

Non-propositional meanings and commitment attribution

More arguments in favor of a cognitive approach

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In this paper, I elaborate on the cognitive pragmatic approaches of commitment attribution. I argue that non-propositional meanings (Sperber and Wilson 2015) play a role in the reconstruction of arguments (see Oswald 2016) and I underline that this constitutes a further argument in favor of a cognitive approach to the study of commitment attribution. I focus on an authentic example of a straw man fallacy consisting in (a) an implicit misattribution of commitments to the speaker with the form “Excuse me for having done p” and (b) a refutation of the attributed position by means of non-propositional effects (in this case, the refutation is implicitly conveyed through an ironical utterance). I conclude that non-propositional effects can serve as a criterion to distinguish a mere false attribution of commitments from a full-fledged straw man fallacy.

Keywords: commitment attribution, straw man fallacy, non-propositional meanings, reconstruction of arguments, cognitive pragmatics

1. Introduction

Commitment attribution has been an essential focus of argumentation analysis at least since Hamblin (1970; but see also Walton and Krabbe 1995). When considering the straw man fallacy, for instance, the use of this concept is unavoidable, as this fallacy consists in a misattribution of commitments to a speaker, followed by a refutation of the attributed position. Until recently, scholars have argued that the notion of speaker commitment should be conceived regardless of “psychological” (see Walton 1996: 127, cited in Section 2.1) or cognitive considerations.

According to Walton (1996), assessing whether a straw man fallacy has been performed requires that (a) the analyst keeps track of the speaker’s communicated propositions and (b) that the analyst evaluates whether the attributed content is

compatible with the previously communicated propositions (i.e., what is known to have been said by the alleged victim of the straw man fallacy). However, this approach is problematic for two reasons: first, it does not explain how the analyst should delimit the “context of a dialogue” (see Walton 1996:127, cited in Section 2.1). That is to say, should the analyst keep track of the speaker’s commitments only within the discourse or dialogue in which it occurs, or should the context be understood in a broader sense that would include previous acts of communication? To avoid leaving these issues to the analyst’s subjectivity, one should provide tools to explain *why* the context of a dialogue should be construed in a broad or a narrow sense, and *how* the context should be delimited in a given situation. In this paper, the context of a dialogue will be conceived as the result of an inferential process, triggered by an ostensive stimulus and oriented towards a principle of relevance.

The second problem arises when considering the explicit-implicit divide of linguistic communication: is the speaker committed only to what is explicitly said, or can she be considered responsible for implicit meanings conveyed in a dialogue? Paradoxically, here, setting aside the analyst’s subjectivity by paying attention only to explicit (and undeniable) contents may lead to overlook some blatant fallacies: as we shall see, there are cases of straw man fallacies which target specifically the implicit level of communication.

These questions can be usefully approached by considering the attribution of commitments as intertwined with interpretive processes (Oswald 2016:18). According to the cognitive pragmatics perspective, the way humans draw inferences in communicative contexts can directly inform us about how listeners attribute commitments to a speaker. Speakers are committed not only to explicit contents but also to implicit ones, such as conversational implicatures. Along the same lines, speakers are not committed only to propositional meanings but also to contents which are not propositional, such as emotional and attitudinal meanings (Sperber and Wilson 2015; Wharton 2015).

The aim of this paper is to provide further arguments in favor of a cognitive approach to commitment attribution. I focus on the role of non-propositional meanings – which are typically triggered by creative metaphors, interjections and irony – and illustrate how these contents may facilitate the identification of implicit arguments. By using an authentic example of a straw man fallacy, I show that non-propositional meanings can be decisive in assessing whether a speaker has indeed committed a straw man fallacy. In the case study that will be examined, it is precisely the attitudinal import of an ironical content that serves as a refutation of the attributed position (this last step being determinant of a full-fledged straw man fallacy).

The structure of the paper is as follows: I first underline the advantages of a cognitive pragmatic approach to commitment attribution phenomena (Section

2.1). I then present a classical example from lexical pragmatics which suggests that both explicit and implicit layers of communication are recovered by a single relevance-driven comprehension heuristic. Under this view, there is no theoretical reason to consider that commitment attribution applies only to the explicit layer of communication, regardless of the implicit layer (Section 2.2). Next, I show how a cognitive pragmatic framework can account for cases of misattribution of commitments. I specifically consider Lewiński and Oswald's (2013) criteria of pragmatic plausibility and interpretive charity as efficient tools in identifying a straw man fallacy (Section 2.3). In Section 3, I briefly review the literature regarding non-propositional meanings (Section 3.1) and then underline the link between these contents and commitment attribution. More specifically, I focus on an authentic example of a straw man fallacy and show how non-propositional meanings weigh in the identification of implicit arguments (Section 3.2). This analysis provides a further argument in favor of a cognitive account of commitment attribution.

