

“You want me to be wrong”. Expert *ethos*, (de-)legitimation, and *ethotic* straw men as discursive resources for conspiracy theories

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Abstract

This chapter discusses features of conspiratorial discourse related to the representation of social actors through the lens of rhetorical and argumentative analysis. Specifically, it identifies a previously undocumented variant of the straw man fallacy (a misrepresentation of an opponent’s position meant to refute it more easily), namely the *ethotic* straw man, which unscrupulous arguers can use to legitimate their own credibility and undermine their opponents’, thereby evading scientific discussion of relevant issues. A TV-interview with French virologist Didier Raoult, who championed hydroxychloroquine-based treatments in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, is taken as a case in point to explain why such quasi-populistic discourse, prominently centred on questions of *ethos*, fits conspiratorial narratives so well.

Key words

rhetoric, argumentation, *ethos*, *ethotic* straw man, legitimation, de-legitimation, conspiracy, Raoult, expertise

1. Introduction

Like many global events, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a breeding ground for numerous conspiracy theories.¹ In this case, however, the health-related nature

¹ See e.g., <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/eight-persistent-covid-19-myths-and-why-people-believe-them/>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

of the event has triggered unique challenges for public discourse on the issue. To inform the public on matters of public health and safety, the media naturally turned to scientific expertise. But because the virus was unknown, the scientific community, at least during the first year of the pandemic, operated under conditions of high uncertainty, both in the field of research and in public scientific communication. Because of these two factors (partial scientific knowledge and media pressure to discuss it), medical disagreements and controversies on causes and treatments, which usually took place in medical circles behind academic walls, crossed the borders of the scientific sphere and became public discussions, with dissenting scientific voices competing for attention. While a healthy practice of scientific research cannot proceed without debate, conducting it in the public sphere is problematic, as the risk of confusing non-experts is high, and the danger of discrediting scientific research altogether looms large. In other words, when medical experts publicly disagree, over time science runs the risk of losing credibility, and debates on fundamental issues might be obscured, if not replaced, by peripheral discussions on the legitimacy of experts. And indeed, if we consider how widespread COVID-19 denialist discourse has nowadays become,² a tendency towards such an epistemological shift becomes tangible.

² See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/> on the popularity of COVID-19 conspiracies in the US and <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/2ouu9vfd10/YouGov%20-%20Globalism%20Study%20and%20conspiracies%20Results.pdf> for a worldwide survey on different conspiracy theories, including one of the allegedly harmful effects of vaccines. Last accessed: 21.02.2022.

In Francophone media, Dr Didier Raoult, the French virologist who led the IHU (*Institut Hospitalo-universitaire*) Marseille, a medical training and research centre, until mid-2022,³ and who has championed the use of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin to treat COVID-19 patients, became a public figure over the last years. His research is now regarded as controversial, as his studies have been criticised by his peers on methodological grounds.⁴ Yet, his behaviour during interviews has generated a sharp divide in the general public, with more than one out of two French citizens declaring in September 2020 that they have a favourable opinion of Raoult.⁵ A quick glance at his numerous media appearances reveals a combative personality who never shies away from criticising his opponents on other grounds than scientific ones – he is in fact well-known for his outspokenness and his contempt for social conventions, politeness included. In terms of argumentative debate, these interviews many times derail into discussions on the (il)legitimacy and credibility of the social actors represented in COVID-19 discourse (scientists, politicians, etc.). These then problematically take precedence over discussions centred on the facts of scientific research, which both policymakers and members of the general public count on to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in appropriate ways. Ultimately, such discourse also fits the conspiratorial narrative.

³ https://www.liberation.fr/societe/sante/ihu-de-marseille-raoult-bientot-out-20210917_DFWGYRY3RBBNHMF45MCXV5FAQ/. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

⁴ See e.g., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7357515/>. Last accessed, 21.01.2022.

⁵ <https://www.lci.fr/population/sondage-plus-d-un-francais-sur-deux-declarent-avoir-une-bonne-opinion-du-professeur-didier-raoult-2164697.html>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

This paper investigates the way social actors are legitimated and de-legitimated in discourse, in the vein of the now classical works of van Leeuwen on the representation of social actors (van Leeuwen 1996) and on legitimation in discourse (van Leeuwen 2007). However, it does so through the lens of argumentation theory and rhetoric, as it focuses on the Aristotelian notion of *ethos*, which we connect to a specific use of the straw man fallacy, discussed for the first time here. After a short discussion on the argumentative nature of conspiracy theories (Sect. 2), we articulate a model of *ethos* (Sect. 3), a notion not typically mobilised in mainstream and contemporary Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), while taking the example of the public image of Dr Didier Raoult as a case in point. We then focus on the straw man fallacy and characterise one of its variants, the *ethotic* straw man fallacy (Sect. 4), before turning to the analysis of our data to illustrate how *ethotic* strawmanning plays out in actual discourse (Sect. 5). We conclude our study by discussing why such *ethotic* strategies connect to and serve particularly well conspiratorial narratives (Sect. 6).

2. Conspiracy theories as argumentative objects

Conspiracy theories can be defined as “proposed explanation[s] of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret” (Keeley 1999, 116). As such, conspiracy theories always emerge in reaction to an official account of a culturally, socially, politically and historically significant event. Their emergence and

propagation have often been seen by researchers as the result of a seemingly low threshold of critical acceptance of information in conspiracy theory believers. As noted by Sunstein and Vermeule, “those who hold conspiracy theories (...) typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a ‘crippled epistemology,’ in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 204). Although this quote establishes that conspiracy theories may stick at a population scale by virtue of a quantitatively limited access to relevant information on behalf of those who believe in them, a case can be made in favour of a more fine-grained account incorporating a qualitative component as well.

