
INSINUATED VS. ASSERTED AD HOMINEM: AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO THEIR RHETORICAL EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

At the crossroads between the fields of pragmatics – the study of meaning in context – and argumentation, the literature often argues that pragmatic variations can affect the rhetorical effectiveness of argumentative structures. However, experimental investigations that address this relation are still scarce, and little empirical evidence is available. This paper develops an experimental inquiry into the effect of implicit meaning, specifically of insinuation, on *ad hominem* argumentative constructions in which an opponent voices disagreement with the proponent's standpoint by launching a personal attack in the refutation. We hypothesised that insinuation can be beneficial when used as a personal attack supporting a refutation, that it is a persuasive move and that it may impact how much people agree with either the author of the *ad hominem* or its target. Our results indicate that an insinuated personal attack does not appear to be more supportive of disagreement than when the attack is asserted. However, an *ad hominem* argument with an insinuated attack is perceived as more persuasive and leads to more agreement with the opponent. Finally, the implicitness of the attack does not affect the agreement given to the proponent. Not all hypotheses were verified. We thus surmise that the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuations might play out on other rhetorical levels (e.g., preserving the image speakers want to project, disrupting conversational dynamics or staining the opponent's reputation).

1. Introduction

Insinuation. “Non-overt intentional negative ascription[s], whether true or false, usually in the form of an implicature, which [are] understood as a charge or accusation against what is, for the most part, a non-present party” (Bell, 1997, p. 36)¹.

Insinuations display a series of pragmatic characteristics (Bell, 1997; Fraser, 2001): (i) the negative ascription is *implicitly* conveyed and must be inferred by the audience, (ii) as they are not part of the speakers’ explicit speech, insinuated ascription can be *denied* (the ease with which speakers can deny insinuated content varying according to the context and the transparency of the insinuation, see Oswald, 2022), and (iii) for an insinuation to be deniable – at least, plausibly – the utterance must be *compatible with at least two interpretations*, one being negative-ascription-free.

These pragmatic features can yield several rhetorical advantages. Since the negative ascription is implicitly conveyed, speakers can disparage someone while having the possibility to deny having meant such a negative ascription and potentially escape negative reputational consequences. In addition, speakers may shift the responsibility for the disparaging interpretation of their utterance to the audience. As implicit messages are less critically evaluated (in particular with regard to presuppositions, see Lombardi Vallauri, 2018, 2021; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia, 2014) and people tend to trust the outputs of their own inferences (Wason, 1960, 1968; Sperber et al., 1995), implicitly conveyed content is more likely to be accommodated in the audience’s cognitive environment. According to Bell (1997) and Fraser (2001), even after a speaker publicly denies the intention or content of a negative ascription, the reputation of their targets remains stained by that derogatory content.

Because it is likely to be rhetorically effective, it stands to reason that insinuations can play a role in an argumentative setting. The argumentative construction closest to this definition of personal attack is the abusive *Ad hominem* (henceforth, AH).

(Abusive) *Ad hominem*. “The abusive [or direct] type of *ad hominem* argument occurs where one party in a discussion criticizes or attempts to refute the other party’s argument by directly attacking that second party personally” (Walton, 1998, p. 2).

Van Eemeren et al. (2009) experimentally investigated the perceived reasonableness of different types of AH arguments (i.e., abusive,

¹ With this definition, Bell (1997) defines what ‘innuendoes’ are. The difference with ‘insinuations’ is that the latter does not take into account the presence or absence of the party targeted by the negative ascription as long as this ascription is implicitly conveyed to an audience. This issue will not be addressed in this paper.

circumstantial, and *tu quoque*) while comparing them to sound arguments. By asking the question, “how reasonable do you find B’s reply” they addressed the normative acceptability of AH. They found that the perceived reasonableness of either AH argument is lower than that of neutral arguments.

With the rhetorical advantages of insinuations raised above, it makes sense to think that an *insinuated* AH argument (henceforth, IAH) might be more rhetorically advantageous to support a disagreement than if it was *asserted* (henceforth, AAH). In the same vein as the experiment of van Eemeren et al. (2009), we might assume that an IAH is perceived as more reasonable – or perhaps less ‘confrontational’ – in the context of disagreement than an AAH.

Section 2 starts by presenting our experimental protocol testing some rhetorical effects of insinuations. Then, each experiment will be developed along with its method, results and a brief discussion. Section 3 concludes with a discussion of our findings and experimental manipulations that could compensate for potential limitations or develop new directions of investigation.

