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# Conspiracy and Bias: Argumentative Features and Persuasiveness of Conspiracy Theories

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the argumentative biases conspiracy theories typically suffer from and pursues two goals: (i) it seeks to identify recurring argumentative and rhetorical features of conspiracy theories, which translates into an attempt to elaborate their argumentation profile (see Hansen 2013); (ii) it provides a cognitively-grounded account of conspiracy theories in terms of their persuasiveness, thus formulating clear hypotheses meant to explain their rhetorical appeal.

**Keywords:** argumentation profile, cognitive pragmatics, conspiracy theory, persuasion, relevance, rhetorical effectiveness

## 1. Introduction

Inaugurated as a field of research in academia more than fifty years ago with Hofstadter's (1964) seminal paper "The Paranoid Style in American Politics", the study of Conspiracy Theories (henceforth CTs) has mainly been carried out by philosophers, psychologists and sociologists (see Byford 2011 for an extensive review). Among the features of CTs that have been investigated are (i) the epistemological problems they pose (see Keeley 1999), (ii) their problematic status and propagation within civil societies (see Sunstein & Vermeule 2009), (iii) the processes that lead people to believe in them, including the influence of cognitive biases (see Brotherton & French 2014, Leman & Cinnirella 2007, Franks et al. 2013 among others). In this multidisciplinary endeavour, some consensus nevertheless seems to emerge as to what these narratives 'do' in terms of the way they attempt to fulfil their goals, namely persuading and spreading. It will be argued here that is significant from a rhetorical perspective.

Defined as "proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret" (Keeley 1999, p. 116), CTs are oftentimes analytically construed as discourses which are structured in particular ways and which attempt to persuade and spread in specific ways (see e.g. Byford 2011, chapter 2). A shared understanding of what CTs are and do, in terms of their rhetorical features, is in fact beginning to materialise in the literature on the topic: CTs are typically assessed as displaying some measure of persuasiveness, a self-sealing and irrefutable character and a commitment to inquiring about the truth that is prompted by (otherwise healthy) doubt regarding the official explanation of the event in question. Whether these agreed-upon features are sufficient to qualify CTs as a fully-fledged discursive *genre*, on a par with literary genres such as poetry and drama or with broader discursive genres alongside political debates or opinion columns in the written press, for instance, is still debatable (but see Zarefsky 2014, p.

204 for a hint at this), and I will not explore this direction here.[1] Instead I will limit myself to defending the idea that they make use of recurring patterns that are argumentatively significant and that, as a consequence, they could be characterised in terms of a specific argumentation profile (in the sense of Hansen 2013) or of a specific argumentative pattern (in the sense of van Eemeren 2016). Section 2 of this paper will thus provide several arguments, which, taken together, serve to legitimise a systematic inquiry of CTs couched in argumentation theory.

Moving beyond the limitations of a descriptive account, I will then reflect on the rhetorical appeal CTs seem to have, notwithstanding their recognised propensity to induce bias. CTs are said to rely on "crippled epistemologies" (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009, p. 211 ff.) in order to spread: they typically take advantage of people's ignorance and of their inability – or unwillingness – to critically assess their content. When someone ends up accepting a given CT as a valid account of some event, it therefore means that something has prevented the individual from spotting that the claims contained in the CT were poorly evidenced. In other words, it means that the individual does not recognise the CT as an "unwarranted conspiracy theory", in the terms of Keeley (1999, p. 111). In turn, it also means that CTs manage in one way or another to bypass *epistemic vigilance* filters (Sperber *et al.* 2010) and that their persuasiveness is likely to be studied with the same tools that can be used to study the persuasiveness of arguments. I will here draw on a cognitive pragmatic framework designed to tackle the rhetorical effects of fallacies (Oswald 2010, 2014, Maillat & Oswald 2009, 2011) to assess how features of the argumentation profile of CTs may play a part in their persuasive success. Section 3 will thus provide a rationale for this project and lay out the lines along which the study of the persuasiveness of CTs can be envisaged, in order to reveal a principled link between CTs' argumentative profile and their rhetorical appeal.

Section 4 applies this framework and analyses a very concrete feature of this argumentative profile, namely the fact that CT proponents are more likely to argue against their opponents than in favour of their own claims (as shown by Wood & Douglas 2013). I will argue that this can translate into the presence of arguments meant to refute claims and in particular into personal attacks. A case in point will be Werner Munter's arguments against anthropogenic climate change.

## 2. Defining an argumentation profile for CTs

### 2.1. Recurring features of CTs

Despite their (evident) argumentative import, CTs have to my knowledge not typically garnered a lot of attention within the community of argumentation scholars, with the exceptions of Zarefsky 2014 [1984], Danblon & Nicolas 2010, Herman 2010, and Oswald & Herman (forth). However, the literature on the subject originating from other disciplines exposes this argumentative import in a clear way, as we shall see next.