Philosophical and psychological approaches make the bulk of extant research on conspiracy theories (Byford 2011); yet, in the literature, little attention has been paid to conspiracy theories in terms of their discursive features (but see Byford 2011; Zarefsky 2014), let alone in terms of its argumentative features (see Herman 2010; Oswald and Herman 2016 for preliminary thoughts in this direction). Interestingly, however, it must be noted that an argumentative perspective on recurring discursive patterns of conspiracy theories resonates well with social and cognitive psychological accounts of conspiracy theories (Oswald 2016). We posit that conspiracy theories are, in themselves, argumentative objects, for the following three reasons:

1. at their core, conspiracy theories are motivated by a need to publicly disagree with received accounts (Keeley 1999, 117) and as such fulfil one of the first

necessary conditions of argumentation, namely its propensity to be used to resolve differences of opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).

2. because they verbally express disagreement with an official account, conspiracy theories are *refutational* narratives meant not only to provide alternative explanations to the events they purport to explain, but also to *persuade* (or convince)⁶ their target audience that they in fact surpass the official account in quality and accuracy.
3. conspiracy theories make extensive use of argumentative strategies (Zarefsky 2014) and adopt the argumentatively dense rhetorical style of scientific inquiry (Byford 2011, chap. 4).

In turn, these make argumentation theory a relevant framework to study key dimensions of conspiratorial discourse. Before we focus on the discursive dimension, let us first mention two directions of research which indicate the potential of argumentation theory for the study of conspiracy theories:

- (i) given the tendency of conspiracy theories to engage in problematic evidence-giving processes, their study stands to benefit from the input of *normative* frameworks available in argumentation theory, as the latter provide models designed to assess the quality of argumentation (reasonableness, cogency, soundness, etc., depending on the chosen normative system).

⁶ We will not discuss the differences between convincing and persuading, as we are here interested in the result of this operation rather than in the means through which this result is achieved. For an overview of the distinctions between persuading and convincing, see Cattani (2020).

(ii) argumentation scholarship supplies various models of analysis meant to bring to the surface the inferential structure of naturally occurring argumentative data, among which warrants, *topoi* or any such kind of unexpressed premises. The analytical reconstruction of this data – or standardisation, in Govier's terms (2010) – allows us to better grasp how explicit and implicit meaning (which is often crucial to work out ideological implications), are articulated.

In this paper, however, we focus on the *discursive* dimension of conspiracy theories and specifically examine strategies which affect the credibility of the social actors that are present in the discourse (van Leeuwen 1996). Following van Leeuwen (2007), we take the discursive construction of credibility as one relevant dimension of legitimation, through which speakers ascribe cognitive validity to meanings that are consonant with the institutional order they adopt and/or promote (Berger and Luckmann 1990). As we are interested in the representation of social actors, our analysis considers strategies of *legitimation*, which speakers use to answer “the spoken or unspoken ‘why’ question – ‘Why should we do this?’ or ‘Why should we do this in this way?’” (van Leeuwen 2007, 94). In our case, legitimation strategies and de-legitimation strategies are meant to answer questions about the credibility of the social actors referred to in discourse, such as ‘Who should we believe?’ and ‘Why should we believe them?’. We argue that this line of questioning overlaps with typical research questions in the study of *ethos*, taken as a resource of

argumentation that does not aim at legitimating the message directly, but rather its messenger.⁷

3. *Ethos*: a multi-layered notion

To the best of our knowledge, *ethos*, which Aristotle defines as the speaker's personal character (Aristotle, Rhet. 1356a in Barnes 2014), has been studied in Francophone (e.g., Amossy 1999; Bonnafous 2002; Cornilliat and Lockwood 2000; Doury and Lefébure 2006; Errecart 2019; Herman 2005; Krieg-Planque 2019; Lehti 2013) rather than in Anglophone discourse studies traditions. For example, recent handbooks on critical discourse analysis (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018; Wodak and Meyer 2015) mention *ethos* only in passing. Moreover, a recent computational study which attempted to mine *ethos* in political debate (Duthie, Budzynska, and Reed 2016) acknowledges the lack of studies on this subject, in particular in artificial intelligence. Still, extant accounts tend to define *ethos* in terms of a person's image – and not necessarily or exclusively the speaker's. We defend, on the contrary, the idea that to attack the image of the other is also a way of building one's own *ethos*, which is why it is necessary to keep the two notions (image and *ethos*) dissociated.

Ethos should moreover be redefined as exerting an influence on the audience even before a speaker utters her/his word in any speech event. Analysing *ethos* in

⁷ See also Zorzi's chapter on conspiracy theories and collective identities, which tackles aspects of *ethos* from the perspective of identity (Demata, Zorzi and Zottola, Chapter 17 in this volume)

discourse should therefore integrate the prior – or prediscursive – *ethos* as a parameter of analysis. The Aristotelian conception should also be broadened to do justice to the idea that *ethos* is not only bound to persuasive genres. In line with Erving Goffman's sociological framework (Goffman 1982), French discourse analysts consider that every time we speak, we create an *ethos*, even in descriptive genres like news stories. *Ethos* thus becomes a constitutive component of every speech act. While this is not highly important for our purpose, since our case study considers persuasive discourse, it appears that even a very objective sentence, say the description of a fact, can be analysed as displaying a specific kind of *ethos*.