2. Experimental investigation

The main difference with the experiment of van Eemeren et al. (2009) is that we were not interested in the argument’s perceived reasonableness but in (i) its pragmatic and argumentative construction – or its logos, (ii) its perceived persuasiveness, and (iii) agreement given to insinulators and targets of insinuations. Moreover, our experiments only focused on manipulating the implicitness of the negative ascription in an argumentative setting by using only abusive AH arguments. Finally, we made sure that the personal attack was only present in the argument supporting the disagreement, unlike some of van Eemeren et al. (2009)’s items which seemed to prime the attack already in the formulation of the disagreement (e.g., “What do you know about ethics? [+ Argument]” or “You can’t judge anything about this! [+ Argument]”).

These three experiments followed the same structure (see Figure 1 for sample item and structure): a context is presented and a dialogue unfolds after it. In the dialogue, a first character (A) defends a claim with which a second character (B) disagrees. B then supports the disagreement with either (i) an argument with an asserted personal attack (AAH), (ii) an argument containing an insinuated personal attack (IAH), or (iii) a neutral argument without any personal attack (Neu). This last condition was added to the first two to control our arguments’ effectiveness and to replicate van Eemeren et al. (2009)’s results with our experimental setting.

Thirty-nine dialogues were created and used, each presented under one condition. Participants were distributed into three lists according to a Latin square design and were presented with the three conditions. The analyses performed are linear mixed models considering the variability of the items and the participants (both used as random intercepts).

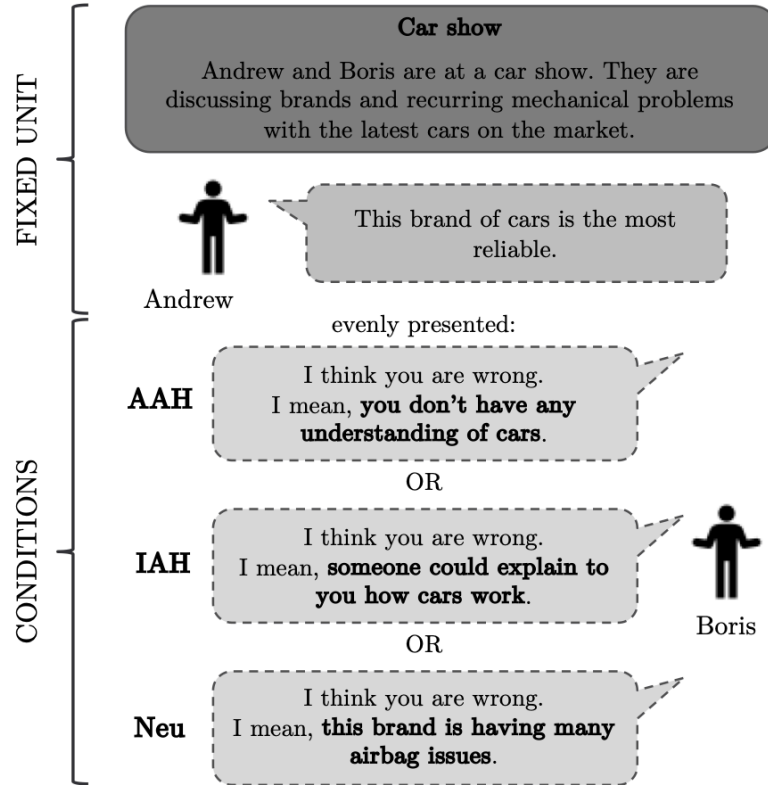


Figure 1. Sample item and structure of experiments.

2.1. Experiment 1: Logos

As a first experimental question, we wanted to know whether insinuations would make it easier to support a disagreement than asserted personal attacks would. The rhetorical effect at stake is *logos*, that is, the construction of the argumentative claim (i.e., disagreeing standpoint supported by a reason with a potential personal attack). Does an IAH give more weight to the reason given for the disagreement than an AAH?

At the bottom of each dialogue, the question "According to you, to what extent does the argument of [Character B] support his claim that [Character A] is wrong?" to which participants were asked to answer on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 "Not at all" to 10 "Absolutely". One hundred and two participants were recruited on the Prolific platform

(www.prolific.co) and completed the questionnaire (see Table I for sample demographics). All participants were fluent and first-language English speakers.

