

Mind The Gap: Commitment Attributions in Argumentative Exchanges

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Abstract: Argumentation, as a specific type of speech act, involves an exchange of meaning among its participants, yielding illocutionary effects consisting in the production of changes in participants' dialectical entitlements and obligations. The production of these illocutionary effects hinges on the joint construction by the speaker and the interlocutor of the meaning of the speaker's utterance. However, the speaker's meaning does not always coincide with the interlocutor's interpretation. This paper argues that this gap has crucial implications for the evaluation of argumentation. Specifically, it explores the consequences of this gap in cases involving commitment attributions, taking the straw man fallacy as a case of study.

Résumé: L'argumentation, en tant qu'acte de langage spécifique, implique un échange de sens entre ses participants, produisant des effets illocutoires qui se traduisent par des modifications de leurs droits et obligations dialectiques. La production de ces effets repose sur la construction conjointe, par le locuteur et l'interlocuteur, du sens de l'énoncé du locuteur. Or, le sens voulu par le locuteur ne coïncide pas toujours avec l'interprétation de l'interlocuteur. Cet article soutient que cet écart a des implications cruciales pour l'évaluation de l'argumentation. Plus précisément, il explore les conséquences de cet écart dans les cas d'attribution d'engagement, en prenant pour exemple le sophisme de l'homme de paille.

Keywords: commitment attribution, joint meaning, normative effects, speech act of arguing, straw man fallacy

Introduction

In September 2022, during a parliamentary hearing on the reform of the abortion law in force in Spain, the former Spanish Minister of

Equality, Irene Montero, defended the importance of sex education for minors:

- (1)[...] all the girls, boys, and non-binary children in this country have the right to know their own bodies, to know that no adult can touch their bodies if they do not want to, and that it is a form of violence. They have the right to know that they can love or have sexual relationships with whomever they choose, based, of course, on consent. (El Diario 2022) [Author's translation].

During her intervention, Irene Montero was addressing the right of 16 and 17-year-old girls to terminate pregnancies voluntarily without needing parental permission, along with the right to sex education for minors, and pointing out that, once they grow up, they are free to love or engage in sexual relationships with whomever they want. However, these statements sparked a major controversy in the context of Spanish politics because the far-right Spanish party Vox called for the minister's resignation, manipulating her words to accuse her of "justifying pedophilia" (Vox 2022). Former Vox spokesperson in the Congress, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, said the following regarding the minister's statements:

The Minister of Equality literally said that minors, boys and girls, should be able to have sexual relations with whomever they want, even with adults, as long as there is consent. [...] Therefore, we demand her dismissal, immediate resignation, and the closure of the ministry. (El Confidencial 2022) [Author's translation].

He also announced that they would take legal action against her. Other members of Vox and other far-right groups also echoed Monteros' statements, twisting her words to accuse her of promoting pedophilia. However, in December 2022, all the complaints and lawsuits were dismissed and deemed inadmissible by the Supreme Court with the approval of the Public Prosecutor's Office because the judges found no trace of incitement to pedophilia in Monteros' words. According to the Supreme Court, Irene Monteros' words addressed the need to educate minors on the matter of consent. After this, Vox appealed the Supreme Court's decision, but again, in March 2023, the complaints and lawsuits were definitely dismissed. Moreover, the Supreme Court also condemned the party's actions in

this matter, noting that all the complaints were clearly inadmissible (Público 2023).

The controversy surrounding Monteros' words highlights the importance of the interlocutor's interpretation of the speaker's utterance in successful communication and argumentative exchanges. When interlocutors distort the speaker's original stance, this not only undermines the illocutionary success of the speech acts, but it can also result in other types of consequences. Argumentation, as a communicative activity, involves an exchange of meaning among its participants (Oswald 2023). From a communicative perspective, speech acts of arguing are successfully performed when the illocutionary effects associated with the act of arguing are produced (Haro Marchal 2023). These effects consist in the production of changes in the set of dialectical obligations, entitlements, commitments, and expectations of the participants in the argumentative exchange. For these effects to come into being, it is necessary that the speaker and the interlocutor jointly construct the meaning of the speaker's utterance. This involves the interlocutor's response showing their interpretation of the speaker's utterance, and the speaker's acceptance of this interpretation. This interaction gives rise to the production of the illocutionary effects that render the illocutionary act of arguing successful. In other words, it entails the recognition that the normative position of the parties—that is, their obligations, entitlements, and expectations—has changed in a certain way.¹

Typically, the interlocutor's interpretation coincides with the speaker's intended meaning. However, in some cases—and, at times, despite the speaker's best efforts—what a speaker means does not always coincide with the interlocutor's interpretation. This gap can arise either from a genuine and innocent misunderstanding on the part of the interlocutor or from a deliberate and strategic misrepresentation. And in some cases, what is at stake is which commitments

¹ For instance, if I carry out an illocutionary act of arguing by telling my partner “We agreed to eat healthier, so I didn't buy the ice cream,” and they interpret this in line with my communicative intentions, our normative positions will have changed. My partner would now be entitled to ask me “But doesn't eating healthy also mean treating yourself once in a while?” and I would be committed to provide further reasons to justify the reasons I already provided, and my partner would have the legitimate expectation that I can provide those reasons, and so on.

can reasonably be attributed to the speaker. Assuming, as Lewiński and Oswald (2013) do, that commitment attribution is linked to the derivation of meaning, what can be reasonably attributed to the speaker hinges not only on what is explicitly said, but also on what can plausibly be taken to mean. In this light, a misrepresentation such as the one involved in the straw man fallacy can concern the content explicitly or implicitly conveyed by their utterance (Schumann et al. 2019). In the case of example (1), Vox's response results from a pragmatic reconstruction on the basis of what the speaker explicitly said (de Saussure 2018). That is, it constitutes an argumentative move that strategically interprets Monteros' utterance in order to attribute to her a highly controversial commitment—one that, according to the Supreme Court, cannot be reasonably attributed from her explicit statement. This divergence between the speaker's intended meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation, which can take the shape of a misrepresentation or a distortion of the original stance, can potentially undermine illocutionary success.