3.1. Situational *ethos*

Pace Aristotle, for whom *ethos* is only built 'online' in discourse, discourse analysts who also rely on sociological studies (Goffman 1959) consider that the image previously built by a speaker before his or her speech also plays an important role in the persuasive process. Although this is often called *prediscursive ethos*, Herman (2005) prefers the expression *situational ethos*, which highlights *ethos* when the rhetorical situation takes place and before the speaker's first word: the micro-context of the situation, such as the circumstances in which the speech takes place, also contributes to the speaker's *ethos*. We consider three subtypes of situational *ethos*: generic *ethos*, specific *ethos* and expected *ethos*.

Generic *ethos* is a compendium of stereotypes, clichés and personal representations or thoughts about different “components” of a type of speaker. Our case study focuses on the figure of Dr Didier Raoult. Anyone who comes forward with his credentials is automatically seen as possessing a certain amount of authority and is considered to be part of the scientific elite. In March 2020, Raoult announced in an online-video and in a preprint scientific paper that hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were effective in treating COVID-19⁸. It is highly probable that non-specialists who are aware of this specific *ethos* (the set of personal and idiosyncratic information that an audience has about a given speaker before the latter even starts speaking) will defer to expertise and be less critical towards Raoult’s assertions. Furthermore, once Raoult, who was not particularly well known by the general public before his bold and radical statements, starts accumulating media exposure, stereotypes about his physical appearance may also be activated. Indeed, he ostensibly departs from expected appearance stereotypes associated with medical authority through the use of garments and accessories typical of members of somewhat marginal communities, like punk musicians or bikers: medium-length grey and poorly groomed hair, shaggy beard and a skull ring. Raoult shows contempt towards received conventions of his social community and showcases himself as a kind of maverick who does not care about the respectability he is supposed to embody. For this reason, he simultaneously represents an intellectual elite (through his titles and functions) and a form of disrespectful and overt anti-

⁸ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.16.20037135v1>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

elitism (through his general appearance). He thus plausibly embodies the figure of a self-made brilliant scientist who reached the top neither by sucking up to the powerful nor by adopting conventions or servile attitudes for which he would have been unduly rewarded, but rather through intellectual and professional merit. This kind of framing is very conspiracy theory-friendly, since Raoult benefits from an *ethos* of untainted and pure research in stark opposition to some ‘corrupt elite’ members who were lucky to benefit from cronyism. As noted by Fuhrer & Cova (2020, 890),

[t]his contrast between a renowned scientist claiming to have found a cure to COVID-19 and the apparent hostility of the French government led Didier Raoult to become an “anti-system” figure (Soullier, 2020). He himself contributed to this image in his various videos and tweets by calling himself a “maverick”, by stressing the difference between the “real scientists” and the “so-called experts who advise the government”, by emphasizing the contrast between Paris (the capital) and the rest of the country, or even by opposing YouTube to the traditional medias, that he considers to be “less reliable” (Verner, 2020).

Specific traits can confirm or invalidate the generic *ethos*; the more one knows the speaker, the clearer her/his specific *ethos* (our second subtype of situational *ethos*)

will be. Since Raoult was the subject of sustained attention in the French media between February and September 2020, his specific *ethos* is likely to have been refined by the audience over the course of this period. Many people discovered that he was awarded the INSERM (French National Institute for Health and Medical Research) Grand Prize in 2010, that he is the discoverer of mimivirus and mamavirus (2 genera of giant viruses), that he has published enormous amounts of research (2000 to 3000 articles), and that he is highly cited (170'000 citations, with an h-index of 185 on Google Scholar)⁹, which is not without triggering suspicion – especially since several articles appear in journals edited by close colleagues, without proper double-blind peer-reviewing procedures. Moreover, people learned about the all-out feud between Raoult and Yves Lévy, a medical immunologist who happened to be the president of the INSERM between 2014 and 2018, and whose mandate was renewed in 2018 while his wife, Agnès Buzyn, was State Secretary of Health in the Macron government. In this controversy, Raoult denounced the possible conflict of interest and wrote several articles against the INSERM. In 2018, the INSERM and the CNRS (the French National Centre for Scientific Research) stripped the medical training and research centre led by Raoult of its research labels, which constitutes a blowback for any leading researcher. These events created a favourable bedrock for the emergence of dedicated conspiracy theories, among

⁹ While the significance of these figures might not be apparent to a general audience, Raoult has repeatedly verbalised his influence by stating that his research on transmission diseases was the most quoted on the Expertscape.com platform. See the February 26 (2020) Bulletin of Scientific Information of his institution <https://www.mediterranee-infection.com/chloroquine-pourquoi-les-chinois-se-tromperaient-ils/>, last accessed: 21.01.2022. Thus, his prediscursive ethos arguably represents him as a top scholar, based on his publication record.

which antisemitic ones, given the Jewish surname of Raoult's opponent (Lévy), which in turn led to complaints being filed against some of the people who propagated these conspiracy theories.¹⁰ Quite rapidly, Raoult came to embody, in the mass media storytelling, the resistance of the province against the centralised Parisian elite.

