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On the plausibility of denials: pragmatic and argumentative considerations

Lou Odermatt & Steve Oswald

University of Fribourg

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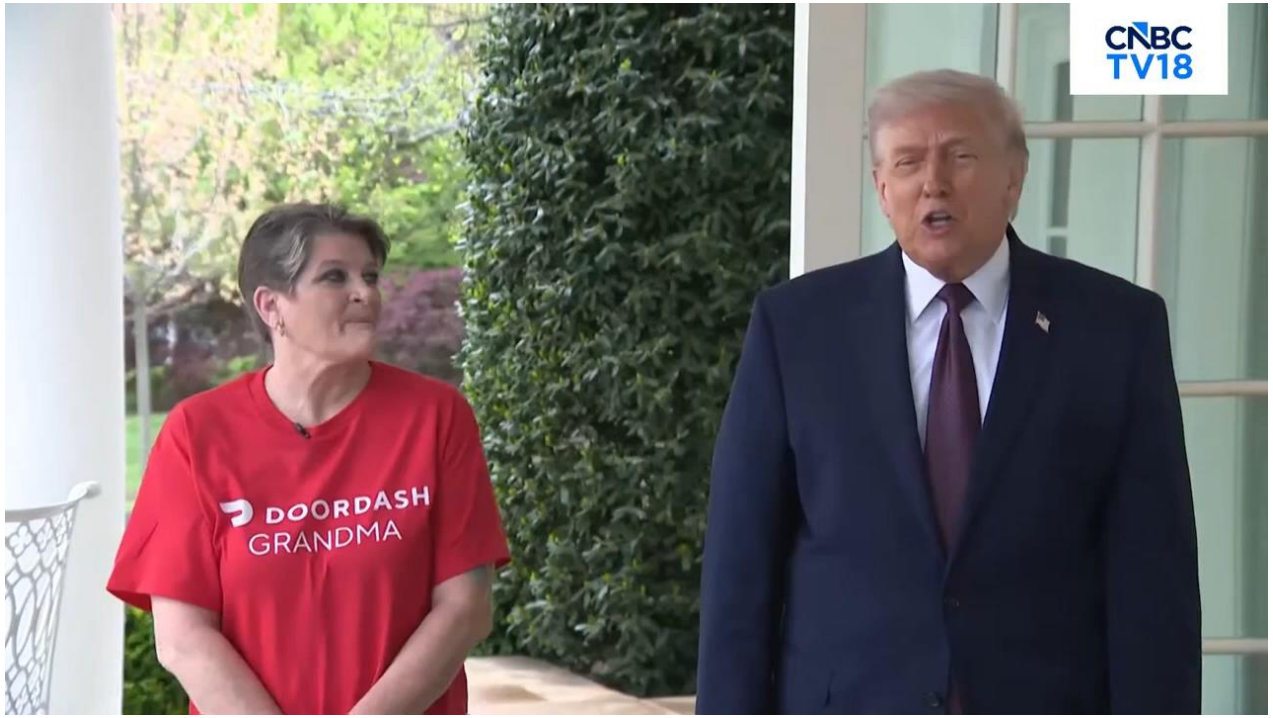
Swiss National Science Foundation

A recent example (13.04.2026)



3 things to notice:

- this is about what Trump meant in posting this
- our sensitivity to how convincing his denial is
- how the denial is argumentatively structured

Outline

1. Denials in discourse
2. Experiment 1: plausibility
3. Experiment 2: argumentativeness

1

On denials

1 Studying commitment

- To a large extent, studying denials requires studying **commitment**

- Morency et al. (2008), Saussure & Oswald (2008, 2009):
  - what our addressees are licensed to hold us committed to based on what we say (and mean)
  - obvious intuitive differences when it comes to explicit and implicit communication
  - retractions/denials might lead to impressions of bad faith

- Three common questions in the study of commitment:
  - scope: what do our addressees hold us committed to?
  - grounds: on which grounds do our addressees hold us committed?
  - target: do addressees only target overt communicative meaning?

1 Some answers

- Scope: mental states, actions, and representations
  - commitment to propositions vs. commitment to communicative intentions
  - → epistemic and communicative commitment (Oswald 2022, Domínguez Armas & Soria Ruiz 2021)

- Grounds: we attribute commitments based on explicit and implicit meaning alike
  - but to different extents, see e.g., Morency et al. (2008), Mazzarella et al. (2018), Pinker (2007), Camp (2018), Fricker (2012), Fraser (2001)

- Target: we attribute commitment both to communicative (overt) messages and to private mental states
  - ‘when you said you had grading to do, did you mean you could not come for lunch with us?’
  - ‘is your claim that you wouldn’t drive a BMW an indication that you don’t like Germany?’