Table I. Sample demographics and completion time

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2	Experiment 3
Sample size	102	50	50
Age in years, m (sd)	33.12 (13.25)	34.96 (14.29)	35.66 (13.14)
Gender			
Women	48 (47%)	24 (48%)	25 (50%)
Men	52 (51%)	25 (50%)	25 (50%)
Others	2 (2%)	1 (2%)	0
Completion			
Time in min (sd)	22.25 (12.64)	24.08 (16.19)	24.16 (10.89)
Remuneration	£2.00 (£6.27/h)	£2.30 (£7.80/h)	£2.50 (£7.17/h)

Our results indicate an effect of the argument condition (see Fig. 2). Neutral arguments are perceived as more supportive of the disagreement than either AH. However, IAH does not support disagreement more than AAH.

One possible explanation for the non-difference between IAH and AAH might be methodological: the question did not capture the possible rhetorical effect of insinuation. By asking whether *the argument of [Character B]* supports the disagreement, participants might have been led to exclude the insinuation when they answered the question – asking someone whether an argument supports a claim amounts to instructing them to evaluate whether the content of the argument plays a justificatory role in supporting the claim. Since the content of IAH is likely almost the same as the content of AAH, it is possible that participants represented the meaning of IAH and AAH independently of both the way it was presented (i.e., insinuated or asserted) and the way they inferred the insinuated meaning. Taking the sample item in Fig. 1, the fact that someone could explain to Andrew how cars work, that is, that he does not know anything about cars, might therefore not be identified as an insinuation, but merely treated as a piece of information, however it was derived. Finally, as we asked participants to identify and judge contents, we might have abstracted the content of the insinuations from their pragmatic type and their context of occurrence.

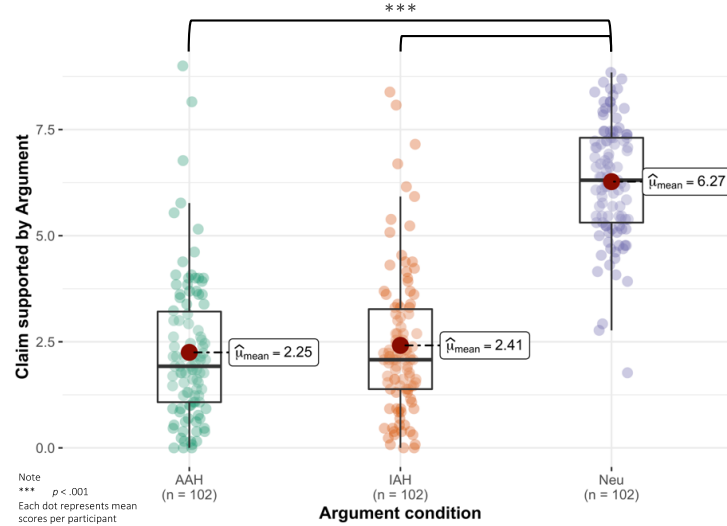


Figure 2. Results of Experiment 1

2.2. Experiment 2: Perceived persuasiveness

As a second experimental question, we wanted to know whether insinuations would be perceived as more persuasive than asserted personal attacks. We thus formulated a question which insists on considering the whole exchange and asks to judge the persuasiveness of the statement (as a whole, without any particular distinction between the disagreement claim and the argument). Is a disagreement supported by an IAH perceived as more persuasive in a conflict of opinion than when an AAH supports it?

At the bottom of each dialogue, we thus asked the question “Based on this exchange between [Character A] and [Character B], how persuasive do you find [Character B]’s statement?”. Participants were asked to answer on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 “Not at all” to 10 “Absolutely”. Fifty participants were recruited on the Prolific platform and completed the questionnaire (see Table I for sample demographics). All participants were fluent and first-language English speakers.

Our results indicate an effect of the argument condition (see Fig. 3). Neutral arguments are perceived as more persuasive than either AH. Moreover, and as expected, IAH are perceived as more persuasive than AAH.

The measure detected a difference in persuasiveness between AAH and IAH: insinuated attacks are perceived as more persuasive than asserted ones. Nonetheless, we asked ourselves what “persuasive” would mean for participants and what explains this increase in perceived persuasiveness. Another measure that could be related to the persuasiveness of a statement is the agreement that one would have with it or with the person. In these first two experiments, we were only interested in the construction of the AH and the persuasiveness of the attacker. Neither of these experiments is concerned with the agreement with the target of those attacks. If the insinuation might work in the attacker’s favour, does it also work against the target?