In the scientific arena, Raoult was steadily challenged up to the point of being accused of charlatanism in November 2020.¹¹ The media also became more critical of Raoult, who was labelled as a “reassurist” (as opposed to an “alarmist”), for, among other things, stating that there would be no second epidemic wave¹² or that the search for a vaccine was a waste of time.¹³ Facts disproved both statements. We conclude that Raoult's specific *ethos* is already quite complex, as some of its features seem to cast a shadow on the image of absolute success given by the generic *ethos*. However, his specific *ethos* also conveys the image of (i) a person who does not need to bow to conventions, including strict and scientific ones related to publication practices, (ii) a rebel much envied by those who criticise him, and of (iii) an outcast who suitably fits any conspiracy theory narrative in the role of silenced seeker of truth.

¹⁰ See <https://www.franceinter.fr/caricatures-complot-liste-de-noms-le-coronavirus-engendre-des-attaques-antisemites-sur-le-web>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

¹¹ <https://scienceintegritydigest.com/2020/03/27/post-publication-reviews-on-covid-19-papers/>. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGPaQsh_rVM&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=IHUM%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9e-Infection. Last accessed 21.01.2022..

¹³ <https://www.cnews.fr/videos/france/2020-12-07/si-samusait-faire-ce-vaccin-obligatoire-vous-auriez-une-revolution-estime>. Last accessed 21.01.2022..

The third and final subcategory of situational *ethos* is *expected ethos*, i.e., the *ethos* we expect to see in a precise rhetorical situation. The material conditions of discourse (the importance of the audience, the distance between a speaker and an audience, on-stage props, the layout of the room, the motivation and reasons of the discourse, etc.) encompass many parameters which contribute to the formation of expected *ethos*. This is also why we prefer the expression *situational ethos* over *prediscursive ethos*.

3.2. Communicational *ethos*

Communicational *ethos* refers to the image of the speaker as the manager of his or her discourse. The *ethos* of anyone who speaks indeed refers to a double role held simultaneously: the role of the speaker and that of his public function. This metadiscursive *ethos* can be analysed from a range of perspectives, but we focus here on the use of Raoult's main communication channel: the YouTube channel of the IHU-Marseille.

From the point of view of his communicational *ethos*, Raoult is very present on the Internet, but somewhat 'passively', as he is not shown to communicate proactively: it is the media who come to him, not the other way around. The medical training and research institute he leads has a YouTube channel that regularly broadcasts his comments, in the form of interviews or filmed lectures. This is crucially not his own personal channel. Furthermore, he did not have a personal Twitter account until

March 2020. Accordingly, the emerging communicational *ethos* is that of a character who is interesting enough to deserve our attention, but not that of a person who craves recognition and publicity by broadcasting content himself. This reinforces his credibility as a scientist who is detached from mundane contingencies, as opposed to some of his colleagues, whom he mocks on several occasions for preferring television sets to health care.¹⁴

Raoult's behaviour during interviews is also significant: on many occasions he has shushed journalists, plainly stated that they do not or cannot understand the topics at hand or threatened to leave the set. While such an interactionally disruptive attitude could be irritating, it confirms the *ethos* of a maverick in the system. In addition, several Facebook accounts were created in support of Raoult, such as "Didier Raoult vs coronavirus" and "Global coalition in support of Dr. Raoult" (Fuhrer and Cova 2020). In short, Raoult's communicational *ethos* confirms that he is outside the establishment and displays a sort of purity in the doctor's approach in the field, a form of disinterestedness that contributes to his credibility. This is related, incidentally, to the slogan of the IHU-Marseille YouTube channel, "the right to be smart". This phrase invites the inference that the YouTube channel offers valuable information that fosters personal reflection. It also insinuates that traditional news media only broadcast nonsense, and that they neither support nor

¹⁴ In the interview we consider as our case study, but also in other interviews, for instance here: https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/03/24/antiviral-antirivaux_1782929/ (last accessed 21.01.2022).

promote this “right to be smart”. This is also a way of promoting alternative news channels which propagate “true facts” that are not given by the mainstream media.¹⁵

3.3. Discursive *ethos*

Ethos which is gradually built as discourse unfolds can be either shown or said, direct or indirect. Discursive *ethos* is thus more the result of an inferential process based on different “symptoms” in a text (shown *ethos*) than a self-portrait of the speaker (said *ethos*): “speakers should not say ‘I am competent in international finance’, but instead display such competence, for instance by quoting relevant statistics or by using a specific lexicon as indexes of their knowledge and abilities” (Jacquin 2018, 414). Direct *ethos* can be defined as covering cases of self-images that are personally (“I”) or collectively (“we”, “scientists” – when the speaker is one of them) conveyed. Indirect *ethos* covers cases where inferences – akin to weak implicatures (Wilson and Carston 2019) – may be derived from the way other people or groups are referred to. For example, Raoult portrays scientists attacking his paper on hydroxychloroquine as “Huey, Dewey, and Louie Duck do[ing] science” from which one can obviously infer a host of *ethotic* propositions along

¹⁵ Raoult himself confirms this idea in one of his interviews: “we named it like that because we thought that what was circulating in the general information was neither always accurate nor always clever”. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LA6Jmf2IzQ&ab_channel=IHUM%C3%A9diterran%C3%A9e-Infection. Last accessed 21.01.2022.

the lines of “I am a real scientist, I am serious in what I do, I have enough authority to judge colleagues, I am an adult (since they are children), etc.”.