2. Cognitive-pragmatic accounts of commitment attribution

2.1 The explicit-implicit divide of linguistic communication

Non-cognitive approaches of commitment attribution can be traced back to Hamblin's (1970) "commitment stores", which fulfil the function of keeping track of the communicated propositions in an argumentative context. In this framework, arguers are accountable only for explicit contents and not for what is implicitly conveyed in the Gricean sense (Grice 1957, 1975). This is what Walton (1996) advocates regarding how the straw man fallacy should be analyzed:¹

Commitment, as a critical and normative concept appropriate for use in evaluating cases of alleged fallacies, *is not a psychological notion*. It should be conceived normatively in relation to the requirements of the type of dialogue a speaker is supposed to be engaging in. [...] The key to evaluating particular cases where the straw man fallacy is alleged to have been committed is to be sought in the *evidence furnished by the text of discourse and the context of dialogue*, as known in that case.
(Walton 1996: 127, my emphasis)

1. Let us underline that the challenge of dealing with implicit contents in communication was acknowledged by Walton (see Walton 1996:126). In addition to that, Walton and Krabbe (1995) refer to a "dark side type of commitments" which correspond to an arguer's "underlying positions, as expressed implicitly by the moves he has made in the sequence of a dialogue" (Walton 2009: 35). However, these accounts do not specifically address the explicit-implicit boundary of linguistic communication, as it is the case in cognitive approaches of commitment attribution.

Thus, according to non-psychological (or non-cognitive) approaches of commitment attribution, the analyst should take into consideration only what constitutes an undeniable piece of evidence, namely what has been explicitly communicated – though, paradoxically, this point is implicitly stated here. Elsewhere in the same paper, Walton concedes that, in some cases, it may be a challenge to assess the exact nature of what has been said: “It is important to realize that the job of determining what an arguer’s commitments really are, or may fairly be taken to be, in a real case, is by no means trivial” (Walton 1996: 126). However, he decides to leave aside the problem of the explicit-implicit boundary of linguistic communication to address other issues.

Interestingly, there exists a similar approach of commitment attribution in the Gricean framework, which originally sought to address problems of deception in linguistic communication. According to Pinker *et al.* (2008) and Reboul (2011, 2017), implicit contents are not considered as a commitment cue because they are either cancellable (see Grice’s conversational implicatures) or because they allow the speaker to hide his manipulative intentions (see the case of presuppositions in Reboul 2017). In other words, borrowing Pinker *et al.*’s terminology, implicit communication does not commit the speaker because it allows for “plausible deniability”.

A classical example of implicature cancellation is illustrated below in (1), where B_1 conveys the implicature that *he doesn’t know exactly where Joe Biden lives* and where B_2 overtly retracts the implicature conveyed in B_1 :

- (1) A: Do you know where Joe Biden lives?
 B_1 : Somewhere in Delaeware.
B does not know exactly where Joe Biden lives. (Implicature)
 B_2 : Somewhere in Delaeware, *but if you need to know exactly where, here is his address.* (Cancellation of implicature drawn in B_1)

(adapted from Grice 1975: 51)

As illustrated above, B_2 ’s attempt to retract or plausibly deny the implicature originally conveyed by B_1 does not cause any problem. The reason why implicatures allow a retraction is due to the fact that they can be cancelled without generating a logical inconsistency. In the light of this, Gricean accounts claim that implicatures have the communicative advantage of allowing to manipulate an audience. In other words, the speaker is seen as committed only to explicit contents and not to implicit ones, as if the listener was entirely responsible for drawing specific inferences.

However, during the last decade, commitment attribution has been reanalyzed through the lens of cognitive pragmatics within the framework of Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995). In this perspective, the notion of commitment is conceived as intertwined with interpretive processes, i.e., those

which are responsible for the recovery of the speaker's intended meaning (see de Saussure and Oswald 2009; Lewiński and Oswald 2013; Oswald and Lewiński 2014; Oswald 2016; Boulat and Maillat 2017; *inter alia*).