In this paper, I will argue that this gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation poses important consequences for the dialectical evaluation of argumentation.² More specifically, I will explore the consequences of this gap in cases in which commitment attributions are at stake. I will contend that, to fully understand the pernicious consequences that the gap poses for the evaluation of argumentation, it is essential to distinguish between the speaker's meaning and what I will call, following Carassa and Colombetti (2009), the *joint* meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing. To illustrate this, I will take the straw man fallacy as a case in point, distinguishing three different scenarios in which the fallacy may be committed. These three scenarios share the interlocutor's misinterpretation of the speaker's intended meaning; what they

² However, argumentation can also be assessed from a logical and rhetorical perspective. Logical evaluation involves assessing whether the semantic conditions determining the correctness of the target-claim have been met. In contrast, rhetorical evaluation considers whether the act of arguing is an effective means to show the correctness of the target-claim (Bermejo-Luque 2011). Here I exclusively focus on dialectical evaluation, which involves the assessment of the various dialectical moves arguers can make throughout the course of an argumentative exchange.

differ on is how exactly this misinterpretation affects the meaning of the speech act of arguing as jointly constructed and hence what consequences this poses for the dialectical evaluation of argumentation.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I will present the main features of the possible gap between the speaker's meaning and its interpretation by the interlocutor. I will also introduce the concept of joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing for its further application to the analysis of the straw man fallacy. In section 3, I will explore the consequences of this gap for the evaluation of argumentation, focusing on the case of the straw man fallacy. Finally, in section 4, I will draw some conclusions.

2. Joint meaning of speech acts of arguing

2.1. Arguing as an illocutionary act

The pragma-dialectical model (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984) and the linguistic normative model of argumentation (Bermejo-Luque 2011) offer a characterization of argumentation as a specific type of speech act. They do so by adopting the Searlean (1969) approach to speech acts, which allows them to formulate the constitutive conditions that must be met for an utterance (or set of utterances) to count as an illocutionary act of arguing. These include the preparatory, sincerity, essential and propositional content conditions (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, pp. 43–44; Bermejo-Luque 2011, pp. 70–72)³. However, this approach they endorse is not exempt from problems⁴. Specifically, it entails two problems (Haro Marchal 2023). The first one involves the attribution of a

³ Van Eemeren and Grootendorst distinguish between recognition conditions and correctness conditions (1984, p. 42). They classify preparatory and sincerity conditions under correctness conditions, and the propositional content condition and the essential condition along with the recognition conditions. In their view, only the recognition conditions must be fulfilled for the illocutionary act of arguing to actually have been performed, whereas the preparatory and sincerity conditions must be met for the act to be correctly carried out.

⁴ These problems have been identified by proponents of the normative or interactional approach to speech acts (Clark 1996; Sbisà 2006, 2009; Carassa and Colombetti 2009; Witek 2015).

mere passive role to the interlocutor. On this account, the interlocutor's response to the speaker's utterances does not play an active role in the performance of the illocutionary act. The second problem lies in the fact that the Searlean approach overlooks one of the illocutionary effects outlined by Austin (1962), namely, the one consisting of the production of changes in the set of rights, obligations, and entitlements of the participants of the communicative exchange—that is, what Sbisà (2006, p. 158) calls the speaker's and interlocutor's deontic modal competence. This is important because, as will be shown below, the communicative success of the exchange hinges on the production of these illocutionary, normative effects.

Following pragma-dialectics and the linguistic normative model of argumentation, I conceive of argumentation as a specific type of speech act. However, to address the shortcomings of the Searlean approach while retaining the strengths of both models, I adopt a normative approach to speech acts (Caponetto and Labinaz 2023; Sbisà 2006, 2009) wherein they are conceived of as social actions that introduce changes in the normative positions of speakers and interlocutors. In other words, the speech acts change dialectical entitlements, rights, and obligations (Corredor 2021, 2023). Within this framework, in order to solve the problems associated with the Searlean perspective, I propose distinguishing between two levels in the analysis of the illocutionary act of arguing (Haro Marchal 2023, p. 482). At the first level—the level of the speaker's utterance—to determine whether the illocutionary act of arguing has been carried out successfully, we must examine the speaker's utterance and the fulfillment of certain conditions. From this perspective, if the speaker has met those conditions—that is, the preparatory, sincerity, essential and propositional content conditions—and has made their utterance graspable for a potential hearer, their act of arguing will be considered successful. By contrast, at the second level—the level of the communicative exchange—considering the speaker's utterance is not enough to determine illocutionary success. This is because only when we take into account the interlocutor's response to the speaker's utterance are we able to determine how that utterance has been interpreted and whether the normative effects that render the performance of the illocutionary act of arguing successful have

been produced. As we will see below, for these normative effects to take place, the speaker and the interlocutor must jointly construct the meaning of the speaker's utterance (Haro Marchal 2025).

The normative effects of illocutionary acts of arguing can be conceptualized as the *prima facie* obligations, entitlements, and commitments of both the speaker and the interlocutor. The following is a preliminary list of these effects:

1. The interlocutor's legitimate expectation that the speaker can provide more reasons to justify the target-claim⁵ if requested to do so by the interlocutor
2. The interlocutor's entitlement to request reasons why the reasons already provided justify the target-claim/expressed opinion
3. The interlocutor's conditional commitment to accept the correctness of the target-claim/expressed opinion unless they can produce reasons to the contrary
4. The interlocutor's acceptance of the burden of criticism in challenging the speaker's argument
5. The speaker's commitment to the truth of the implicit inference-claim/warrant
6. The speaker's *prima facie* obligation to provide more reasons (reasons why the reasons already provided justify the target-claim) if requested to do so by the interlocutor
7. The speaker's commitment to addressing potential counterarguments and objections

As we will see, these normative effects entail the speaker and interlocutor being mutually bound to a certain standard of evaluation. Therefore, once in place, they function as a regulative device that allows for the evaluation of the quality of the argumentation and the dialectical moves carried out by the speaker and the interlocutor.