1 Corollaries for the study of denials

- In terms of **scope**: we can in principle deny different types of commitments
- In terms of **grounds**: whether a commitment was explicitly or implicitly incurred can impact its denial
- In terms of **target**: denials may scope over both what was part of a communicative intention and what was not
- Importantly: research on plausible deniability is rapidly developing
  - e.g., Pinker (2007), Dinges & Zakkou (2023), Mazzarella (2021), Bonalumi et al. (2023), Peet (2024), etc.

1 Denials (Boogaart et al. 2021)

- Denials appear in discourse as conversational moves by which speakers respond "to an accusation of having said something inappropriate" (2021, 209)
  - speakers deny a commitment that was attributed to them based on what they uttered
  - denials usually make the case that a commitment was wrongly attributed
  - they are **defence** strategies

- Denials are structured as a 3-step dialogical sequence:
  - speaker A says P or implies Q
  - speaker B challenges A for saying P or implying Q (prompt for denial)
  - speaker A denies having said P or implied Q

1 Different ways of denying (Boogaart et al. 2021)

- Straightforward denial ('I did not utter P' or 'I did not imply Q')
  - plainly denying
- Redefinition ('I didn't say/imply P/Q, I said/implied R/S')
  - providing an alternative meaning
- External circumstances ('I shouldn't have said/implied P/Q, but there are mitigating circumstances for why I did)
  - providing excuses/reasons for saying/implying P/Q
- Wrong judge: ('but who are you to judge?')
  - reverting the attack

1 Metalinguistic denials

- Working definition of metalinguistic denials (MDs):
  - a metalinguistic conversational move by which (i) a speaker denies a commitment that was attributed to them and (ii) provides an alternative interpretation of the utterance that made the audience infer said commitment

- Twofold structure (following Mazzarella 2021 on *full-fledged denials*):
  - objection to commitment attributed by addressee (OCA) → 'I didn't mean X'
  - proposed alternative commitment (PAC) → 'I meant Y'

1 MDs share features with arguments (1)

1. Structural similarity (twofold structure):
   - arguments articulate premises with a conclusion
   - MDs articulate PACs with an OCA

2. Similar relationship between components:
   - arguments instantiate a link of support between premises and conclusion
   - MDs instantiate a link of support between the PAC and the OCA
   - this link is normatively evaluable (acceptability vs. plausibility)

1 MDs share features with arguments (2)

3. Similar context of occurrence:
   - arguments appear in contexts of doubt or disagreement to settle an issue
   - MDs appear in contexts of doubt or disagreement about what S meant

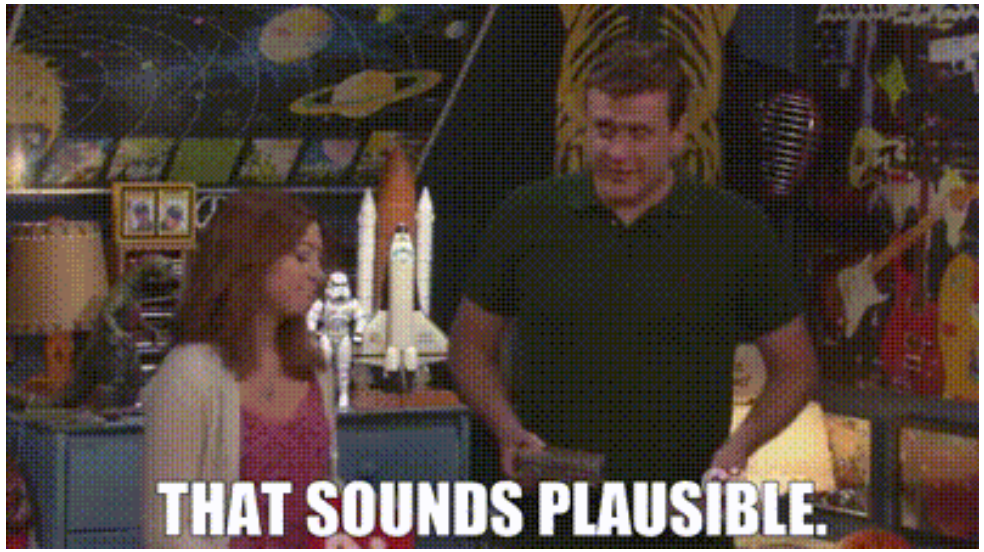
4. Similar purpose:
   - arguments are issued to convince the addressee that the conclusion holds
   - MDs are issued to convince the addressee that OCA holds