More specifically, de Saussure and Oswald (2009) argue that implicatures which strongly contribute to the relevance of an asserted proposition should act as commitment cues. In their account, the retraction of a strong implicature will generate a "pragmatic inconsistency" despite the logical possibility to cancel this content (de Saussure and Oswald 2009: 231). Thus, there is a fundamental difference between the logical properties of linguistic contents and how a specific type of content will be perceived in an argumentative context. As de Saussure (2018: 179) puts it, "retractability [can be] more or less plausible, whereas cancellation is or is not valid".

Pragmatic inconsistencies, as characterized by de Saussure and Oswald (2009), happen to be widespread in the political scene. To mention a telling example, consider Donald Trump's polemic claim that he made during the 2016 presidential campaign:

(2) Donald Trump (*about Hilary Clinton*):

"Hilary wants to essentially abolish the Second Amendment[...]. If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. *Although the Second Amendment people, maybe there is.*"

Implicature: The Second Amendment people (i.e., gun owners) should/could use their guns to prevent Hilary from being elected.

(Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sSUpKqMScw>)

In this context, Donald Trump's attempt to plausibly deny the implicature (i.e., that gun owners should harm Hillary Clinton to prevent her from being elected) was massively mocked by the media.² This clearly suggests that Trump was considered as committed not only to the explicit level of communication but also to what he implicitly conveyed. The reason why the denial of this specific implicature failed is due to the fact that it is a milestone for the relevance of the statement that he made: indeed, why would Trump make an understatement to encourage *pro-gun* people to simply "vote" against Hilary Clinton? The specific designation of "Second Amendment people" makes the suggestion to commit violent acts much more salient than if he had not designated any specific group in the American population. Moreover, the fact that Trump is widely acknowledged to be a

2. To illustrate this, consider the following remarks from a *New York Times* article, which ironizes about Trump's attempt to deny having encouraged people to commit violent acts against Clinton: "You know those Second Amendment people, they just love to get on buses and vote together!" (Thomas L. Friedman, August 10th, 2016).

dishonest and manipulative speaker makes the implicit incitement for violence difficult for him to deny or retract. Finally, the fact that Trump did not immediately seek to correct a potential misunderstanding suggests that he took responsibility for the strong implicature he conveyed. As underlined by de Saussure (2018:179), there is an essential difference between an implicature *cancellation*, which occurs just after the statement was made and which serves as an anticipation to a potential misunderstanding, and an implicature *retraction*, which occurs *ex-post* and may fail to be convincing in manipulative contexts.

Thus, arguers do not abstain from attributing commitments to implicit contents, even if the latter have the logical property of being cancellable. It is worth noting that it is precisely at this point that the framework of cognitive pragmatics becomes useful. As we shall see, it provides tools to make predictions regarding when an arguer can indeed be considered as committed to an implicit content. They allow to assess the “pragmatic plausibility” of commitment attribution as well as the degree of “interpretive charity” that should be expected in a specific context (Lewiński and Oswald 2013; Oswald and Lewiński 2014). The next section is dedicated to the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic which explains how implicit contents are inferred in communicative contexts. In Section 2.3, I sketch Lewiński and Oswald’s notion of interpretive charity, which allows to make finer predictions regarding how listeners will attribute commitments to a speaker in specific contexts.

2.2 Searching for relevance

Relevance is the key notion in cognitive pragmatics. It should be understood as a comprehension heuristic (see below) which is oriented towards an optimal relationship between processing costs and cognitive effects (or benefits). Processing costs are ideally sought to be minimized (by attention being directed only to salient linguistic, gestural or prosodic cues) while the cognitive effects are sought to be maximized (by reinforcing or revising previous knowledge, or by incorporating new beliefs).

Relevance-guided comprehension heuristic

- a. Follow a path of *least effort* in computing *cognitive effects*: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

(Sperber and Wilson 2008: 613)

The cognitive heuristic presented above is responsible not only for the recovery of implicit contents but also for some aspects of the explicit layer of communication.

This field of research is best known as “lexical pragmatics”, see Wilson (2003), Carston (2002, 2009). Indeed, the explicit level of communication is already the result of some inferencing which allows to recover a complete proposition. To illustrate this point, consider the following example taken from Carston (2009: 2):

(3) **Max:** How was the party? Did it go well?