Byford (2011, p. 4), for instance, holds CTs to belong to a "tradition of explanation" which is characterised by "a particular rhetorical style", and, what is more, a style which persists over time, as contemporary CTs both borrow and draw on the rhetoric and arguments of previous CTs (*ibid.*, p. 5). In particular, and as an echo to Hofstadter, Byford identifies two central

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[1] Genres can be defined as "clusters of conventionalized and predictable ways of goal-oriented communicative acting arising from imperatives posed by constantly evolving socio-cultural situations" (Cap & Okulska 2013:3) and I leave for another occasion a reflexion on whether CTs can be considered to be constrained by such imperatives.

rhetorical *styles*: the rhetoric of scientific inquiry and the rhetoric of just asking questions (2011, p. 88-93). The rhetoric of scientific inquiry is meant to convey an impression of irrefutability and displays the following features:

- concern with demonstration and presentation of proof in reaction to an official story (henceforth OS)
- representation of CT proponents as investigators and researchers
- reliance on a multitude of arguments
- emulation of formal features of academic discourse: reliance on jargon, pseudo-demonstrations and proofs, references to other work (usually of other CT proponents), etc.

In turn the rhetoric of just asking questions is designed in CTs as a refutational strategy with the following features:

- representation of the CT not as a theory but as a question-asking systematic enterprise meant to expose the inaccuracy of the official story and make room for alternative conspiratorial accounts
- challenge of official and ongoing research meant to expose lack of answers and the allegedly inherently dubious nature of the official story
- reliance on errant data (details the official story has trouble explaining)
- obfuscation of the CTs' own flaws by means of excessive focus on the alleged problems of the official story
- diversion of attention by forcing CT opponents to defend themselves – instead of allowing them to attack CT proponents' claims

A look at the literature in cognitive psychology on the factors that could be responsible for the stickiness of CT beliefs might provide additional evidence to undertake an analysis of CTs as a specific argumentative phenomenon. In a corpus study on how CT proponents deal with the promotion of conspiratorial material vs. the rejection of conventionalist material, Wood & Douglas (2013) found that CT proponents are more likely to argue against their opponents than in favour of their claims. Byford (2011, p. 131-134) reports that CT believers are particularly likely to give in to known cognitive biases such as the fundamental attribution bias (see Nisbett & Ross 1980), the major event-major cause heuristic (McCauley & Jacques 1979, Leman & Cinnirella 2007) and the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton & French 2014), which, in the case of CTs, play a role in generating reasons to reject OS and thereby favour alternative explanations.

All these features, taken together, constitute in my view a clear indication that it makes sense to study CTs from a truly argumentative perspective, since such characterisation satisfies three of the basic criteria shared by argumentative objects of study. First, and based on Byford's description, we can say that CTs fulfil one of the necessary conditions many contemporary accounts take to be inherent to argumentation (e.g. van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, Govier 2010, Barth & Krabbe 1982), namely the controversy or disagreement requirement. Because they systematically emerge in reaction to a consensual official story, CTs are in essence refutational narratives. That is, they put forward a claim as to the inaccuracy/invalidity of OS and provide evidence for that claim. They therefore materially realise the first dialectical step towards an argumentative exchange by making explicit the difference of opinion in the form of a challenge

formulated against OS. Second, the purposes and goals of CTs are typically those of argumentative objects: just like argumentations, CTs express their persuasive intent by setting out to cast doubt on OS. And, crucially, they are explanations presented as better explanations than OS. Third, their discursive manifestation looks like that of argumentations, in the sense that CTs offer arguments in the form of premise/conclusion articulations – or claim/argument complexes. Moreover, it could be claimed, following the literature on the weak epistemological features of CTs, that their unfalsifiable and self-sealing character is an even clearer indication that they make use of particular types of (fallacious) arguments (see section 2.3).

## 2.2. Argumentation profiles and argumentative patterns

Argumentation theorists might see in the previous characterisation a tempting point of entry into the study of CTs: if we assume that inferential processes in communication about disagreements are verbally expressed through argumentative means, then we can expect to find linguistic manifestations of the cognitive misfortunes previously evoked in the discourse of CT proponents. Put more simply: if CT believers are convinced by (but also generate) inferences which are cognitively biased in some way, we should see traces of these biases in their discourse. What I would like to propose at this point is that such a correspondence might very well translate into the use of specific (mostly fallaciously instantiated) argumentation schemes. Furthermore, I consider that this can lead to a more precise characterisation which can draw on contemporary research in argumentation theory around the notions of *argumentation profile* (Hansen 2013) and that of *argumentative pattern* (van Eemeren 2016).