Let's consider the following example in order to illustrate the evaluative function of normative effects. Imagine that, in a context where my partner and I are getting ready for a trip and need to leave for the airport, I say, "*It's already 7:30—we should probably call a cab now.*" My partner responds by saying "*But the hotel is just a 10-minute walk away.*" This reply reveals two things: first, that the

⁵ Or the expressed opinion in the case of pragma-dialectics.

initial utterance was interpreted as an act of arguing; second, that the interlocutor has evaluated the argumentation as being bad, questioning the reasons adduced as a good means to show the correctness of the target-claim. In response, I may say: *"Yes, but it's starting to rain, and I don't want to show up soaked."*⁶

By means of this argumentative exchange, in which an act of arguing has been performed and recognized as such (i.e., the meaning has been jointly constructed by speaker and interlocutor), some normative effects have been produced, including those outlined above. Once in place, these effects work as a regulative device binding the participants to a standard of evaluation that determines which subsequent dialectical moves are legitimate and allowed (i.e., which would count as good or bad moves within the exchange). For instance, in this example, further replies from the partner that challenge the implicit inference-claim would be acceptable dialectical moves. By contrast, simply insisting on questioning the need to act (e.g., to call a cab) without providing any further justification would constitute an illegitimate move, as it would go against the normative effects in play—in this case, the interlocutor's conditional commitment to accept the target-claim unless they can produce reasons to the contrary. As we will see, the production of normative effects is not always straightforward. Let us now see how they come into being.

2.2. *The joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing*

As already pointed out, argumentation, as a communicative activity, involves an exchange of meaning among its participants (Oswald 2023). Moreover, for the act of arguing to be successful from a communicative point of view, the aforementioned normative effects must be brought about. The production of these normative effects depends on the interlocutor's interpretation of the meaning of the speaker's utterance together with the speaker's acceptance (tacit or

⁶ Here, the response to my partner's utterance takes the form of a concessive "yes, but" construction, which, as Üzelgün et al. (2015) have shown, is commonly used in argumentative contexts to manage disagreement. In this example, it indicates that I agree to some extent with my partner's argument, while refuting his overall standpoint.

explicit) of this interpretation; more specifically, it depends on the interactive construction by the speaker and the interlocutor of the meaning of the speaker's utterance. The interlocutor's interpretation of the speaker's utterance and its acceptance by the speaker constitutes what I, drawing from Carassa and Colombetti's (2009) proposal, refer to as the *joint meaning* of illocutionary acts of arguing (Haro Marchal 2025)⁷.

In order to illustrate this, Carassa and Colombetti (2009, p. 1851) offer the following example in which a speaker, Alex, utters (2a):

(2a) Alex: I think I'm going for a walk.

In this case, Alex's communicative intention was to inform his interlocutor, Barbara, of his plans by means of his utterance, but without any intention to invite her to join. After this, the dialogue continues as follows:

(2b) Barbara: Sorry Alex, I'm too busy.

(2c) Alex: Pity. Well, I'll be back soon.

Barbara's utterance (2b) reveals that she interpreted Alex's statement not as merely informing her about his plans, but as inviting her to join. As Carassa and Colombetti observe, in (2c) Alex shows that the meaning of his first utterance was jointly construed as an invitation for Barbara to join. Hence, if Barbara changes her mind and responds to Alex's utterance by saying "Oh, well, I think my work can wait. But only a short walk, ok?" Alex cannot now, without consequences, say that his intention was not to invite her, but rather to just go for a walk alone. And this is so because in jointly

⁷ The notion of *joint meaning* that I am endorsing here does not entail a strong collaboration or cooperation between a speaker and their interlocutor, as Carassa and Colombetti (2009) seem to be assuming. In cases of straw man fallacies, especially in situations of power imbalance, the speaker can take up a certain attribution of commitments due to unfair norms in place or due to the lack of hermeneutical resources (see Stevens 2021). In those cases, we would not consider the speaker to be actively collaborating with their interlocutor.

construing the meaning of the utterance as an invitation, he acquires certain obligations, such as acting in a coherent way (2009, p. 1851).

Carassa and Colombetti conceptualize joint meaning as being the joint commitment of the speaker and the interlocutor that the speaker has performed a certain illocutionary act. In my view, it involves the attribution by the interlocutor of certain commitments to the speaker, and the speaker's acceptance of this attribution. In addition, the joint meaning⁸ determines the commitments introduced into what, following Walton and Krabbe (1995), I refer to as the *commitment store*⁹ (Haro Marchal 2025, p. 243). However, as we have previously pointed out, the interlocutor does not always correctly interpret the speaker's utterance, thus posing potential difficulties for the construction of the joint meaning.¹⁰ In these cases, there is a gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation.

For instance, consider the following example in which three colleagues, Anna, Henry, and John, are discussing the best marketing strategy to promote a product. The conversation takes a negative turn because Henry and John start making offensive comments about a female colleague's recent advancement in the company. In reaction to this, Anna decides to intervene and says, "It's incredibly disrespectful to speak in such a way about your colleague, so you should stop right now." In this case, by means of her utterance, Anna has carried out a speech act of arguing in which she adduces that speaking about a colleague in the way that Henry and John have done is disrespectful, and she presents that as a reason to conclude that they should stop doing it. If Henry and John then responded to Anna by saying something like "You're right" or "We're sorry" and then Anna replied, "It's fine. Please, don't do that again. Where were we?" then it can be said that the meaning has been jointly

⁸ 'Meaning' here includes both the illocutionary force and the propositional content of the speaker's utterance.

⁹ A key difference between Walton and Krabbe's approach and my own lies in their consideration that the commitment store exclusively contains propositions; by contrast, for the purposes of the present discussion, I will assume that it contains both propositions and the illocutionary forces of speech acts.