Amy: There wasn't enough drinks and everyone left early.

Amy: There wasn't enough alcoholic drinks to satisfy the people at [the party]_i and so everyone who came to [the party]_i left [it]_i early.

In this example, Amy's utterance is pragmatically enriched in order to recover an explicit proposition that she is committed to, namely that it is “the lack of alcoholic drinks” that constitutes “a reason not to spend too much time at a party”. What matters here is the fact that the explicit layer of communication behaves in a way that is similar to implicatures to the extent that it requires pragmatic enrichment in order to unveil the speaker's intended meaning.

In light of this example, the doubts that are likely to arise regarding the speaker's commitments are far more pervasive than what would be expected in a non-cognitive approach. Indeed, if the analyst wanted to account only for what is evidenced to have been said, even the explicit layer would not serve as an absolute piece of evidence. In the above example, the analyst would not be sure whether Amy is talking about “any type of drinks” or about “alcohol”. Furthermore, the causal link between the “lack of alcohol” and “not staying long at a party” is not explicit either. Therefore, in order to avoid a methodological ambush, one should acknowledge that both explicit and implicit contents are recovered by a single comprehension heuristic. Under this view, there is no theoretical reason to consider that commitment attribution applies only to the explicit layer of communication, regardless of what is implicitly conveyed.³

2.3 Spotting misattributions of commitments: The case of straw man fallacies

Lewiński and Oswald (2013), in a paper dedicated to the straw man fallacy, present two criteria to assess whether the attribution of commitments to a speaker is legitimate. First, they propose the criterion of *pragmatic plausibility* which results

3. An anonymous reviewer underlined that inasmuch as the explicatures determine the proposition conveyed, a non-cognitive approach could capture this level of commitment. However, the main point defended here relates to the fact that explicatures and implicatures are both recovered by an inferential process. In this sense, there is no reason to exclude implicatures from a theory of speaker commitment.

directly from the relevance comprehension heuristic presented in the previous section. They argue that commitment attribution is pragmatically plausible if the antagonist “follows contextually relevant procedures in deriving speaker meaning” (Lewiński and Oswald 2013: 170). On the other hand, pragmatically implausible attributions will not follow contextually relevant procedures. This latter case is typically what constitutes the first step of the straw man fallacy.

In order to assess the legitimacy of commitment attribution, Oswald and Lewiński add the criterion of *interpretive charity*, which they define as the act of choosing the most beneficial (i.e., the least challenging or face threatening) interpretation for the speaker. They underline that the degree of interpretive charity varies depending on the nature of the debate. They make predictions regarding the contexts in which implausible attribution of commitments should occur. For instance, in the context of an informal friendly talk, implausible commitment attributions are not highly likely to occur, whereas political debate is expected to manifest a higher proportion of implausible commitment attributions.

The combination of these two criteria serves as a tool to analyze cases of alleged straw man fallacies. As already noted, a straw man fallacy is characterized by the attribution of a pragmatically implausible commitment to an arguer, followed by a refutation of the attributed position. In this account, a straw man fallacy is expected to occur in uncharitable contexts, such as political debates (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Contextual soundness criteria for the straw man fallacy assessment (adapted from Lewiński and Oswald 2013: 170)

	Precise interpretation	Loose interpretation
Highly critical (uncharitable)	Criminal trial, blind academic review...	Political debates
Constructive (charitable)	Doctor – patient consultation, conference presentation, classroom discussion	Small friendly talk, family dinner table...

However, let us note that interpretive charity does not depend only on the situational context (i.e., the fact of being in a criminal trial or in a doctor-patient consultation, or holding family discussions) but also on epistemic vigilance mechanisms (Sperber *et al.* 2010) which allow to filter information. In this perspective, comprehension procedures and commitment attribution are sensitive to the way the speaker is being perceived in terms of competence and benevolence. In this respect, Sperber (1994) underlines that listeners take into consideration what they know or assume about the speaker’s beliefs and desires while interpreting utterances, even in contexts of mutual trust. These pieces of information will be used to construct the context to search for relevance. For instance, depending on the

listener's knowledge of the speaker's beliefs, sentence (4) will be interpreted in significantly different ways:

(4) *Listening to a speech from Donald Trump.*

A: At last, someone who truly speaks his mind!