The concept of argumentation profile, defined by Hansen (2013, p. 148) as a "description or characterization of argumentation behaviour over time as exhibited by an argumentation agent – an individual or a group, party, or collective that makes and takes responsibility for arguments," is originally designed to account for the communicative behaviour of agents in argumentative contexts over time. That is, the very notion of profile is meant to study "the argumentation behaviour of argument agents" (*ibid*., p. 150) in an attempt to systematically reach descriptive adequacy. Relevant to the notion of profile are argumentative concepts such as arguments kinds, argument schemes, *pisteis*, dialectical roles, dialogical roles and dialogical positions. These concepts are used by Hansen to characterise an agent's argumentative behaviour in a way that is able to highlight the recurring patterns the agent resorts to in her or his argumentative activities. The descriptive usefulness of such an endeavour is to allow a fine-grained characterisation of an argumentation profile we can expect a given agent to draw on as s/he argues. It is important to note that Hansen refrains from adopting an evaluative perspective but that he considers the possibility of doing so; we will see in the next section that by virtue of the "crippled epistemologies" that seem to characterise CTs, it can indeed make sense to normatively evaluate an argumentative profile.

I should also mention at this point the differences between the goal I am pursuing here and the goals the very notion of argumentation profile, as defined by Hansen, is meant to reach. First, I will not be reporting here on a systematic characterisation of an alleged argumentation profile characterising all CTs *over time*. This preliminary and limited investigation includes a meta-analysis of existing literature on CTs from other disciplines and thus consists of a principled account of why it would make sense to identify an argumentative profile for an object like CTs, with possible pointers as to what specific parts of such an argumentation profile could look like. Second, I am not after a characterisation of a specific agent's behaviour, but rather

after a characterisation of a particular type of narrative (hence the proximity with the notion of genre), which requires from the agent who endorses it to argumentatively behave in specific ways.

Next to Hansen's notion of argumentation profile, the notion of argumentative pattern, recently systematised in the pragma-dialectical framework (see the latest special issue of *Argumentation*, March 2016), represents another conceptual alternative for the type of goals I want to reach here. An argumentative pattern is

> a constellation of argumentative moves in which, in order to deal with a particular kind of difference of opinion, in defence of a particular type of standpoint a particular argument scheme or combination of argument schemes is used in a particular kind of argumentation structure (van Eemeren 2016, p. 15).

I contend that available descriptions of CTs in extant literature allow for an account of CTs in terms of argumentative patterns: CTs in fact do consist of a set of argumentative moves meant to deal with a particular kind of difference of opinion (which can be mixed or nonmixed, single or multiple depending on whether the CT proponent makes an alternative account explicit and whether s/he attacks one or various claims relating to OS), they do emerge in defence of (or as attacks of) specific standpoints (either pro- or anti-OS) and, assuming the consensus in the literature is indeed right, I will show that they also tend to draw on an identifiable set of argument schemes and argument structures. Within pragma-dialectics, argumentative patterns are intimately linked to activity types, and this means that argumentative patterns bear institutional relevance, as they are deployed in order to realise "the institutional point of the communicative activity type" (*ibid*.). While the focus of argumentative patterns on specific types of argument schemes and structures is highly relevant to the purposes of this paper, the potential of CTs to be significant in institutional terms will not be addressed here – I am at the moment not convinced that CTs can be defined as fulfilling any institutional goal, nor, for that matter, that it makes sense to identify an activity type of 'conspiring' or 'propagating CTs'. Accordingly, similarly to my usage of the notion of argumentative profile, my usage of the notion of argumentative pattern is only partial, as it focuses on a limited set of argumentatively relevant features such as argumentation schemes.

To summarise, my goal is to identify recurring argumentative and rhetorical features of CTs; in this respect, this is similar to goals pursued in research conducted on argumentation profiles and argumentative patterns. However, my focus will cover neither the characterisation of an agent's argumentative behaviour nor its institutional relevance. Instead, I choose to limit myself, in this paper, to studying the argumentative features of the discourse which has come to characterise CT rhetoric over the years.

## 2.3. Towards an argumentation profile of CTs

It is now possible to bring the contents of section 2.1 and 2.2 together in what I introduce as a first tentative argumentation profile of CTs which focuses on the types of arguments we should expect (unwarranted) CTs to make use of. Given (i) their argumentative and rhetorical nature, (ii) their refutational character and (iii) their likely relationship with cognitive biases, there is reason to assume that the sort of evidence CTs will rely on involves argument schemes and structures which can normatively be evaluated as fallacious.