¹⁰ These difficulties may not entail major problems and can be quickly solved, as example (2) shows, by simply accepting the interlocutor's interpretation.

constructed because it coincides with her interlocutors' interpretation. And therefore, we could say that the normative effects associated with the act of arguing (outlined above) have been produced and are in place, so her act of arguing was successful.

However, let's imagine that the responses she receives from Henry and John are something similar to "Oh, God, calm down!" and "Yeah, you're overreacting! Don't be so aggressive!" These responses show that they interpreted Anna not as attempting to justify that they should stop talking that way, but rather as expressing anger or attacking them.¹¹ In this case, a gap emerges between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutors' interpretation. Imagine that, after John and Henry's responses, and to avoid further uncomfortable reactions, Anna simply lowers her head, bites her tongue, and says "I'm sorry, I guess I'm a bit stressed out today." In this case, we would say that, in retrospect, the meaning of Anna's utterance has been constructed as an expression of anger by Anna or even as a hostile attack on Henry and John. This joint meaning clearly differs from what she originally intended to communicate, but it nonetheless enters the commitment store of the participants in the conversation. As a result, the normative effects in place are not those of an act of arguing.

In the next section, I will show that the notion of joint meaning can be particularly useful for the analysis of cases in which the gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation may have negative consequences for the evaluation of argumentation and subsequent dialectical moves performed in the argumentative exchange.

3. Mind the gap: the case of the straw man fallacy

3.1. The straw man fallacy

In this section, I will show that the notion of joint meaning, alongside the distinction between the speaker's meaning and joint meaning, can shed light on the analysis of cases in which commitment attributions are at stake. More specifically, I will argue that the

¹¹ This can be due to different reasons, some of them related to the speaker's social position or identity. See (Yap 2020) for further elaboration.

notion of joint meaning allows us to carry out a more fine-grained analysis of how the gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation affects the evaluation of argumentation. I will show this by taking the straw man fallacy as a case study. I will present three scenarios in which the fallacy may occur that pose different consequences for the evaluation of argumentation. While the most evident consequence lies in the fact that the argumentation assessed by the interlocutor does not coincide with the one originally put forward, further implications emerge when we take joint meaning into account. To illustrate this, I will present three scenarios where such a gap occurs, showing how its consequences for argument evaluation vary depending on how it affects the joint construction of the meaning of the speech act of arguing.

a The straw man fallacy is commonly characterized as occurring when a speaker's position or argument is misrepresented or distorted by the interlocutor in order to make the argument easier to refute or criticize while disregarding the speaker's original stance. The interlocutor then proceeds to criticize the distorted position as if it were the speaker's actual stance (Walton 1996; Johnson and Blair 1983; Govier 1992; Tindale 2007; van Laar 2008; Aikin and Cassey 2011, 2022; Lewiński and Oswald 2013; Stevens 2021; de Saussure 2018).

The distortion of the speaker's position can take various forms. According to Tindale, the straw man fallacy involves attacking or dismissing a position that "is not the real 'man' or 'person', but a caricature of the real position held" (2007, p. 20). In some cases, the speaker's position is exaggerated by the interlocutor, with the intention of making it look more radical (Walton 1996, p. 117), or, quite the opposite, sometimes it is oversimplified by "omission of his nuances of qualifications" as van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987 p. 286) claim. In addition, it can take place by means of making up a fictional standpoint to represent the speaker's view for its refutation (Walton and Krabbe 1995, p. 95) or by "fabricating an imaginary opponent with an imaginary and impossibly weak argument and then defeating the argument" (Aikin and Cassey 2011, p. 92). Additionally, the straw man fallacy can be committed when an interlocutor selects a weaker version of the speaker's argument or perspective (Talissee and Aikin 2006, p. 347).

What all these forms have in common is the interlocutor's attribution of wrong commitments to the speaker. In this respect, I will follow Walton (1996) and Lewiński and Oswald (2013) in characterizing the straw man fallacy as an issue of commitment attribution. Before we move on with the analysis of the implications of this fallacy for the evaluation of argumentative exchanges, let's look at these two accounts in more detail.

Walton (1996) presents an account of the straw man fallacy relating it with other types of fallacies, such as *ad hominem* arguments, or *secundum quid*. However, he defines it as a fallacy in its own right. According to him, the straw man fallacy does not simply consist in misrepresenting someone's position, but in using "that misrepresentation to refute or criticize that person's argument in a context of disputation" (1996, p. 124). He claims that the straw man fallacy poses problems for the critical discussion because, in order to resolve it, the argumentation used by one of the parties should be based on premises representing the actual position of the other party (1996, p. 125).

One of the issues addressed by Walton has to do with the presence or absence of the respondent at the moment at which the accusation of having committed a fallacy has to be assessed. If the person is present, Walton claims, they are "in a privileged position to pronounce on what [their] present position is on the issue" (1996, p. 126). But even so, it might be difficult for them to make clear what commitments they've acquired, especially if there are no witnesses or any other record of the conversation. Walton points out that the commitments acquired by the participants in a dialogue, according to an ideal model, are placed in a commitment store (Hamblin 1970). However, in real conversation, disputes can arise because there wasn't any registration of these commitments or because any possible registration, like in memory, can be disputed. In cases in which the respondent is not present, Walton claims, evaluators should employ the principle of charity in their interpretation of the discourse (1996, p. 127).

Walton emphasizes the importance of determining the respondent's commitments when assessing accusations of straw man fallacies. The evaluation should be carried out considering the evidence present in the discourse, including what the speaker said and how it

was said. He conceives of ‘commitments’ as being a normative concept “appropriate for use in evaluating cases of alleged fallacies” (1996, p. 127) and related to the specific conditions of the type of dialogue in which the speaker is participating. In a nutshell, what is essential to evaluate cases constituting straw man fallacies is the evidence that allows evaluators to track what the speaker’s commitments are and thus what their actual position is.