In (4), if the listener knows that the speaker shares the same political beliefs with Trump, the sentence will be interpreted literally. However, if the listener knows that the speaker does not share the same political ideas, the utterance will be interpreted ironically, i.e., as an echoic representation of a typical argument coming from Trump's supporters, in order to mock its vacuity.⁴

At this point it is worth noting that the tools of cognitive pragmatics should allow not only to identify the possible implicit arguments involved in a dialogue but also to predict their respective likelihood. This last point is nicely illustrated by Oswald (2016: 27–30), who shows that implicit premises triggered by an utterance can lead to a consistent *modus ponens* type of reasoning as well as to a fallacious type of reasoning. Oswald underlines that, when a situation like this occurs, only the most relevant implicit premise should be selected, i.e., the one which presents an optimal relationship between processing costs and cognitive effects.

In the next section, I argue that non-propositional meanings can also play a significant role in the reconstruction of arguments, inasmuch as they contribute to relevance. Before presenting an example of a straw man fallacy which is characterized by non-propositional effects, I offer a brief review of the relevant literature.

3. Commitment cues beyond propositional meanings

3.1 Defining non-propositional meanings

The research agenda of Relevance theory was recently redefined in Sperber and Wilson (2015). In this paper, they underline that the core of linguistic investigations has, until now, been exclusively concerned with a Gricean conception of meaning, which accounts only for “determinate” and “propositional” meanings. They illustrate this point with a classical example from Grice (see Sperber and Wilson 2015: 131):

4. Of course, the ironical reading of this type of utterance does not depend only on the listener's knowledge of the speaker's political beliefs. It also depends on whether the literal interpretation is sufficiently relevant for the listener. In case the literal reading does not bring sufficient cognitive effects, the listener may be led to an ironical understanding of the utterance.

- (5) *John is offering drinks to his guests; some have already taken whisky, vodka, cognac or orange juice.*

John (to Rita): Do you want some whisky?

Rita: I do not drink alcohol.

When Rita utters that she does not drink alcohol, it is usually considered that John will derive a specific implicature, namely that “Rita does not want to drink whisky”. The implicature is derived through deductive reasoning, as illustrated below:

Premise 1 : Rita doesn’t drink alcohol. (explicit content)

Premise 2 : Drinking whisky entails drinking alcohol. (implicated premise)

Conclusion 1: Rita doesn’t drink whisky.

Premise 3: If Rita doesn’t drink something, then she doesn’t want it.

Conclusion 2: Rita doesn’t want to drink whisky. (implicature)

However, Sperber and Wilson underline that communication involves a continuum of effects which lie between “determinate” and “propositional” meanings and “indeterminate” and “non-propositional” meanings. They argue that an exchange such as (5) activates a wide array of implicatures, making Rita’s contribution not reducible to a single proposition. Thus, a psychologically realistic account of Example (5) would look more like this:

- (6) *Rita:* I do not drink alcohol.

Implicatures:

- a. She doesn’t want whisky
- b. Her reason for refusing his offer of whisky is that she doesn’t drink alcohol
- c. She doesn’t want cognac
- d. She doesn’t want vodka
- e. She might accept orange juice

The crucial point here is that communication is not equivalent only to determinate propositions. On the contrary, communication often triggers meanings which fall outside the domain of strict “propositionality” and which nevertheless contribute to relevance. Creative metaphors, interjections and irony (shown below in Examples 7, 8 and 9, respectively) are typical linguistic phenomena that are considered as non-propositional. In other words, these contents are not paraphrasable without a substantial loss of the speaker’s intended meaning. To illustrate this point, consider the contrast between the pairs of utterances below:

- (7) a. Juliet is the sun.
 b. Juliet is beautiful. Juliet is my reason to live. Juliet makes me feel happy.
 Etc. (Sperber and Wilson 2015: 147)

- (8) a. Damn! That's really annoying.
 b. I'm cross, that's really annoying. (Wharton 2015: 21)
- (9) a. It is so nice to finally be able to spend some time with you, darling!
 b. I thought we would be able to spend some time together, however you've been watching TV during the whole evening. The expectation that we would spend some time together is therefore ridiculous. This truly annoys me.