A recurring feature noted by CT researchers lies in the refutational character of CTs, which emerge in reaction to an official account (OS) of a major event and which dismiss the latter in favour of a conspiratorial account. In what Byford described as the 'rhetoric of just asking questions', we find the idea that CTs typically try to discredit the sources mentioned by OS – but this can also be extended to cover OS proponents who would oppose the CT as well. This is typically done by casting doubt on either the integrity or the competence of the source of information that is mentioned: to take but only two famous examples, following this line, CT proponents of the account according to which 9/11 was an inside job consider that the Bush administration cannot be telling a true story about 9/11 because the conspirators are within its ranks; similarly, according to climate change denialists, we should not believe scientists who postulate the anthropogenic cause of climate change because they have vested interests in making the fossil-free energy market flourish. Examples are countless because, as noted by Keeley, "[t]he more evidence piled up by the authorities in favour of a given theory, the more the conspiracy theorist points to how badly 'They' must want us to believe the official story" (1999, p. 120). In other words, the more OS is adamant in putting forward OS, the more this is taken by CT proponents to be an indication that there is indeed a conspiracy.[2] I contend that in CTs this translates into a systematic display of mistrust towards scientists and official sources (see also Lewandowsky *et al.* 2013, who find that rejection of science correlates with adoption of CT beliefs). From an argumentative perspective, therefore, and given that positive evidence on the untrustworthiness of the sources mentioned in OS is lacking, I expect CTs to resort to *ad hominem* arguments, which, ironically enough, many times take the form of a charge of conspiracy against OS proponents (see the example discussed in section 4). This assumption echoes the results of the study by Wood & Douglas (2013), who found that CT proponents are more likely to prefer attacking OS than defending their own account. Generalising from this negative attitude towards official and scientific sources, and drawing on Byford's observations about the rhetoric of scientific inquiry, whereby CTs emulate academic discourse, we should therefore expect CTs to typically rely on source-related arguments. In particular, I would venture that given the lack of concern for argument soundness or acceptability, source-related arguments such as *ad populum* and *ad verecundiam* are to be expected in CT corpora. The presence of these source-related arguments, whether they are used to attack various aspects of OS or to support conspiratorial claims, would be a clear indication that CTs are indeed biased in the selectiveness of the sources they grant their trust to.

Moving beyond the way CTs manage their allocation of trust to sources of information, there is more to say on the justificatory features of their content, which have consensually been said to leave much to be desired. Hofstadter famously stated that CTs rely on a "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (1964, p. 35). Sunstein & Vermeule (2009) hold them to draw on "crippled epistemologies", which hints at the idea that there is something about successful CTs that makes their victims' critical testing procedures fail. Keeley defines them as *unwarranted* CTs, as the way they explain facts seem to undermine the strength of their explanation. All these various characterisations have in common the idea that CTs' reliance on evidence is, to say the least, problematic. Building on Jackson's idea that fallacies are "failed diagnostic strategies" (Jackson 1996, p. 111), I will thus suggest that this can make us expect CTs to make use of a number of fallacious arguments. For instance, Byford's observation that

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[2] Notice that this is also something that contributes to CTs self-sealing nature, as noted by Zarefsky (2014[1984], p. 205): "It [the CT] is virtually impossible to disprove, and even discrepant evidence can be explained easily as the work of the clever conspirator who is trying to cover his tracks."

evidence for one conspiracy theory becomes evidence for all of them seems to be compatible with Swami *et al.*'s (2010) findings that belief in one CT correlates with belief in other CTs. In turn, from an argumentative perspective, this could make us expect to find that CTs are likely to rely on arguments from generalisation and arguments from analogy, perhaps more so than other argumentative genres. One does not need to look very far to find CT proponents draw analogies between major events in order to juxtapose conspiratorial explanations: a recent example is Paul Craig Roberts' analogy between the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 and 9/11 concerning the finding of a terrorist's ID papers in the aftermath of both attacks – on Ground Zero on 9/11 and in the getaway car of the Kouachi brothers in Paris.[3]

Keeley (1999) and Byford (2011), among many others, note that it is typical of CTs to mistake insufficient or non-representative evidence for acceptable evidence. As a way of theorising this idea, CT scholars have coined the term *errant data*, defined as a set of "specific details (which are mostly irrelevant, attributable to coincidence, or based on inaccurate information or false premise) that have not been adequately accounted for by the received (non-conspiratorial) explanation" (Byford 2011, p. 92). Errant data is taken to play a fundamental role in any CT, as it is taken to functionally behave as the initial building block of the conspiratorial account (see Keeley 1999, p. 119). Seeing as CTs thus seem to build on non-representative or insufficient evidence, we could expect them to display a proclivity to make use of inductive or abductive argument schemes, i.e., those defeasible argument schemes which are based on evidence that is uncertain or evidence whose relevance to the issue is itself uncertain. The leap from "the undeniable to the unbelievable" mentioned by Hofstadter in his essay on the paranoid style in North American politics could very well build on the fact of inducing or abducing the presence of a conspiracy from the many problems faced by OS. The mere existence and presence of errant data as the starting point of a CT makes it likely to make use of such argument schemes.

Another recurring feature mentioned in the literature on CTs lies in their propensity to state or encourage the derivation of claims which are inferred from the absence of contrary evidence. For example, on Paul Craig Roberts' account of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France, the fact that no mainstream US media reported the suicide of a French official investigating the attacks is brought forward to cast doubt on OS; common conspiratorial accounts of 9/11 hold that if it had indeed been a real terrorist attack, the US military would have gunned the planes down before they could have crashed the World Trade Center.[4] Inference of fact based on the absence of evidence of the contrary is known, in argumentation theory, as the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy, or appeal to ignorance (see e.g. Walton 1999). We also find in Byford's characterisation of CTs as making use of the rhetoric of just asking questions the idea that CTs typically exploit absence of evidence: an example of this would be the fact that CTs sometimes take advantage of Oss' inability to provide positive evidence due to the limits of scientific progress (this may happen in CTs around scientific phenomena, such as climate change or AIDS).