Similarly, Lewiński and Oswald (2013) also characterize the straw man fallacy as an issue of commitment attribution. More specifically, as they note, it is an issue of commitment attribution related to the derivation of meaning; it is a move that is “meant to make misattributions of meaning and commitments pass for legitimate” (2013, p. 170). Drawing from pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren et al. 2010), they conceive of fallacies as speech acts constituting violations of rules governing rational argumentative discussions (2013, p. 165). In particular, they define the straw man fallacy as occurring when the arguer misrepresents the adversary’s argument “in such a way that they become easier to refute, and then attacks the misrepresented position as if it were the one actually defended by the adversary” (2013, p. 165). Their interest lies in the criteria for identifying a straw man fallacy as an unreasonable move, which requires being able to distinguish between a representation and a misrepresentation of an adversary’s position. To do so, pragmatic criteria for normative interpretation, provided by the pragma-dialectical approach, are needed.

One of the aspects that can be taken into consideration in the identification of a straw man fallacy is the pragma-dialectical concept of “disagreement space” (van Eemeren et al. 1993), which relates to the commitments that a speaker can be “held accountable for on the basis of a pragmatic interpretation of what she said in a given context” (Lewiński and Oswald 2013, p. 168), including the speaker’s meaning, which determines all the fair attacks on the speaker’s position. However, as they point out, the speaker’s meaning includes explicit but also implicit contents, so it is not always so transparent, making it difficult to identify the actual speaker’s commitments. Thus, the interpretation of a given utterance or set of utterances includes the speaker’s obligation to be as clear as possible in formulating their utterances in a graspable way for them to allow

their interlocutor to attribute the correct commitments to the speaker (2013, p. 169).

They formulate two criteria for the identification of a straw man fallacy: (i) pragmatic plausibility and (ii) interpretative charity (2013, pp. 169-170). According to the first one, if a speaker is following “the contextually relevant procedures in deriving speaker meaning [...] and thus stays within the bounds of a disagreement space of a given utterance” (Lewiński and Oswald 2013, p. 169), then they cannot be taken as committing a straw man fallacy. Regarding interpretative charity, they frame it as a “choice of the interpretation that is most beneficial to the arguer” (2013, p. 170), and arguers and analysts are advised to make that choice when interpretative doubts arise. It should be understood not as a rule of reasonable argumentation, but as a rhetorical choice that can be made by the adversary in producing their criticisms to the speaker’s position.¹²

I agree with Walton and Lewiński and Oswald that the straw man fallacy is an issue of misattribution of commitments and that the identification and evaluation of a straw man as an unreasonable move depends on the determination of the speaker’s commitments. I would nonetheless like to go a step further and argue that introducing the notion of joint meaning can be useful to fully understand what this misattribution of commitments consists of and what its implications are for the evaluation of the argumentation. Specifically, the misattribution of commitments in cases of straw man fallacy consists in a gap between the speaker’s meaning and the interlocutor’s interpretation. As we previously observed, the interlocutor’s response to the speaker’s utterance shows how they have been interpreted and thus what commitments are attributed to the speaker. If this interpretation is accepted by the speaker, then we can say that the meaning of their utterance has been jointly constructed (Haro Marchal 2025, p. 242). This interactive construction determines which commitments are introduced into the commitment store, and which normative effects, functioning as a standard of evaluation, are in place. In this regard, introducing the notion of

¹² Lewiński and Oswald also point out that the adversary can opt for an uncharitable interpretation, provided it is a pragmatically plausible interpretation (2013, p. 170).

joint meaning and accounting for the straw man fallacy in terms of a gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation will allow us to provide a more thorough account of the consequences this gap can have for the evaluation of argumentation. I will illustrate this by presenting three scenarios in which a straw man fallacy is committed.

3.2. *Three scenarios*

In the preceding section, we observed that the successful performance of an illocutionary act of arguing (from the communicative point of view) amounts to the production of certain normative effects. These normative effects, whose production depends on the joint construction by the speaker and the interlocutor of the meaning of the speaker's utterance, function as a standard of evaluation. That is, once in place, these effects allow us to assess subsequent dialectical moves by the speaker and the interlocutor. For instance, if someone carries out an illocutionary act of arguing by uttering,

(3a) I've been thinking that we should reconsider our meat consumption. It is not good for either our health or the environment.

a possible response could be,

(3b) Don't see it. Eliminating meat will lead to us not getting enough protein.

However, let's imagine that the speaker's intention was just to suggest that they should reduce and not eliminate their meat consumption. Here, although there seems to be a gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation that could potentially constitute a straw man fallacy, the speaker's formulation of their utterance leaves some room for interpretation. We can imagine that, after this, the speaker responds with,

(3c) I didn't mean that! What I wanted to say is that we should reduce consumption, not eliminate it.

(3d) Oh, ok! That could work for me!

By means of (3c), the speaker is providing more information and thus clarifying what they meant by (3a). The initial gap, which in

some cases could potentially constitute a straw man fallacy, does not pose a problem in this particular case; after additional information has been provided by the speaker, what the speaker meant has been clarified and has been accepted by the interlocutor, so the meaning of (3a) has been jointly constructed, bringing about the normative effects that will regulate next dialectical moves on the basis of the commitments introduced into the speaker and interlocutor's commitment store. This example illustrates an argumentative exchange in which the speaker's act of arguing, (3a), has been successfully carried out despite the initial gap.

What differentiates this from straw man cases? A possible answer lies in the intentionality of the move. In many cases, a straw man fallacy is committed strategically, for example, it may be used to block or hinder the discussion. However, as Tindale (2007, p. 22) observes, a straw man fallacy can be intentionally or unintentionally committed and still be fallacious.¹³ As mentioned, a crucial feature of straw man fallacies is that the misrepresentation of the speaker's position is meant to be attacked by the interlocutor. As we will see in the instances of the straw man fallacy that will be presented, the interaction aimed at jointly establishing the commitments to which the speaker can be held accountable (and thus to solve the potential problems derived from the gap) is not fruitful. Specifically, unlike in cases like (3), this interaction fails to result in a proper attribution of commitments to the speaker.