Interestingly, indirect *ethos* can be created from the image given of others in one’s discourse, as has already been shown (Herman 2005). Yet, we contend here that it can be indirect in an additional sense, namely through a process by which the speaker first represents the discourse of others and subsequently mocks it. We call this strategic move *ethotic straw man fallacy*.

4. The straw man fallacy: from propositional to non-propositional misrepresentations

The straw man fallacy has traditionally been defined as a fallacious refutational argumentative move in which a participant misrepresents an opponent’s position in order to refute it more easily (see e.g., Lewiński and Oswald 2013). Speakers who use this two-step argumentative move typically target a propositional content (the misrepresentation of an opponent’s position) with the hope of getting the audience to reject it – the victim of the straw man is usually not intended to be fooled by the tactic (see de Saussure 2018). In terms of the type of propositional content the fallacy is aimed at, the straw man can target not only the standpoint a given participant defends, but also the premises that the latter invokes to support a standpoint.¹⁶ Existing research on the straw man fallacy, within the field of

¹⁶ Recent experimental work on the persuasive effectiveness of the straw man fallacy (Schumann, Zufferey, and Oswald 2019) indicates that misrepresentations of premises for refutational purposes

argumentation studies, has broadly tackled two research questions: a descriptive one and a normative one.

On the descriptive side, researchers have been interested in examining different types of straw men in terms of the target being misrepresented (Aikin and Casey 2011; 2016), the nature of the misrepresentation (Talisie and Aikin 2006), the focus of the misrepresentation (speaker vs. message), the meaning resources speakers dynamically draw on when strawmanning in argumentative exchanges (Macagno and Walton 2017), and the effects of the fallacy in argumentative exchanges, such as attacking and victimising (Macagno and Walton 2017) or gaining conversational prestige (de Saussure 2018). From a normative perspective, the straw man fallacy has been investigated in terms of the different ways in which it can run against various argumentative and pragmatic standards (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, chap. 11; Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008; Lewiński and Oswald 2013; Govier 2010, chap. 4).

For a long time, the straw man fallacy has been almost exclusively assessed as a strategy meant to get an audience to reject a given *propositional content*. In recent years, however, research has shown that straw men fallacies are oftentimes also accompanied by *ad hominem* attacks (Aikin and Casey 2011) and that they can also be used as a strategy to boost one's own *ethos* in terms of conversational skills and wit (de Saussure 2018) or to undermine someone else's image (Macagno and

are more likely to go unnoticed than misrepresentations of standpoints, suggesting that strawmanning a premise is more persuasive than strawmanning a standpoint.

Walton 2017). Macagno and Walton call the latter *metadialogical* straw men and define them as misattributions of propositional contents. Here we propose to add the sub-category of *ethotic straw men*, which are exclusively meant to boost the speaker's *ethos*, and, crucially, which operate through misrepresentations of mental and emotional states – i.e., not through misattributions of propositional contents. On our account, the *ethotic* straw man thus consists in building a misrepresentation of the opponent's feelings, intentions, mental states *exclusively*, with no manifest intention to refute any position of the opponent. Instead, its goal is to undermine the latter's conversational credibility, possibly in the long run, and thus to delegitimize them. We define the *ethotic* straw man as an argumentative move by which a speaker boosts her/his own *ethos* through the misrepresentation of the emotional and cognitive states of an opponent (which relate to the opponent's psychological traits and identity) meant to undermine the latter's credibility in the eyes of an audience. We now specify this definition and characterise the *ethotic* straw man in terms of both its operational dimension and its genuinely argumentative nature.

On the operational side, the strategy unfolds in a context in which the conversational roles and the respective *ethotic* profiles of participants are well identified: it only makes sense to misrepresent someone's mental states when those are (i) relevant to and (ii) likely to have been made manifest in the ongoing interaction. In other words, conversational participants who engage in *ethotic* straw manning are targeting the legitimacy of their victims in terms of their credibility as

conversational participants, in order to benefit from the comparison. As for the argumentative significance of *ethotic* straw men, it must be seen from within the rhetorical tradition on *ethos*, which has long considered the way speakers are able to profile themselves in the eye of audiences (see Sect. 3). Our case study is telling in this respect, as it showcases an expert being questioned for having been wrong in his predictions. Here, we will thus consider argumentative phenomena through their contribution at the interactional level, where epistemically relevant positioning dynamics are at play.

5. Case study

We articulate a qualitative analysis of an *ethotic* strategy through which Raoult, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, defends himself from the charge of having been wrong about the likelihood of a second wave. The data comes from an interview by French journalist David Pujadas, conducted on 27 October 2020, and broadcast on a major French news channel, LCI.¹⁷ This case study is not, *per se*, a case of conspiracy theory. Although highly controversial and problematic in many respects, the message Raoult conveys in this interview is, strictly speaking, not conspiratorial, as the interviewee does not straightforwardly explain any fact that he discusses by blaming it on the secret agency of a malevolent group of individuals. Despite the lack of conspiratorial claims, however, his discourse makes

¹⁷ The video is unfortunately no longer accessible online.

use of a host of strategies which can be recruited, in their actual form, by conspiratorial discourse. Our twofold analysis strives to systematically show (i) how Raoult manages his *ethos* through complex strategies bearing on the credibility of the social actors referred to in the interview, and (ii) that these strategies are immediately and straightforwardly compatible with conspiratorial narratives around COVID-19.