Finally, some empirical research suggests that CTs are likely to adopt a very specific dialectical stance. As previously mentioned, Wood & Douglas (2103, p. 7) found in their study of online comments about the tenth anniversary of 9/11 that "conspiracy advocates showed a tendency to spend much more time arguing against the official explanation of 9/11 than

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[3] See Paul Craig Roberts' account here: http://www.paulcraigroberts.org/2015/01/13/charlie-hebdo-paul-craig-roberts/ (last accessed, 18.03.2016).

[4] In the corpus Wood & Douglas (2013) used, to which I was granted access, we find comments such as "Inside Job 9/11! If it was a real terrorist attack U.S. military would have blew (sic) up the planes while in the air before they could hit any population area!"

advocating an alternative." Coupled with Keeley's observation that "the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation" (1999, p. 120), it seems that CT proponents will argue from the position of refutation and challenge. In their discourse, in light of errant data and of the absence of contrary evidence, they repeat that it is OS that has serious justificatory problems, not the CT. Therefore, the burden of argumentation is nearly always directed at OS: the position of he who asks questions, or the challenger, is much less subject to the need of providing justifications than the position of the attacked, since it is the acceptability of OS which is called into question.[5] As a consequence, we should expect CTs to exhibit a rather simplified management of the burden of proof, more often than not in ways that are meant to shift the burden of proof to CT opponents (and partisans of OS).

Summing up the contribution of this section, I have tried to systematically draw parallels between extant characterisations of how CTs operate from an epistemological perspective and expected argumentative behaviour in an attempt to sketch an argumentation profile of CTs built around the type of argumentative structures likely to be found in them. The idea is that there are good reasons to expect recurring features of CTs to translate into the recurrent use discursive use of known weak or fallacious argumentation schemes, namely, in what I have surveyed so far, source-related fallacies (*ad populum*, *ad verecundiam*, *ad hominem*), hasty generalisations, arguments from analogy, inductive and abductive arguments, *ad ignorantiam*, and shifting the burden of proof. This last observation might also serve as an indication that it might be relevant in the establishment of the argumentation profile of CTs to consider the type of dialectical roles they favour. In what I have surveyed so far, it seems that CTs function as narratives which are meant to remain untouched: they call into question OS and highlight its alleged weaknesses, thereby allowing CT proponents to claim the role of critical observer and escape positive dialectical obligations themselves.

It should be noted that I neither claim that (i) these first elements of characterisation are both exhaustive and exclusive, nor that (ii) finding these argumentative devices is a necessary indication that the text under consideration qualifies as a CT. However, I do believe that CTs are very likely to make use of these argumentation schemes in fallacious ways by virtue of their problematic epistemological ways. The next step to ground and hopefully validate this first descriptive stage in an investigation of the argumentative features of CTs would be an empirical study of CT corpus, which I have not been able to start yet. Let me now turn to the second goal of this paper, namely an assessment of the rhetorical effectiveness of CTs.

## 3. Rhetorical effectiveness of CTs

Judging by their pervasiveness and their massive (online) propagation, CTs appear to be rhetorically appealing as culturally transmitted objects. Moreover, and following the assumptions of cultural epidemiology (see Sperber 1985, Sperber et al. 2010), it could be said that the reason for their spreading has to do with how relevant they are found by their target populations. I will explore here the possibility that CTs can be rhetorically appealing by virtue of their ability to escape or bypass some basic checks our epistemic vigilance filters should perform in their processing.

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[5] This is also supported by the idea that many times CT proponents do not appear to have a standpoint to defend, other than 'OS is wrong'. As a consequence, it is sometimes difficult to identify the dialectical obligations contracted by CT proponents.

I have mentioned earlier that in order to be effective from a rhetorical perspective, CTs need to obfuscate their argumentative and evidential weaknesses, or at least to draw their audience's attention away from them. In cognitive psychological terms, it can thus be said that CTs need to either fool or satisfy our epistemic vigilance filters. I also mentioned earlier (see section 2.3) that an argumentative profile of CTs would expect them to address sources of information, in an attempt to discredit those the OS relies on and to give credit to those the CT relies on, and that achieving this result can typically be done through the use of source-related fallacies. Now, since it is also the case that CTs are epistemically flawed, it means that their content – the second dimension on which we exert epistemic vigilance according to theory – is also flawed in some way, and, crucially, that content weakness also manages to remain under the critical radar.