As we will now see, the analysis of the straw man fallacy is particularly useful for analyzing the consequences that the gap poses for the evaluation of argumentation. As previously mentioned, the most obvious consequence has to do with the fact that, in cases constituting a straw man fallacy, the argumentation that is criticized or refuted by the interlocutor (i.e., evaluated as bad argumentation) does not coincide with the argumentation actually put forward by the speaker. However, other consequences can be observed if the notion of joint meaning is taken into account. In order to illustrate them, I will present three scenarios in which there is a gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation. The consequences of these gaps for the evaluation of the argumentation

¹³ See also (Stevens 2021).

differ depending on how the gap affects the joint construction of the meaning of the speech act of arguing in each scenario.

3.2.1. *Creating the gap*

In the first scenario, the straw man fallacy is committed when the meaning of the illocutionary act of arguing is firstly jointly constructed by the speaker and the interlocutor in a correct manner, but the interlocutor's subsequent criticisms are based on a distorted version of the speaker's argumentation. In this scenario, where the normative effects are in place due to the initial construction of the joint meaning, the interlocutor's subsequent moves must be evaluated negatively in the light of these effects. To illustrate this, let's consider the following example. During a department meeting where the announcement of a position for an assistant professor is being discussed, the following dialogue takes place between a PhD student, Sophia, and the head of the department, Roger:

- (4a) Sophia: I believe it's important to increase the presence of philosophers from underrepresented and marginalized groups. So I think that the call for applications should state that we encourage people from these groups to apply.
- (4b) Roger: So what you're saying is that we should explicitly include this in the announcement? Would it work something like: "Our department is committed to diversity, and to promote the work of philosophers from underrepresented groups, we encourage these individuals to apply for this position"?
- (4c) Sophia: Yes, exactly.
- (4d) Roger: Alright. Could you take care of adding it to the call for applications?
- (4e) Sophia: Sure. I'll do it today.

In this example, an illocutionary act of arguing has been performed by Sophia. In this case, she has adduced that it is important to increase the presence of philosophers from underrepresented groups as a reason to conclude that they should include in the call for

applications that they encourage philosophers from underrepresented groups to apply. By means of his utterance (4b), Roger is seeking clarification to see if his interpretation coincides with what Sophia meant. By means of (4c), Sophia makes clear that Roger's interpretation is correct, that is, it coincides with the speaker's meaning. The meaning of Sophia's utterance has thus been jointly constructed: speaker and interlocutor agree on what the speaker meant, so the normative effects have been produced accordingly. In other words, both Roger's and Sophia's set of dialectical obligations, entitlements, commitments, and expectations have changed. Thus, for instance, Roger would be entitled to ask Sophia for reasons to show why the reasons already provided justify the target-claim, and Sophia would, in principle, be expected to provide them. Similarly, Sophia would be committed to address potential counterarguments and objections raised by Roger in response to her argumentation—that is, to the meaning jointly constructed by Sophia and Roger. The commitments that have been introduced into the commitment store are that Sophia attempted to show that the target-claim “the call for applications should state that we encourage people from these groups to apply” is correct, adducing as a reason that it's important to increase the presence of philosophers from underrepresented and marginalized groups. This entails that, for instance, Roger would now be entitled to ask for reasons to show why the reasons already provided justify the target-claim, and Sophia would, in principle, have to provide them. In other words, the illocutionary act of arguing carried out by Sophia would be successful. But let's imagine that, after the meeting, Roger approaches Sophia in the cafeteria and utters (4f) in presence of others:

(4f) Roger: I've been thinking about our conversation at the meeting. I think what you said before is problematic. Academic competition should be exclusively guided by considerations about a person's merits and qualifications, irrespective of their background or identity. So why should we discourage white men from applying, even if they are properly qualified?

Roger's utterance (4f) shows that there is a gap between what Sophia meant and his interpretation of her utterance. He can thus be considered to be committing a straw man fallacy, because he is

misrepresenting Sophia's stance as an attempt to justify that they should discourage white men from applying by adducing as a reason that considerations about a person's identity should override their merits and qualifications. Here Roger is *creating* the gap between Sophia's intended meaning and his own interpretation—that is, he seems to assume that his interpretation coincides with what Sophia meant.

This gap could have arisen from a genuine misunderstanding, and thus seeking clarification would constitute an appropriate move within the exchange. We can imagine that Roger's utterance (4f) in fact constitutes an attempt by him to re-evaluate what Sophia meant by her utterance (4a). In this case, Roger and Sophia could engage in a meta-dialogue in which Sophia could provide clarification of the meaning of her first utterance in a way that allows them to jointly construct the meaning of that utterance in accordance with a different interpretation.¹⁴ However, Roger's utterance could also be the result of a deliberate misrepresentation of Sophia's argument: Roger could be merely pretending or making it seem as if his interpretation coincides with Sophia's intended meaning and the meaning as jointly constructed.

In this case, the creation of this gap poses consequences for the evaluation of argumentation in the sense that, based on this misinterpretation, Roger could consider himself entitled to engage in further dialectical moves to critically challenge an argument that does not actually coincide with Sophia's. However, these further dialectical moves would not be legitimate in light of the normative effects previously brought about by their initial joint construction of Sophia's argumentation, that is, those produced by means of Sophia's utterance (4a), Roger's utterance (4b), and Sophia's subsequent response. Such dialectical moves should be evaluated negatively. For instance, Roger would not be entitled to ask Sophia for reasons to justify why considerations about a person's identity should override an assessment of their qualifications. And, in fact, Sophia would not be obliged to provide reasons for that, given that the reasons she already provided and the target-claim she intended to justify are

¹⁴ As Stevens (2022) and Hundleby (2023) highlight, in contexts marked by power imbalances, this type of strategy may not yield the best results for the speaker, exposing them to additional risks.

completely different. Thus, dialectical moves made by Roger with regard to the distorted position, such as asking Sophia “Why do you want to discourage white men from applying?” are bad or incorrect dialectical moves; they would be bad means for determining whether Sophia’s argumentation is a good or bad attempt at showing that the target-claim or conclusion is correct (Bermejo-Luque 2011, p. 191).