Eleven instances of the *ethotic* straw man fallacy were found in our data. We articulate our analysis around the converging legitimating and de-legitimizing functions these fulfil as they contribute to building Raoult's discursive *ethos*.

5.1. Delegitimizing the media by misrepresenting their true nature

The interview starts with Pujadas asking Raoult whether he recognises that his prediction about the absence of a second pandemic wave was wrong. In the ensuing discussion, we identified the following two examples:

- (1) I am not of your nature, I am of another nature. Me, I don't want to scare people, I don't use fear to scare people. (07:47)

Je ne suis pas de votre nature, je suis d'une autre nature. Moi, je ne veux pas faire peur aux gens, je ne manie pas la peur pour effrayer les gens.

(2) As for me, I peacefully observe [scientific facts] while you get all worked up by what I might have or have not said; I peacefully observe.
(11:03)

Moi, je regarde paisiblement pendant que vous vous excitez sur ce que j'ai pu dire ou ne pas dire. Moi, je regarde paisiblement.

Even if Pujadas is not particularly known for promoting sensationalism, in (1) and (2) Raoult echoes a general accusation often levelled against the media, namely a purported intention to scare people and reap the monetary benefits of scandals and controversies, thereby suggesting that this is what Pujadas is doing. This accusation must be inferred as follows: Raoult first asserts a difference in nature (1) and in behaviour (2) between him and the media, then states that he is not a scaremonger (1) and that he is a peaceful observer (2), leaving it up to the audience to conclude that the media, including Pujadas, are the opposite. Moreover, the contrast is made salient through the use of personal pronouns for reference assignment (“*your nature*” vs. “*I am*”, uttered with a strong intonation on both pronouns to highlight the distinction; “*I peacefully observe while you get all worked up*”). The accessibility of the implied meaning, namely that people in the media are hysterical scaremongers, is thus increased, as it completes an inferential structure that facilitates it. Crucially, the accusation is not only attributive, as it implies something about the nature and the behaviour of the media, but also misattributive, because there is no plausible evidence in the interview that the essence of journalism is to scare people or to get all worked up by what people say. And because Raoult is not

misattributing a claim but an identity and psychological traits, this is an instance of *ethotic* straw man. This de-legitimizing strategy positively impacts Raoult's own discursive *ethos*, since by exposing the media's purported identity (their "nature"), Raoult hints that he has seen through their secret intentions. This allows him to build the indirect *ethos* of someone who is smart enough not to be fooled by the immoral motivations of the powerful.

Occasionally, the de-legitimation process also uses the classical straw man fallacy, as in (3):

- (3) I think that this country is living a dramatic error, which is the perpetual dramatization, for something of which, in the end, what are we going to suggest, that everyone remains locked up all their life because there are viruses out there? But you're all crazy, you've all gone nuts! (08:00)

Je pense que ce pays vit une erreur dramatique, qui est la dramatisation perpétuelle, pour quelque chose dont, à la fin, qu'est-ce qu'on va suggérer, que tout le monde reste enfermé toute sa vie parce qu'il y a des virus dehors ? Mais vous êtes fous, vous êtes devenus tous cinglés!

The French government has obviously never suggested the adoption of an exaggerated policy of lifetime lockdowns.¹⁸ It is nevertheless a premise for the

¹⁸ Note the hyperbolic language in quantification ("everyone") and in time references ("perpetual", "all their life"), which is symptomatic of misrepresentations.

standpoint “you’re all crazy”. This standpoint, an outright attempt at delegitimizing the government and the media (who are not portrayed as critical of the government as they are part of the referents of the pronoun “you”) through a misrepresentation of their position, also indirectly contributes to Raoult’s own discursive *ethos*; as he denotes the “crazy” ones through the pronoun “you”, he is necessarily excluded from their set – unlike them, he therefore appears to be wise and reasonable. Thus, the misattribution is strategically exploited to boost Raoult’s own discursive *ethos*.

5.2. Delegitimizing the media by misrepresenting their intentions and emotions

Examples (4), (5) and (6) are examples of *ethotic* straw man fallacies which misrepresent Pujadas’ inner mental states:

- (4) You want me to be wrong. (07:28)

Vous voulez que j’aie tort.

- (5) You would like me to play soothsayer, I am not doing that. (09:46)

Vous voudriez que je fasse le devin, je ne le fais pas.

- (6) I am very sad for you that you feel desperate. Me, I’m not. (10:58)

Je suis très triste pour vous que vous soyez désespéré. Moi, je ne le suis pas.

Let us start by mentioning that there are no plausible reasons to consider that Pujadas wants Raoult to be wrong – Raoult *was* factually wrong, independently of

anyone's volition. (4) is part of Raoult's answer to the question "Weren't you over-optimistic at the time [in September 2020]?" ("*Est-ce que vous n'avez pas péché par optimisme à ce moment-là?*"), but has some prospect of not being identified as a misrepresentation because the French expression used by Pujadas (*'pécher par optimisme'*, literally 'to sin by optimism') is semantically related to the notion of error (echoed in (4) by "wrong"). Moreover, Raoult explicitly refers to what Pujadas allegedly wants, i.e., to a deliberate intention. Precisely because of this, the motivation behind this deliberate intention is implicitly made salient and opens a space of speculation to start listing possible options. We should also mention that (4) is preceded by a short segment on the government's actions at the time: "what happened is that the government decided to close down everything. A week later, they reopened everything". Initially, therefore, Raoult tried to evade answering the question by deviating the discussion onto the government's inconsistency and incompetence – even if the government overreacted, this has no bearing on Raoult's over-optimism.¹⁹ Interestingly, in doing so, he destabilises Pujadas, whose sudden silence after the passage on governmental inconsistencies allows Raoult to follow up with an attack on the journalist (4). From the perspective of Raoult's *ethos*, (4) indirectly establishes Raoult's foresight, which is typical of individuals who can identify other people's true intentions.