5. Similar effects:
   - arguments have rhetorical effects, and so do MDs (esp. *ethos* and *logos*)

1 Taking stock and going experimental

- MDs are defensive conversational moves meant to manage commitment attribution retrospectively, after a challenge has been issued
  - main hypothesis: they are **argumentative moves** in nature

- Empirical support is needed for this claim:
  - exp1: normative assessment of the justificatory link between PAC and OCA
  - exp2: assessment of participant perception on 2 defining features of arguments: intention to convince and presence of reasons

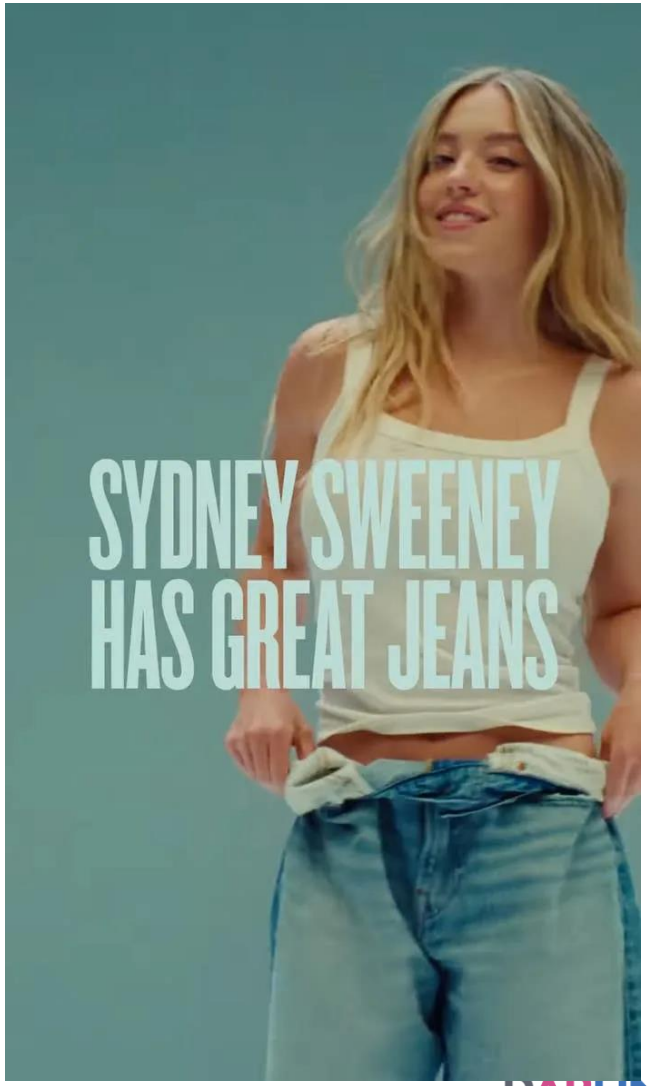


On the plausibility of denials

2 The importance of the PAC – example

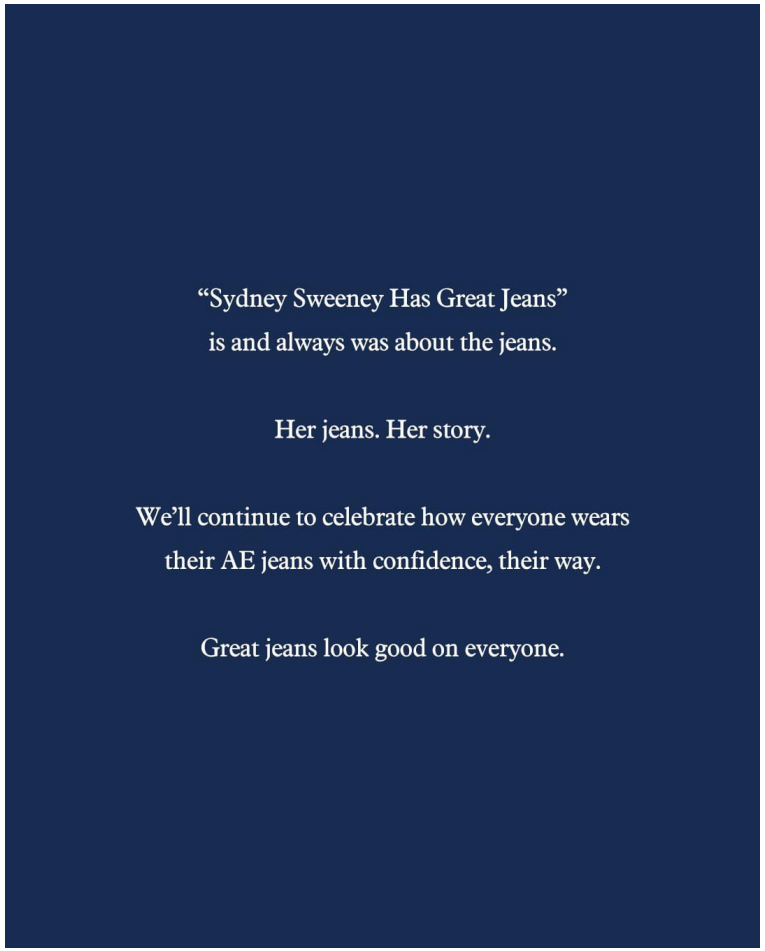
- American Eagle jeans ad
  - The ad starred American actress, Sidney Sweeney
  - It played on the phonetic identity between *jeans* and *genes*
  - “Jeans [or genes] are passed on from parent to offspring, often determining traits like hair color, personality, and even eye color. My jeans are blue” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DNyA-6X0cI)

- This ad’s communicative intentions sparked some controversy
  - Perceived as promoting eugenics
  - Perceived as claiming the superiority of Caucasian genes



2 The importance of the PAC – example

- As a reaction to the controversy, the brand published the following denial on their social media
- The issue with this statement is apparent when we make the denial explicit:
  - "We didn't mean to promote eugenics and white supremacy. Our ad is and always was about the jeans, and not genes."
  - Jeans do not get passed on from parent to offspring
  - Genes do get passed on from parent to offspring
- Thus, this is an issue related to the plausibility of the PAC



2 What makes a denial plausible?

Whether a denial is found plausible is the result of a judgment of how well it is perceived to fit the context

- See Mazzarella (2021), Oswald (2022), and Camp (2018)