From a cognitive perspective, describing rhetorical effectiveness amounts to specifying under which cognitive conditions arguments come to be effective, and more precisely under which conditions inferential processes of information selection are such that they result in the addition of the argument's conclusion into the addressee's cognitive environment (see Oswald forth.). In this picture, it is important to consider that two sets of information partake in the evaluative process that leads to the state of being convinced/persuaded:[6] the content of the argument and the conclusion (taken together with their accessibility and strength in the addressee's cognitive environment) and the set of critical assumptions that are mobilised in order to evaluate it (taken together, as well, with its accessibility and strength in the addressee's cognitive environment). I will discuss rhetorical effectiveness in terms of how these two sets of information behave in the way an argument is evaluated in an argumentative communicative context.

Saying that an argument, be it fallacious or not, has managed to convince its audience amounts to saying that either it has withstood critical evaluation or that it has been accepted without any critical evaluation. I would like to suggest that these two scenarios are likely to be subdivided into four cases as follows. An argument is rhetorically effective when

(i)     all relevant critical information has been considered and the epistemic advantages of the conclusion prevail;
(ii)    the conclusion is immediately consistent with an epistemically strong representation (or with a subset of epistemically strong representations) contained in the addressee's cognitive environment;
(iii)   no critical information is present in the cognitive environment at the time of evaluation;
(iv)    there is no reason to summon critical information.

Cases (i) and (ii) highlight the role of *epistemic strength* in rhetorical effectiveness, as they stipulate that the conclusion is accepted by virtue of the argument's epistemic superiority over critical information sets. Cases (iii) and (iv) highlight the role of the *accessibility to* and *availability of* critical information in rhetorical effectiveness, showing that failing to access critical information should in principle increase persuasiveness (provided, of course, the content

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[6] I choose not to make a distinction between conviction and persuasion at this point, even if I am aware of terminological disputes regarding the two terms. My interest in this paper is the state in which the claim put forward in the argumentation ends up belonging to the addressee's cognitive environment and I will accordingly use the terms persuasion/conviction with this denotation in mind.

of the argument is itself plausible in the addressee's cognitive environment). From this analytical overview of possibilities, it emerges that an argument is rhetorically effective when the articulation between premises and conclusion is epistemically strong and/or when the cognitive processing cost (interpreted in terms of information accessibility) of the evaluative procedure, notably in what regards the mobilisation of critical information, remains advantageous. Put more simply, an individual will end up accepting the conclusion of an argument when she finds its content particularly plausible in light of the criticism she can think of at that point.

I have argued elsewhere and with others (e.g., Oswald 2010, 2011, 2014, forth., Oswald & Lewiński 2014, Maillat & Oswald 2009, 2011, Oswald & Hart 2013) that it makes sense to interpret these parameters in terms of Sperber & Wilson's extent conditions of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1995, p. 125). Here I will limit myself to recall what this reductionist take on rhetorical effectiveness involves,[7] by offering a twofold construal of the process. On the one hand, the idea is that when arguments in favour of a claim are being evaluated in order to determine whether the claim should be accepted, what the cognitive system is doing amounts to weighing the epistemic strength of the information contained in the premise/conclusion articulation against the information that is already present in the addressee's cognitive environment (which may include critical information). On the other hand, it is also assumed that this very process is affected by the presence/absence of critical information – i.e. by whether the cognitive system supplies critical information sets or not – and by the extent to which the latter is epistemically strong. In such a framework, rhetorical effectiveness comes to be defined as a function of (i) the strength/weakness of the claim/argument complex and (ii) of both the strength/weakness and presence/absence of critical information.

More to the point in terms of analysing the rhetorical effectiveness of arguments, this framework postulates that persuasive strategies are of two kinds: there are *strengthening* and *weakening* strategies. Strengthening strategies are meant to foreground information that is compatible with the content of the claim/argument complex; this can be done by making such information epistemically strong and more accessible. Weakening strategies are the ones which target critical information in order to background it; this can be achieved by making it epistemically weaker and less accessible – if not altogether inaccessible. In such a framework, known fallacies can be reinterpreted as enforcing such strategies: *ad hominem* arguments are weakening strategies meant to decrease the epistemic strength of a piece of information by discrediting its source; *ad verecundiam* arguments are strengthening strategies meant to increase the epistemic strength of a piece of information by giving credit to its source; red herrings are weakening strategies meant to divert attention away from the representation of critical information, and so on.

The overall rationale for studying the argumentative profile of CTs in terms of their rhetorical appeal is thus to be found, within the framework adopted here, in the recognition that the types of arguments employed therein are meant to behave in a very specific way: given that they should be evaluated as unacceptable or invalid, depending on the normative standard one wants to apply, I will therefore assume that these are fallacious arguments whose rhetorical effectiveness precisely lies in the obfuscation of their fallaciousness. If CTs manage to convince despite their objective epistemic flaws, it is because those who believe in them failed to assess the arguments put forward by them as fallacious. And this, I venture, can be analysed as the success of various strengthening and weakening strategies meant to influence the process of

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[7] It is important to state that this reductionist perspective is necessarily partial and that the work presented here should not be taken to defend that this is the only cognitive process at stake in persuasion.

information selection. What an analyst interested in the persuasiveness of CTs should be out for, therefore, are those discursive formulations that might bias argumentative evaluation by foregrounding and backgrounding sets of information. I now turn to an illustration of this type of analysis.