3.2.2. *Retaining the gap*

In the second scenario, the interlocutor's response indicates that the speaker's meaning has been distorted, yet the speaker does not accept this interpretation of her utterance. In this case, a straw man fallacy has been committed, but, as a result, no joint meaning has been constructed, and, consequently, the normative effects associated with the act have not not produced. This absence of normative effects hinders the evaluation of the argumentation put forward by the speaker in subsequent moves. To illustrate this, let’s imagine a different version of example (4):

- (5a) Sophia: I believe it's important to increase the presence of philosophers from underrepresented and marginalized groups. So I think we should include in the call for applications that we encourage them to apply.
- (5b) Roger: I think that’s problematic. Academic competition should be exclusively guided by considerations about a person’s merits and qualifications, irrespective of their background or identity. So why should we discourage white men from applying, even if they are properly qualified?
- (5c) Sophia: No. That’s not what I meant.
- (5d) Roger: Well, it is clear to me that you meant exactly that!
- (5e) Sophia: Again, that’s not what I meant.

In this case, we can see that there is a gap between the speaker’s meaning (i.e., what Sophia meant) and Roger’s interpretation of her utterance. In this example, Roger committed a straw man fallacy because he is misrepresenting Sophia’s position to make it look

more radical and thus easier to criticize; he is attributing to Sophia a set of commitments to certain contents that she actually did not intend to convey (de Saussure 2018, p. 174) and interpreting her conclusion as being they should discourage white men from applying, adducing as a reason that considerations about a person's identity should override an assessment of their qualifications. Importantly, no joint meaning is constructed here: Roger's interpretation is not taken up by Sophia, who explicitly denies that what she meant is what Roger interpreted. The lack of agreement regarding the speaker's meaning prevents certain commitments from entering into their commitment store.¹⁵ Consequently, the normative effects associated with the illocutionary act of arguing performed by Sophia are not produced. In this scenario, Sophia would be allowed to ignore or refuse to directly address the interlocutor's challenges to the reasons already given because the reasons for which he would be seeking additional justification are not the ones provided by Sophia in the first place. And the same applies for other possible dialectical moves: as far as no argumentation has been introduced in the commitment store shared by Sophia and Roger, any dialectical move regarding the argumentation provided and the argumentation attributed to Sophia would be illegitimate. In other words, there is no argumentation in their commitment store to be evaluated, so other dialectical moves in this direction would be illegitimate.¹⁶

In scenarios of this sort, the straw man fallacy has not been committed randomly or by chance, but instead to serve some specific purposes. It can be argued that the speaker has made her utterance(s) graspable for her interlocutor and the rest of the audience; however, Roger could still insist on his misinterpretation for strategic reasons. We can imagine that Roger believes that opportunities are already equal for everyone and considers that Sophia's suggestion is just an

¹⁵ At least in the commitment store shared by Sophia and Roger. However, this could be different for the rest of the audience attending the meeting. As in the previous scenario, it is easy to imagine that other people's interpretation of Sophia's utterance coincides with her intended meaning.

¹⁶ One legitimate move would be to ask for clarification, that is, to attempt to construct the joint meaning. For instance, Roger could address Sophia at the cafeteria and utter "Sorry, Sophia. I should have been more careful. Did you mean that...?"

excuse to “erase” white men from academia. He thus aims to convince the rest of the audience that Sophia is really trying to fool them. So he retains the gap between the speaker’s meaning and his interpretation tactically. By doing so, he is trying to prevent Sophia’s actual argumentation from entering into the commitment store, thereby avoiding discussing whether the explicit encouragement of applications by marginalized philosophers should be added to the call. In other words: he is trying to *block* the construction of the joint meaning as a strategy for preventing the discussion initiated by Sophia from moving forward. However, Roger’s attempt to persuade the audience may not be as effective as he assumes.¹⁷

In one of their experiments assessing factors that influence the acceptability of the straw man fallacy, Schumann et al. (2019) found that this fallacy tends to be more acceptable when it echoes the speaker’s explicit rather than implicit meaning since “the explicit misrepresentation gives the illusion that the content corresponds to the original statement due to the surface similarity between the words used in the original statement and in the misrepresentation” (2019, pp. 1, 12). In example (5), Roger’s case constitutes a pragmatic reconstruction involving a fallacious reformulation based on an implicit misrepresentation of what Sophia meant. In other words, he infers from Sophia’s utterance of (5a) the implicature “We should discourage white men from applying.” In this respect, and based on the findings by Schumann et al., Roger’s argumentative move is unlikely to succeed.

Such deliberate manipulation is characteristic of the dynamics commonly observed in political contexts. Example (1) would be a case of the straw man fallacy in which the gap between the speaker’s meaning and the interlocutor’s interpretation is retained. As pointed out, Irene Montero’s intervention generated a big controversy because, while she was justifying the importance of sex education for minors, the far-right party Vox pragmatically reconstructed her utterance as implying a justification of pedophilia. The implicit

¹⁷ Even if it turns out that it does not persuade, as de Saussure (2018) suggests, the straw man fallacy could still be a winning move “not because of its potential persuasive force, but rather because it targets the pragmatic cognitive-inferential skills of its victim while enhancing the prestige of its author” (de Saussure, 2018, p. 188).

misrepresentation of her argumentation carried out by Vox's member Espinosa de los Monteros served strategic purposes, namely, to prompt Irene Montero's resignation.