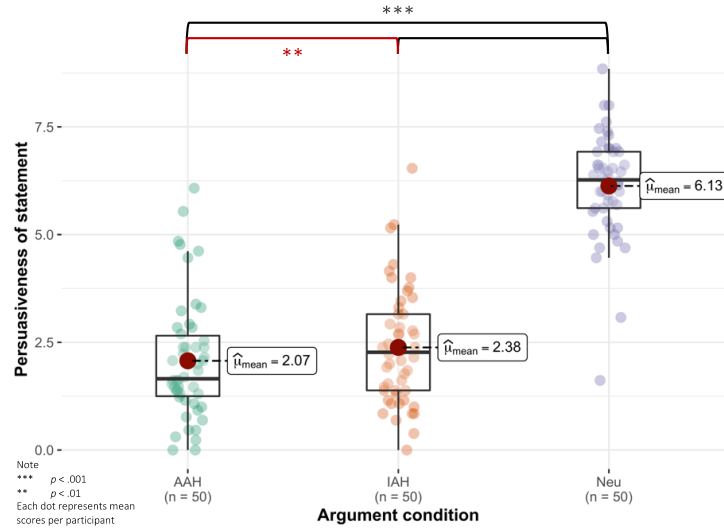


Figure 3. Results of Experiment 2

2.3. Experiment 3: Agreement

As a third experimental question, we wanted to know whether insinuations, compared to asserted attacks, would lead participants to agree with the attacker but disagree with the target. We decided to further investigate the finding of the previous experiment by examining whether it is due to higher agreement towards the attacker, lower agreement towards the target, or both.

At the bottom of each dialogue, the question “Based on this exchange between [Character A] and [Character B], to what extent do you think [Character A]/[Character B] is right?” to which participants were asked to answer on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 “Not at all” to 10 “Absolutely”. Participants were assigned to two lists nested within the condition lists that were displayed almost equally (i.e., 19 and 20) to the

participants. Fifty participants were recruited on the Prolific platform and completed the questionnaire (see Table I for sample demographics). All participants were fluent and first-language English speakers.

Regarding agreement with the target of the attack, our results indicate an effect of the argument condition (see Fig. 4a). Neutral arguments lead to less agreement with the target than either AH. However, IAH does not lead to less agreement with the target than AAH. Regarding the agreement with the attacking character, our results indicate an effect of the argument condition (see Fig. 4b). Neutral arguments lead to more agreement with the attacking character than either AH. Moreover, as expected, IAH does lead to more agreement with the attacking character than AAH.

What could explain this non-difference between agreement with the target under IAH and AAH is that another rhetorical effect is at play concerning the target, but independently from the decrease in agreement. According to Bell (1997), insinuation is primarily used to disparage someone, to make them seem ridiculous in the eyes of an audience. The fact that the insult is insinuated and thus not frontal allows insinulators to appear more subtle and clever. Indeed, according to our results on the agreement with the attacking character, agreement seems to be preferred when the personal attack is implied rather than asserted. The latter finding is in line with the results observed in the perceived persuasiveness experiment (Exp 2).

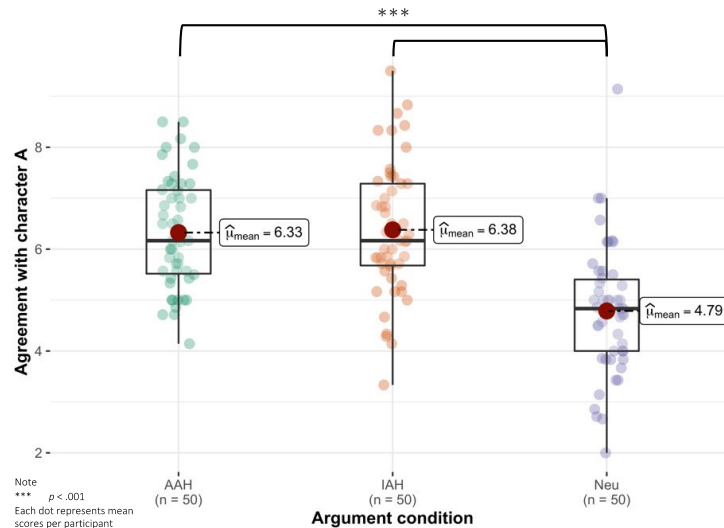


Figure 4a. Results of Experiment 3 (target of attacks; A)