**4. A case in point: Werner Munter's arguments against anthropogenic climate change**

In order to illustrate how the previous framework can be used to analyse the rhetorical effectiveness of CTs in a way that would contribute to an understanding of their argumentation profile, I will analyse in what follows an excerpt of an interview given by Werner Munter, a renowned retired Swiss mountaineering guide who also has an taken an amateur recent interest in global warming.[8] According to him, there is no question that global warming is happening, but to think that humans have something to do with it is foolish, arrogant and wrong, as he believes it is only a natural phenomenon. In 2014, year of the 5th IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) assessment which confirmed that 97% of climate scientists agree on anthropogenic climate change, Werner Munter was interviewed twice (*Le Matin*, 03.05.2014 and *swissinfo.ch*, 31.10.2014). In the first of these two interviews, he states the following:[9]

    (1)   (about the IPCC assessment): "The official thesis? Rubbish!"
    (2)   (about the 97% of scientific consensus): "These people are imbeciles who repeat foolish things in a continuous loop, who know it and are paid to do it."

The standpoint (1) is supported by three arguments in the interview, which look like scientific arguments. Munter argues that climate data shows that global warming is a natural and cyclical phenomenon, that the concentration of $CO_2$ in the atmosphere is negligible and that the official thesis about global warming contradicts the laws of physics. These arguments are a matter of proper scientific debate and have actually already been refuted by experts on many forums and blogs,[10] which is why I will not discuss them here. What I am interested in at this point is rather what Munter replies to the interviewer after that. Between the second and third argument, the journalist acknowledges that Munter seems to make a point, as he asks "So why is the official thesis quasi-consensual? Your scientific colleagues are not all imbeciles!" To this, Munter replies the following:

    (3)    "Those theories aim at making us feel guilty. When scientists such as those of the IPCC say they want to save the planet, I say that they are not credible. They lie to preserve economic interests, among which their own. Because there is business behind the fight against global warming. There is a will to scare people, for example by over-dramatizing the rise of oceans, when they rise only 2 to 3 mm per year! Talking about $CO_2$ in tons rather than in proportion is

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[8] Werner Munter is the inventor of the '3x3 method' designed to assess risks when mountaineering, which is taught in many alpine club courses. He is a well-known figure in the mountaineering community and has also given his name to a hitch used in climbing, the Munter hitch.

[9] The interview is available (in French) here: http://www.lematin.ch/suisse/La-these-officielle-Une-foutaise/story/19748787. (last accessed 21.03.2016)

[10] See for instance http://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php and, specifically regarding Munter's interview, a reply (in French): http://walker-france.com/climat-les-aneries-de-werner-munter/ (both last accessed 21.03.2016).

also intellectual manipulation. Tons are impressive, but let's not forget that the atmosphere weighs 5'000'000'000'000'000 tonnes (5 million billion tons)!"

The purpose of this section is to analyse how part of this answer serves as a charge of conspiracy launched by Munter on the IPCC scientists and the proponents of OS. To see where this charge is exactly located, let us first look at the argument more closely. His answer in (3) can be taken to defend the claim that the IPCC's theory is the result of a conspiracy. Here is a possible reconstruction of this argumentative articulation:

(4)    Claim: The official thesis is the result of a conspiracy
(5)    Premise: Those theories aim at making us feel guilty
(6)    Premise: Those theories are defended by scientists who are not credible
(7)    Premise: There is a will to scare people (with examples)
(8)    Premise (implicit): any theory which cumulates these three properties is the result of a conspiracy

In this reconstruction, (8) is an implicit premise that reveals the argument from sign behind Munter's qualification of OS (if it looks like a conspiracy, it is a conspiracy). The premise in (6) is the one that is further elaborated on by Munter in the text, and that this is where the root of the charge of conspiracy will eventually originate. I argue that this is a case of subordinate argumentation, and thus that (6) also functions as a sub-standpoint supported by a premise which itself becomes an additional standpoint supported by an additional premise. This would be reconstructed as follows:

(9)    Claim: These theories are defended by scientists who are not credible
(10)   Premise: These scientists lie to preserve economic interests, among which their own
(11)   Premise (implicit): Scientists who lie are not credible

And the second subordinate argumentation would look like this:

(12)   Claim: These scientists lie to preserve economic interests, among which their own
(13)   Premise: There is a whole business behind the fight against global warming
(14)   Premise (implicit): If there is a business behind research, then researchers are liars

Munter's idea is that the whole IPCC business is a conspiracy, and that the IPCC theses are wrong precisely because they emanate from people with a secret agenda, as revealed in (14). Now, it is interesting to note that (6) functions like a personal attack, and specifically a fallacious one: for one, the charge of conspiracy is not made explicit and has to be inferred. Moreover, it fails to be precisely defined: we infer that IPCC scientists are conspirators, but we neither know what kind of "business" they are into, nor what kind of interests they have. It thus seems that the only support that Munter offers in favour of his charge of conspiracy is the suspicion of some sort of secret agenda. How can we now make sense of the rhetorical prospects of this argument?