¹⁹ In addition to sharing features with red herring fallacies and shifting the burden of proof, this move is also reminiscent of a *tu quoque* attack, whereby he dodges an accusation by reverting it: he is accused of being wrong and answers by pointing out that the government was also wrong.

(5) and (6), which also attribute specific mental and emotional states to Pujadas, are immediately followed by the reporter's denial ("no, no, not a soothsayer" and "no, I'm not desperate, no one is desperate" respectively), which shows that they are felt to be baseless misrepresentations – and thus potential straw men. However, because (4), (5) and (6) attribute negatively connotated mental and emotional states, they function as attacks on the credibility of the journalist. As a result of these misrepresentations, the initially attacked party (i.e., Raoult, who is held accountable for past declarations that turned out to be inaccurate) becomes the attacker, and the initial attacker (Pujadas) is led to defend himself from the accusations. This shift in dialectical roles translates into an *ethotic* strategy, as it simultaneously allows Raoult to build a discursive *ethos* of a smart man who can clearly identify the 'true' intentions and emotions of those who attack him, even when these are covert.

5.3. Legitimizing authority by ridiculing the interviewer

In the following examples, Raoult uses verbal irony while committing the *ethotic* straw man fallacy.²⁰

(7) Again, if you want to give me science lessons on coronavirus, you are being ridiculous. (10:20)

²⁰ We use the label 'verbal irony' consistently with the pragmatic literature on the topic (see e.g., Garmendia 2018; Wilson and Sperber 2012), even if in standard English many speakers would refer to this phenomenon as sarcasm.

Encore une fois, si vous voulez me donner des leçons de science sur le coronavirus, vous êtes ridicule.

(8) You are right, explain to me what this is about once and for all so that I can understand and change my mind. (21:11)

Vous avez raison, expliquez-moi ce que c'est une bonne fois comme ça je comprendrai et je changerai d'avis.

In these examples, Raoult ironically reverses the status of expertise in the interaction by hinting at the fact that Pujadas is trying to explain coronavirus to him (7) and by requesting explanations from the reporter (8). This is obviously nonsensical, as Raoult is still the medical expert (this being the result of work on his situational *ethos*), while Pujadas is still the reporter, and arguably triggers an ironical reading. Yet, this irony is based on a misrepresentation of Pujadas' intention, who is portrayed as *wanting* to explain something he believes his interlocutor ignores – this is emphatically not the case. Now, if indeed Pujadas thought he was explaining medical matters, and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, to Raoult, then he would appear to be ridiculous, which is the point Raoult consistently tries to make during the interview. This is another instance of *ethotic* straw man, because (i) the move consists in misrepresenting an intention (and crucially not a content) in order to undermine the credibility of his interlocutor – here his journalistic rigour and professionalism and (ii) the resulting effect is the construction of the image of a skilled conversational participant, who is able to expose his opponent's strategies by making fun of him.

While examples (1) to (6) misrepresent the unacceptable or immoral motivations of the media, (7) and (8) aim at de-legitimizing the media for the ridiculousness involved in their alleged attempts to give lessons to experts. All of them, however, converge in that they can also be said to serve to legitimate Raoult as a scientist. The effectiveness of Raoult's defence precisely consists in relying on the *ethos* of a great scientist (that Pujadas has incidentally acknowledged several times in the interview) and in denying Pujadas the possibility of discussing scientific issues on an equal footing, as in the following examples:

- (9) You have a problem: it is that your scientific references are not scientific. (02:03)

Vous avez un problème, c'est que vos références scientifiques ne sont pas scientifiques.

- (10) You're challenging me with college notions and I'm talking to you as a scientist and you can't hear what I'm saying. (03:30)

Vous m'opposez des notions de collège et moi je vous parle en scientifique et vous n'entendez pas ce que je vous dis.

- (11) I wonder [laughing] if you properly understand what I'm saying. (09:35)

Je me demande si vous comprenez bien ce que je dis.

Raoult is ridiculing Pujadas's questions or assertions as if they were scientific, while Pujadas never claimed to be a scientist – in fact, he denies this twice in the

interview. In sum, Raoult has accepted to be interviewed by a news television network but misrepresents Pujadas' questions as if they were a scientific critique: the framing linked to the genre (a TV interview, from which popular scientific discourse may be expected) seems to fade away, which allows Raoult to question the media's intentions and to avoid responding to the critiques/questions.

5.4. Legitimizing an *ethos* of victim by misrepresenting media intentions

Previous examples tackled either the purportedly deceitful intentions of the media or Raoult's scientific authority. But there is another *ethos* which is built through this interview, namely that of a victim. The *ethotic* strawman also helps building it, but while the preceding examples illustrated its reliance on irony and sarcasm, the following showcases tension.