Sperber and Wilson argue that there is no single interpretation of the creative metaphor “Juliet is the sun” which could serve as an adequate paraphrase. Rather, creative metaphors trigger an open-ended list of propositions which is likely to vary among listeners. As they put it, “[w]hat is aimed at in such cases of weak communication is a degree of cognitive alignment, not a duplication of precise contents.” (Sperber and Wilson 2015: 147). Along the same lines, when considering the contrast between (8a) and (8b), it also appears that the interjection “damn” cannot be paraphrased without losing a substantial component of the original utterance. According to Wharton (2015), interjections are linguistic means used to convey an emotion or an attitude towards a propositional content. In this case, the speaker is not stating that she is angry (as in the paraphrase “I’m cross” in (8b)); she is instead showing or providing direct evidence that she is angry. Finally, utterance (9a), conveyed in a context triggering an ironical interpretation, would not be paraphrasable without losing the attitudinal component of irony. It is worth noting here that irony, as argued by Wharton and de Saussure (*to appear*), involves emotional contents as well as a face-threatening dimension which will be discussed in the last section.

To summarize, an adequate theory of communication – and, by extension, a theory of argumentation – should be able to account for non-propositional meanings because these contents also contribute to relevance. To the extent that relevance attribution is correlated with commitment attribution, non-propositional meanings are expected to play a role in the attribution of commitments. This last point is precisely what will be developed in the next section.

3.2 Refuting a position by non-propositional means: An authentic case of straw man fallacy

We have seen earlier that commitment attribution is intertwined with interpretive processes. The question that should be addressed now is whether non-propositional meanings also weigh in commitment attribution processes. To the extent that non-propositional meanings contribute to relevance (see Section 3.1), there are good reasons to assume that they affect how listeners attribute commitments to a speaker.

In this section, I present an authentic example of a straw man fallacy in order to compare non-cognitive and cognitive approaches of speaker commitment. In the exchange below, two men are debating in a French television show: Ramzy Bedia (RAM) is a popular humorist and Eric Zemmour (ZEM) is a famous intellectual and polemist. At some point, Zemmour quotes the French philosopher Pascal, emphasizing that everyone knows this quote. From this point onwards, the discussion progressively leads to a straw man fallacy (the crucial elements are emphasized):

RAM: *On cite trop de gens. On peut pas parler normalement sans faire du name-dropping à tout va?*

ZEM: *Excusez-moi d'avoir lu des livres.*

RAM: *"Excusez-moi d'avoir lu des livres"... vous sous-entendez quoi avec ça?*

ZEM: *Rien... vous me reprochez de citer des auteurs; je préfère citer des auteurs que de me les approprier sans les citer. Ce n'est pas de la vanité, c'est simplement que j'ai du respect pour ces auteurs.*

RAM: *Et ensuite la phrase, "excusez-moi, moi, d'avoir lu des livres", qu'est-ce que ça sous-entend? Ça ne sous-entend pas que moi je n'ai rien lu? (applaudissements)*

[RAM: Too many people are being quoted. Can't we speak normally, without always name-dropping?

ZEM: Excuse me for having read books.

RAM: "Excuse me for having read books" ... what are you trying to insinuate with that?

ZEM: Nothing... you blame me for quoting authors; I prefer quoting authors instead of appropriating myself citations. This is not vanity, it is just that I have respect for these authors.

RAM: And then the sentence, "**excuse me, if I have read books**", what does that imply? Doesn't it mean that I haven't read anything? (*the audience applauds*)]

(Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwwL4LAFfo>, at 8' 50")⁵

Interestingly, this example leads to two different conclusions, depending on whether the approach is cognitive or non-cognitive. According to a non-cognitive perspective, it is Ramzy who performed a straw man fallacy, because he misquoted Zemmour's explicit utterance. That is to say, while Zemmour said "Excuse me for having read books", Ramzy distorts the explicit content (i.e., by attributing

5. I am indebted to Steve Oswald for sharing this example with me and discussing the issues involved in this argumentative exchange. In particular, he drew my attention to the implicatures (a)–(c) presented below. Note that this example has also been cited in de Saussure (2018:175).

to him the content “excuse me, if *I* have read books”), in order to challenge it. On the other hand, a cognitive approach would conclude the contrary, namely that it is Zemmour who performed a straw man fallacy by saying: “Excuse me for having read books”. In the remainder of this section, I explain why this utterance should be considered as a straw man fallacy.