Consistently with the framework presented in section 3, I argue that the argumentation contained in (3) instantiates at the same time a weakening and a strengthening strategy. Munter rejects OS by saying that its theories emanate from a bunch of liars. The perlocutionary effect of the use of this *ad hominem* is thus to make sure that whatever these experts say is taken to be epistemically weak by the audience. The goal of a personal attack, in epistemic terms, is thus to weaken the chances that the addressee will include what the target of the attack says in his cognitive environment. This way, Munter tries increase the chances that his readers will disregard the IPCC theses. But I argue that this cognitive constraint is only part of the overall rhetorical strategy.

It must be recalled here that the argument presented in (3) is not interpreted solely on its merits, what is more in an informational void. The argument is part of a complex discourse in which Munter has already presented arguments that look scientifically plausible to the untrained eye – as knowledge of both physics and climate science would be required to help us understand that they are flawed. Assuming that the average reader does not possess this knowledge, it is reasonable to assume that once the 'pseudo-scientific' arguments are released, some sort of expectation is triggered as to their consequences regarding the topic of the interview. A clear indication of this is to be found in the reporter's question: if it is true that the IPCC reports do not hold from a scientific perspective, then how come so many scientists support them? At this point, it can be said that the reader is led (and I dare say even constrained) to expect some answer that will resolve the paradoxical situation. Munter is happy to supply an aptly relevant resolution by declaring that the IPCC theories are the fruit of a conspiracy. In other words, the charge of conspiracy (whereby Munter accuses IPCC experts of being conspirators) is likely to be found relevant in a context where unverifiable scientific refutation is offered: not only is it highly accessible in the context (we are waiting for something that explains why so many experts persist in supporting 'bad' science – according to Munter), but it is also contextually extremely useful, from a cognitive perspective, as it resolves the paradox which Munter has previously created. The charge of conspiracy in this case functions as a way of reinforcing the claim/argument complex put forward by Munter in opposition to the scientific consensus. In a way, Munter has used the 'errant data technique': he has pointed to inconsistencies relating to OS and is at the same time supplying the explanation that would make sense of the perceived paradox.

In this interview, Munter therefore offers a cognitively advantageous solution to a problem that was generated by his own previous refutations. With (3), he is therefore offering a relevant (in Sperber & Wilson's cognitive technical sense of relevance, i.e. in a cost-effective way) chain of representations by generating trouble and by immediately supplying a resolution for it (see also Saussure 2005 on the deceptiveness of trouble-and-resolution cognitive patterns). It could thus be said that in addition to increasing the chances that the attack will be perceived as relevant, Munter is also offering a sense of global coherence. I contend that for a reader who has not questioned Munter's previous pseudo-scientific arguments, the story he offers makes sense and has chances of being rhetorically appealing because it weakens OS and at the same time strengthens Munter's own conspiratorial account.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have pursued two goals. The first has been to elaborate an argumentation profile of CTs by making explicit the parallels that can be drawn between on the one hand the features of CTs, as described in extant literature originating in philosophy, social and cognitive

psychology, and the argumentative significance of these features on the other. I have tried to defend the idea that such an argumentation profile is possible, at least if we consider the types of argument schemes and the sort of dialectical roles we are likely to find in CTs. In particular, I have argued that it is reasonable to expect CTs to make use of source-related fallacies (*ad populum*, *ad verecundiam*, *ad hominem*), hasty generalisations, arguments from analogy, inductive and abductive arguments, *ad ignorantiam*, and shifts in the burden of proof. All these arguments are additionally expected to appear in refutational strategies which are about an assessment of the OS rather than about a defence of the CT.

I have then drawn on a cognitive pragmatic framework to propose a reductionist take on rhetorical effectiveness, which holds that an assumption ends up belonging to an individual's cognitive environment after undergoing an assessment affected by constraints on the accessibility and epistemic strength of different sets of information: the more the information contained in the argumentation is foregrounded (in terms of accessibility and epistemic strength) and the critical information is backgrounded (in the same terms), the more the argumentation is likely to be successful, and vice-versa. I have then tried to illustrate these strengthening and weakening strategies with an example of *ad hominem* taken from a contemporary CT about the alleged natural causes of global warming.

While these results can be taken to suggest a fruitful assessment of CTs within an argumentative framework, I acknowledge their limitations and consider that they still need to be empirically and experimentally validated. Further research is needed in the two strands of this research project. Exhaustive corpus analysis first needs to be performed on CT material to confirm the argumentation profile sketched in what precedes. Moreover, from an experimental perspective the assumptions made in sections 3 and 4 need to be evaluated by putting to the test experimental designs meant to confirm whether information selection can indeed be constrained on the accessibility and epistemic dimensions, this in turn resulting in changes in the subject's cognitive environment.

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