experimental pragmatics, for instance, but also within more traditional cognitive psychology, which has been concerned with biases and illusions, see Pohl, 2004). These domains of scientific inquiry can guide our understanding of the mechanisms governing cognitive processing and begin to explain why and how discourse can effectively impact belief formation. Moreover, reliance on such approaches is a step further in addressing and accounting for the complexity of communication. We do not communicate single-purposely and many times our utterances fulfil different goals, be they argumentative, conversational, informative, etc. Acknowledging that behind this complexity lies a corresponding cognitive complexity which we can in fact learn from through cognitive science research may get us closer to a richer and more informed discipline of discourse analysis.

## Notes

- 1 In the literature on the topic, the term manipulation is often used to refer to what I call here deception (I have used the term myself in the past). I will however privilege the latter here because the term 'manipulation' can be understood in the very basic sense of 'operating/using an object' and thus, if applied to communication, could come to denote the mere act of assembling linguistic or conceptual material in a certain way, which restricts the conceptual scope of the phenomenon I am concerned with in this chapter.
- 2 See Maillat and Oswald (2009: 350–61) and Galasiński (2000: 17–33) for more extensive discussions of the problems involved in defining the concept of deception.
- 3 See Oswald (2010: 103–21) for a complete rationale behind this choice.
- 4 I adopt here the conventional notation in pragmatics where speakers are denoted as females and addressees as males.
- 5 This is a distinction made by Sperber and Wilson in terms of *communicative* intention and *informative* intention (see Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 29–31).
- 6 Recent research in cognitive anthropology (see Sperber et al., 2010) postulates that human communication evolved and stabilized in such a way that humans have developed epistemic vigilance filters targeted at assessing source reliability and message consistency. One way of describing how deception operates would therefore be to consider that it manages to overcome these vigilance filters (see Oswald and Hart, 2014; Oswald and Lewiński, forthcoming; Oswald, 2011 for an elaboration of this idea concerning different argumentative fallacies).
- 7 The cognitive environment of an individual will be defined, following Sperber and Wilson (1995: 38–46) as the set of assumptions that are manifest to her/him (i.e., those which s/he takes to be true or probably true at a given time).
- 8 I will obviously not be able to summarize here the entire theory and its philosophical and epistemological grounding; for a concise introduction to RT I refer the reader to Wilson and Sperber (2002).
- 9 Quite a few pointers about how a cognitive pragmatic approach to discourse could look can nevertheless be found in the work of Saussure (see Saussure, 2007a, 2007b, 2012).
- 10 For an illustration of how the interpretative procedure unfolds, see the example given in Wilson and Sperber (2002: 263).
- 11 By 'favourable contents', I mean all the contents which do not lead the addressee to be critical about the linguistic material he is processing. These are targeted at creating an impression of coherence and consistency with the discourse they are embedded in.
- 12 This, of course, can also be part of the analysis as a further question of inquiry, but it does not constitute a necessary step in the explanation of how influence works.
- 13 The English translation is my own; a transcript of the debate is available on the website of the French newspaper *Libération* at <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/010118726-la-transcription-exhaustive-du-debat>, and the video is available at <http://youtube/UhLYmyOxlRY> (both last accessed on 7 April 2013).
- 14 The extent to which this is an actual *ad hominem* fallacy is debatable; in order to count as one, the argument would need to be completely made explicit and the

reconstruction would need to show how a premise about one of Sarkozy's psychological traits is used to argue for the falsity of a statement. This is arguably the case here, even more so if we take into account Sarkozy's immediate reaction to try to counter the attack. However, suffice it to say that Hollande's move definitely sets the stage for the *ad hominem*; whether he exploits it as such or not is irrelevant here, because the point of (8) is to elicit a response Hollande will then be able to exploit.

- 15 Many *ad hominem* attacks are combined with humour, particularly in political discourse (see e.g. Van Eemeren and Houtlosser's 2008 analysis of an *ad hominem* at the Canadian House of Commons), and this is perhaps not coincidental. Studies of verbal humour have already pointed out (see e.g. Attardo, 1994) that humour can be expressed through contradiction, incongruity and in particular flawed reasoning. See also Oswald (forthcoming) for a discussion of another humorous example involving a formal fallacy and its non-detection, namely affirming the consequent.

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