(12) You cannot tell me what I ought to do, you're crazy, you've gone nuts too (...) again, you are not to tell me that I must be optimistic or pessimistic, you're crazy. (26:57)

Vous ne pouvez pas me dire ce que je dois faire, quand-même, vous êtes fou, vous êtes devenu cinglé aussi (...) encore une fois, vous n'avez pas à me dire que je dois être optimiste ou pessimiste, vous êtes fou.

At no point did Pujadas tell Raoult what to do; he merely pointed out that facts seem to warrant a pessimistic attitude more than an optimistic one, and that optimism,

considering the events surrounding the pandemic, might be dangerous and encourage irresponsible behaviour from the public. While here Raoult is explicitly referring to an instance in which Pujadas allegedly told him what to do, he is also by the same token making the reporter look like a sanctimonious individual who admonishes morally condemnable behaviour. Again, this is based on a misattribution of intentions, as Pujadas' discourse does not qualify as such. The resulting effect on Raoult's *ethos* is that of a victim of an unacceptable command.

(13) Don't think you can fuck me over like this. You take me for a fool, it's unbelievable, you are the only one who takes me for a fool, it's unbelievable. (32:36)

Vous ne croyez pas me couillonner comme ça. Vous me prenez pour un imbécile, c'est incroyable, vous êtes le seul qui me prend pour un imbécile, c'est incroyable.

Again, Raoult misattributes to Pujadas an intention (deliberately trying to 'fuck him over', in French, *couillonner*) for which we have no manifest evidence. But by doing so, Raoult conveys that Pujadas is not interested in finding out about the virus or about how to fight it. Instead, he is portrayed as wanting to make Raoult look bad. While there might be some truth to this, an alleged intention of setting up Raoult is far from being transparent in the interaction. Raoult then reverts to the preceding strategy: ridiculing Pujadas for his unbelievable attack on authority.

(14) Are you done with that? Are you still trying to set me up on coronavirus? (23:39)

Vous avez fini avec ça, vous essayez encore de me piéger sur le coronavirus?

This example is loaded with irony as in (7) and (8), but it also contributes to the lexical field of entrapment (“cannot tell me what I ought to do”, “fuck me over”, “set me up”). The question (14) responds to was “Do you agree that there are precautionary measures, like wearing face masks in certain circumstances, that need to be observed?” Again, we see that Raoult fails to answer the question and instead reinterprets it as an attempt to trap him. The misrepresentation of Pujadas’ intentions, as an *ethotic* straw man, not only allows Raoult to make the conversation derail onto a discussion on the credibility of his interlocutor, whose malicious intent is uncovered and denounced, but it also contributes to building the discursive *ethos* of a victim for the French scientist.

6. Why *ethotic* straw men are likely to appeal to conspiracy theories

It appears that Raoult consistently orchestrates a strategy which makes a discussion on facts inexorably derail onto a discussion on the credibility of those who oppose him, who are systematically de-legitimated: the journalist, just like the government, on the grounds of incompetence or dishonesty, and peers and scientists who disagree with him for being amateurish or downright mad. Again, this is done to silence Raoult’s opposition – the ‘elite’ (media, scientific institutions and government) – not through a critical discussion, but on the grounds of

trustworthiness and credibility. In so doing, Raoult reduces all possible debates on the merits of standpoints to issues regarding the image of participants to these debates. This is something Raoult's rhetoric shares with populist rhetoric, which typically includes "some kind of appeal to 'the people' and a denunciation of the elite" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 5). The interview strikingly illustrates that such a strategy allows Raoult to never get into the details of his own research.

Since conspiracy theories prepare their audience "for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (Hofstadter 1964, 37–38) and since this process requires figures of trustworthy experts, argumentations dominated by *ethotic* strategies are likely to resonate favourably in conspiracy theory narratives. Although Raoult himself does not propagate known conspiracy theories on COVID-19, we hope to have shown that his multi-layered *ethos* is exceptionally compatible with conspiracy theories. Likely, because Raoult's *ethos* represents him as a maverick who fights dominant elites, his discourse is bound to strike a chord with conspiracy theory proponents. His argumentative discourse, dominated by personal attacks against the unreasonable ("crazy") media and government, together with statements uttered from a privileged position to know (resulting from his *ethos*) is thus tailor-cut for conspiratorial narratives, which are typically structured around the fight between good and evil. More specifically, we hope to have shown with our account of *ethos* and the *ethotic* straw man fallacy that Raoult's preference for misattributions of intentions and other cognitive states takes over the debate in a way that makes ideological considerations relevant in the

exchange, to the point of fitting the now traditional conspiracy theory representation of deceptive elites.

Lastly, we would like to connect our findings with extant avenues of research in cognitive psychology. A recent study (Fuhrer and Cova 2020) found that trust in Raoult correlates with belief in conspiracy theories, and moreover that these two variables also correlate with a preference for an intuitive cognitive style – which denotes a way of thinking that privileges reliance on one’s own intuition over a careful and objective assessment (i.e., an analytic style) of the situation in decision-making processes. Interestingly, our findings are in line with Fuhrer & Cova’s, given that *ethotic* argumentative strategies, in so far as they impact trust and mistrust of social actors, are likely to resonate with intuitions about people more than with careful and full-blown argumentation on complicated issues we ignore much about. In other words, it should come as no surprise that arguing rhetorically by (mis)representing people’s mental states is likely to seduce the conspiratorial mindset.

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