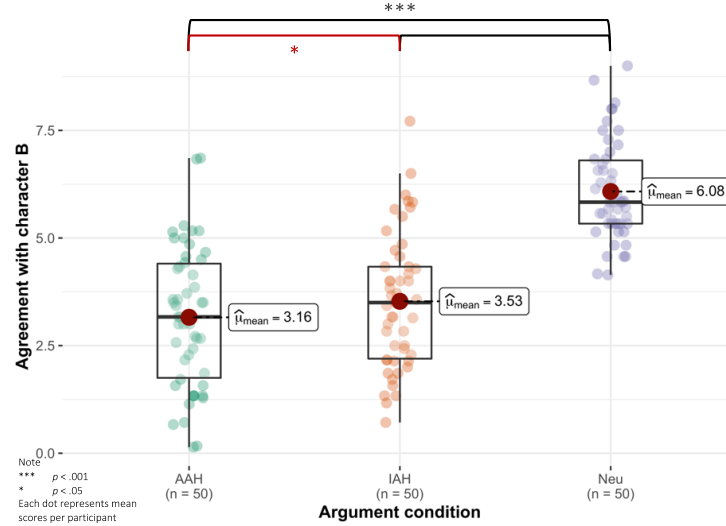


Figure 4b. Results of Experiment 3 (attacking character; B)

3. Discussion

In our experiments, we observed that pragmatic variations have consequences on argumentative effects. So far, we observed that (i) a personal attack is not considered as an acceptable argument to support a disagreement, regardless of whether the attack is insinuated or asserted, (ii) insinuations are perceived as more persuasive and (iii_a) lead to more agreement with insinuating speakers but (iii_b) not to less agreement with the target of those insinuations.

After the results we obtained on persuasion, we wondered whether an IAH is perceived as more persuasive because the AAH is considered more insulting and threatening. Indeed, a negative ascription that is asserted feels more face-threatening than a negative ascription that has to be inferred. Consequently, the asserted attack is perhaps likely to be more easily rejected, less agreed upon, and perceived as less persuasive. This issue of face-threatening raises the question of politeness. For instance, saying “you are a liar” may be perceived as more choking or blunt than saying “you have a special relationship with truth”. Thus, something more elaborate and subtle might be more readily accepted. However, an opposite hypothesis suggests that implicitness may be perceived as manipulative, deceitful and mocking (Pinker, 2007). However this may be, our results support the idea that implicitness is preferred. For a follow-up experiment, we could imagine a question following the same structure as in our experiments but asking about perceived offensiveness: “Based on this

exchange between [Character A] and [Character B], to what extent do you find [Character B]’s reply to [Character A] offensive?”. If indeed, insinuations are perceived as less offensive, then this might explain why individuals are more accepting of them.

Besides how the attack – the argument in our argumentative setting – is expressed, the way the disagreement is expressed may have influenced our results as well. Saying “I think *you* are *wrong*” might be understood as meaning “my opinion is the right one, while yours is wrong” (Pietroiuști, 2022). In case an IAH follows a disagreement voiced in such a way, this more conflictual attitude may make the personal attack much more apparent, reducing the plausibility of an innocuous alternative interpretation. By expressing a more open attitude towards the difference of opinion, such as “I disagree”, one can more easily expect an interpretation of the argument as conveying no personal attack. The principle is the same, as the second character does not share the same opinion as the first; however, with “I disagree”, the conflict is about the ideas, while “I think you are wrong” is about the person. Both communicate the same – a disagreement – but highlight different attitudes. Experimental manipulation of the disagreement wording could only sometimes lead to greater persuasiveness. Still, it would leave more room for a neutral interpretation of the IAH and thus better distinguish IAH from AAH.

In conclusion, we have emphasised the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuations in terms of logos and persuasion, but we should not reduce their effectiveness to those measures. Indeed, insinuations might also be rhetorically effective in terms of the perceived image of the speakers, their effects on the audience or the dynamics of the conversation. As observed, the impact on persuasiveness and agreement is minor. This suggests that the effectiveness of IAH might be found more strikingly at another level, yet to be explored.

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