Let us start by showing how Zemmour attributes a commitment to Ramzy: by using the expression “Excuse me for having done *p*”, there is an implicit attribution of a commitment, namely that *Ramzy has blamed Zemmour for having read books*. The question that should be asked here is whether the attributed position is pragmatically plausible. The pragmatic plausibility of the attributed commitment requires the identification of the possible implicatures that can be derived from Ramzy’s initial utterance and the assessment of their respective plausibility in terms of relevance (i.e., processing costs and cognitive effects). The array of implicatures conveyed by Ramzy’s utterance can be formulated as follows:

Ramzy: Too many people are being quoted. Can’t we speak normally, without always name-dropping?

- a. There is a contrast between speaking normally and not speaking normally.
 - b. There is a threshold beyond which quoting people is not necessary.
 - c. Speaking normally implies not going beyond the threshold of an acceptable number of quotes.
 - d. Quoting people beyond what is necessary amounts to name-dropping.
 - e. Eric Zemmour is name-dropping.
 - f. Name-dropping is equal to showing off.
 - g. Eric Zemmour is showing off.
 - h. Eric Zemmour’s quote is not relevant with respect to the question under discussion.
 - i. Eric Zemmour is performing an *ad verecundiam* fallacy.
 - j. Reading books is a necessary condition to name-drop.
 - k. Eric Zemmour has read books and therefore can name-drop.
 - l. Reading books is not good.
- [...] ⁶

Argumentation – especially in highly critical contexts such as this one – presents a strong confirmation bias (see Mercier and Sperber 2011, 2017). The goal of an arguer is essentially to defend ideas which are compatible with his own views. When a disagreement arises, an arguer may seek to demonstrate that the antagonist’s arguments are not valid. Considering these remarks, it is reasonable to assume that

6. As underlined by Sperber and Wilson (2015), utterances convey arrays of implicatures which can be considered as open-ended (see also Section 3.1).

Ramzy's purpose was to underline that Zemmour's quote from the philosopher Pascal is not a valid argument. Keeping this in mind, the list of implicatures presented above can be divided between plausible and less plausible implicatures, as illustrated in Table 2. Plausible implicatures are the most efficient implicit arguments to challenge Zemmour's quotation of Pascal, whereas the less plausible implicatures should be argumentatively less efficient.

Table 2. Weighing the plausibility of implicatures

Plausible implicatures	Less plausible implicatures
a. There is a contrast between speaking normally and not speaking normally. b. There is a threshold beyond which quoting people is not necessary. c. Speaking normally implies not going beyond the threshold of an acceptable number of quotes. d. Quoting people beyond what is necessary amounts to name-dropping. e. Name-dropping is equal to showing off. f. Eric Zemmour is name-dropping. g. Eric Zemmour is showing off. h. Eric Zemmour's quote is not relevant with respect to the question under discussion. i. Eric Zemmour is performing an <i>ad verecundiam</i> fallacy	j. Reading books is a necessary condition to name-drop. k. Zemmour has read books and therefore can name-drop. l. Reading books is not good.

Arguably, Ramzy implied that Zemmour's quote does not constitute a valid argument in the discussion and merely serves as a way to show off. It could also be argued that he is accusing Zemmour of committing an *ad verecundiam* fallacy. By contrast, the content that Zemmour tried to attribute to Ramzy (i.e., that he blamed him for having read books) seems to be less plausible. Indeed, blaming someone for reading books – a universally well connoted activity – would be evidently self-defeating. Therefore, this latter attribution of commitment seems less easy to attribute to Ramzy.

Now that it seems clear that Zemmour has indeed attributed a false position to Ramzy, we need to assess whether the misattribution of commitment is the object of a refutation. Let us underline that it is precisely at this stage that non-propositional meanings will be crucial for the analysis: Zemmour's response is manifestly ironical, as it would be absurd to apologize for having read books (particularly from the perspective of an intellectual). If Zemmour had wanted to honestly apologize, he could have said: "Sorry for name-dropping" or "Sorry for acting like a snob." Instead of this, he apologizes for having read books, just as if Ramzy had claimed that reading books is a bad thing to do. The refutation of the misattributed position essentially stems from the ironical attitude that is conveyed by his

utterance. As we have seen earlier, irony is not strictly propositional to the extent that it serves to convey an emotion or an attitude towards a content. Importantly, this content may also be face-threatening for the addressee. In order to illustrate the face-threatening dimension of ironical utterances, one can attempt to spell out the implicit meanings that Zemmour intended to convey:

Zemmour: Excuse-me for having read books!