3.2.3. *Taking up the gap*

In the final scenario, the straw man fallacy occurs when the interlocutor distorts the meaning of the speaker's utterance in their response, and yet the speaker *accepts* this interpretation. Hence, the normative effects produced will shape the evaluation of subsequent dialectical moves based on this distorted joint construction. Let's consider a different version of example (5):

- (6a) Sophia: I believe it's important to increase the presence of philosophers from underrepresented and marginalized groups. So I think we should include in the call for applications that we encourage them to apply.
- (6b) Roger: I don't think that discouraging white men is beneficial for our department. After all, the university should encourage all applications from qualified people, regardless of their social background or identity.
- (6c) Sophia: Yeah...you're right...So should I add anything else to the call for application?
- (6d) Roger: No, I think it is fine. You can start distributing it.

This last scenario, in which the joint meaning doesn't coincide with the speaker's intended meaning, can be particularly pernicious for the speaker. It can be accounted for in different ways. On one hand, we can imagine that Sophia knows that Roger's interpretation does not coincide with what she meant, but she still accepts it and thus they jointly construct her utterance as meaning what Roger interprets it to mean. But she could also genuinely believe that Roger's interpretation actually coincides with the meaning she intended to communicate. In this second case, we would say that the victim has been fooled (Stevens 2021).¹⁸ However, in both cases, the

¹⁸ As noted by an anonymous reviewer, this case can be explained as one in which Roger has identified an implicature in the argument Sophia put forward by means of (6a) (i.e., "We should discourage white men from applying") and that Sophia,

consequences for the evaluation of argumentation would be the same: what enters into the commitment store is the distorted version of Sophia's argumentation, and, thus, subsequent dialectical moves will be constrained by the normative effects brought about by this distorted version—that is, the changes in the set of obligations, entitlements, commitments, and expectations associated with the distorted version of Sophia's speech act. For instance, if the speaker attempts to reintroduce aspects of her previous argument (such as additional justification for the reasons already provided) to demonstrate why the interlocutor's assessment of the argumentation as bad is incorrect, this move would be deemed inappropriate. Especially in cases where the speaker is actually fooled, she may find herself unable to adopt a critical stance or engage in the discussion.

In cases where the fooled speaker belongs to an oppressed group, this inability may stem not merely from simple confusion, but may have structural roots, leading to the systematic recurrence of such phenomena. As Stevens (2021, p. 114) points out, due to her social position, the speaker may suffer from a hermeneutical lacuna, hindering her ability to provide a precise formulation of her reasons, thus making her particularly susceptible to being misrepresented. This, eventually, could result in an undermining of her confidence in her own faculties (2021, p. 122). In addition to these epistemic vulnerabilities, certain social groups may be systematically exposed to such distortions due to the norms that shape interaction in argumentative settings. For instance, norms of politeness may disproportionately affect speakers perceived as women or as members of marginalized groups. As Hundleby (2013) observes, the norms of politeness governing argumentative discussions make it difficult for women to be correctly interpreted:

When women defy gendered standards of feminine, polite passivity, they initially tend to be viewed as merely requesting an active, authoritative role—especially in expert discourse. If not *prima facie* excluded, women are denied the responses that men receive, and

through utterance (6c), shows that after Roger's response, she recognizes that this implicature can indeed be derived from what she said. Since this implicature involves something that can be considered inappropriate and something she did not intend to convey—such as, for instance, discouraging white men from applying—by means of (6c), she appears to be retracting her initial proposal.

pro tanto, seem to be speaking out of turn or continuously entreating to argue (Hundleby 2013, p. 243).

These gendered norms may lead to the speaker being interpreted as performing a completely different illocutionary act, as in cases of discursive injustice (Kukla 2014), or as holding commitments they do not, as in the case of the straw man fallacy. This suggests that distortions like the one occurring in example (6) may not be merely occasional misunderstandings, but rather a symptom of broader structural patterns that affect how argumentation is conducted and interpreted in practice.

Over time, continuous exposure to such interactional asymmetries may lead the speaker to stop perceiving arguing as an available communicative move in the dialogue. In Ayala's (2016) terms, the speaker may cease to perceive the *speech affordance* of arguing—that is, they may no longer perceive certain situations as offering the possibility to argue, even when they should. If a speaker repeatedly experiences having her attempts to argue not be recognized as such—because her contributions are misinterpreted, ignored, or not taken up as the right moves in the exchange—she may at some point stop perceiving those situations as ones in which arguing is possible at all. The erosion of this perception undermines not only participation in dialogue, but the very conditions for communicative agency.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation poses significant consequences for the evaluation of argumentation. Using the straw man fallacy as a case in point, I have contended that the notion of joint meaning, together with the distinction between the speaker's meaning and the joint meaning of illocutionary acts of arguing, can shed light on the implications of the gap created by this fallacy for the evaluation of argumentation.

To demonstrate this, I presented three scenarios in which a straw man fallacy was committed but the consequences of the existing gap differed. In the first scenario, the straw man fallacy is committed after the speaker and the interlocutor jointly construct the meaning of the illocutionary act of arguing correctly (i.e., in a way that

reflects the speaker's intended meaning). This case involves the interlocutor creating a gap between the speaker's meaning and the interlocutor's interpretation; however, since the relevant normative effects were already produced, the interlocutor's misrepresentation and any subsequent dialectical moves based on it must be negatively assessed. In the second scenario, the interlocutor's initial response already indicates that the speaker's meaning has been distorted, yet the speaker does not accept this interpretation of her utterance. In this case, the straw man fallacy prevents the joint construction of the meaning of the speech act of arguing hence blocking the production of the relevant normative effects. This, in turn, prevents the evaluation of the argumentation put forward by the speaker in subsequent moves. Finally, in the third scenario, the interlocutor's distortion of the meaning of the speaker's utterance is accepted by the speaker. The normative effects produced are thus based on this distorted joint construction, biasing the evaluation of subsequent dialectical moves and potentially hindering the speaker's ability to reintroduce aspects of their previous argumentation.

The proposed analysis thus allows us to discern different pernicious consequences of the misattribution of commitments involved in the straw man fallacy, taking into account how it may differentially affect the joint construction of the speech act of arguing and its characteristic normative effects. Future work could delve into the possible strategies for mitigating the impact of fallacious argumentation, particularly when these are the result of a misattribution of commitments.

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