- a. Reading books is a necessary condition to name-drop.
 - b. I have read books and therefore I can name-drop.
 - c. Ramzy blames me for name-dropping and therefore for having read books.
 - d. Reading books is good.
 - e. Blaming someone for reading books is ridiculous.
 - f. If Ramzy had read books, he would also be able to name-drop.
 - g. If Ramzy does not name-drop, then he has not read books.
 - h. People who do not read books are not competent.
 - i. Ramzy has not read books and is not competent.
- [...]

The dissociative attitude conveyed by the ironical content appears to be the essential face-threat for the addressee. Furthermore, I would like to argue here that the attitudinal import also serves as a refutation of the commitment that was attributed to Ramzy: after having attributed a pragmatically implausible content to his addressee, Zemmour challenges it by making this content look unsustainable and ridiculous.

In the cognitive pragmatic literature, scholars have underlined that the straw man fallacy can address the antagonist's *standpoint* or *arguments* (see Schumann *et al.* 2019), as well as his *pragmatic skills* (see de Saussure 2018). In this case, the straw man fallacy seems to address specifically the antagonist's pragmatic skills: indeed, by claiming "Excuse me for having read books", Zemmour presents an implicature that can hypothetically be drawn from Ramzy's initial utterance, but that he failed to anticipate. However, the lack of anticipation of the implicature is precisely due to the fact that it is pragmatically implausible in this context.

To summarize, we have seen that non-cognitive and cognitive approaches reach different conclusions regarding an authentic dialogue involving a straw man fallacy. According to a non-cognitive perspective, it is Ramzy who is guilty of performing a straw man fallacy, whereas in a cognitive perspective it is Zemmour who is responsible for performing a straw man fallacy. Despite the misquotation ("excuse me, if *I* have read books"), Ramzy merely spells out what Zemmour implicitly communicated by uttering "Excuse me for having read books."

The straw man fallacy that was considered involves two steps: the first consists in a misattribution of content by saying "Excuse me for having read books". I

showed to what extent commitment attribution is pragmatically implausible, inasmuch as its argumentative input is evidently self-defeating. The second step consists in a refutation of the attributed position by non-propositional means: in this example, it is the ironical attitude that constitutes a challenge to the attributed position. Importantly, here, it is only the non-propositional effects conveyed by the ironical utterance that allow to distinguish a mere false attribution of commitment from a full-fledged straw man fallacy.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide further arguments in favor of a cognitive approach to commitment attribution. I first underlined the benefits of cognitive pragmatics to explain how listeners attribute commitments to a speaker. A specific Example (i.e., Donald Trump implicitly encouraging his supporters to harm Hilary Clinton) allowed to illustrate that the retraction of an implicature can lead to a “pragmatic inconsistency” (de Saussure and Oswald 2009). Next, a classical example from lexical pragmatics suggested that both explicit and implicit layers of communication are recovered by a single relevance comprehension heuristic. Under this view, it appears that there is no theoretical reason to consider that commitment attribution applies only to the explicit layer of communication, regardless of the implicit layer of communication. Finally, I explained how cognitive pragmatics can account for misattributions of commitments. In particular, it was shown that Lewiński and Oswald’s criteria of *pragmatic plausibility* and *interpretive charity* can serve as efficient tools to assess whether a straw man fallacy is performed by an arguer.

In the remainder of the paper, I focused on non-propositional meanings and specifically on how these contents contribute to relevance. Given that non-propositional meanings contribute to relevance, it seemed reasonable to assume that they also play a role in the attribution of commitments. This hypothesis was tested through the analysis of an authentic debate which involved a straw man fallacy. Importantly, the analysis of this example allowed to test the predictions of non-cognitive and cognitive frameworks. It transpires from this analysis that these frameworks reach conclusions which are incompatible with each other: i.e., in a non-cognitive framework it is Ramzy who is held responsible for performing a straw man fallacy by distorting Zemmour’s explicit content, whereas a cognitive framework reaches the conclusion that it is Zemmour who implicitly attributed a false commitment to Ramzy before attempting to refute the attributed position with an ironical attitude (which is non-propositional). In such a case, non-propositional meanings serve as an essential criterion to distinguish a mere false

attribution of commitments from a full-fledged straw man fallacy. In light of this, non-propositional effects constitute an additional argument in favor of a cognitive approach of commitment attribution.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Anna Piata and two anonymous referees for their feedback and constructive remarks on earlier drafts.

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