- Experimental evidence shows that manipulating context results in a change of perceived plausibility of a denial (Bonalumi et al., 2023)

Thus, the plausibility of a denial is defined by how contextually relevant it is perceived to be

More specifically, how contextually relevant its PAC is perceived to be (Mazzarella, 2021)

2 Experiment 1 – Plausibility of PAC

Goals

Provide evidence for the correlation between:

- The plausibility of the denial as a whole (OCA + PAC)
- The way in which the PAC is formulated
- The perceived image of the speaker

Participants

Analysis on 99 participants (see Table 1)

Age mean	41.26(range: 19-71)
Sex	50 Female (50.5%) 49 Male (49.5%)
Primary language	96 English (95.7%), 1 English + Korean (1.01%), 2 English + Spanish (2.02%)
Country of residence	United States (100%)
Time taken mean	22.15 minutes
Monetary reward	£ 2.01 per person

2 Experiment 1 – Material

Items

- 16 dialogues
- Between two characters (X and Y)
- Topics were neutral
- Randomized

Conditions (pretested)

- Plausible alternative commitment (pPAC)
- Implausible alternative commitment (iPAC)

Attention check questions

- Three (Two had to be answered correctly)
- Same structure as items
- Randomized

2 Experiment 1 – Sample item

X and Y are siblings. They are discussing the distribution of weekly chores, and Y comes up with an already-made distribution of tasks for both X and Y. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

X_1: “You are always the one deciding who does what chore.”

Y_1: “Are you implying that I don’t divide chores equally?”

X_2: “I didn’t mean that!” **OCA**

Y_2: "How so?"

X_3: "I meant that I'd also like to decide which chores I do sometimes.” **PAC (here pPAC)**

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X_1: “You are always the one deciding who does what chore.”

Y_1: “Are you implying that I don’t divide chores equally?”

X_2: “I didn’t mean that!" **OCA**

Y_2: "How so?"

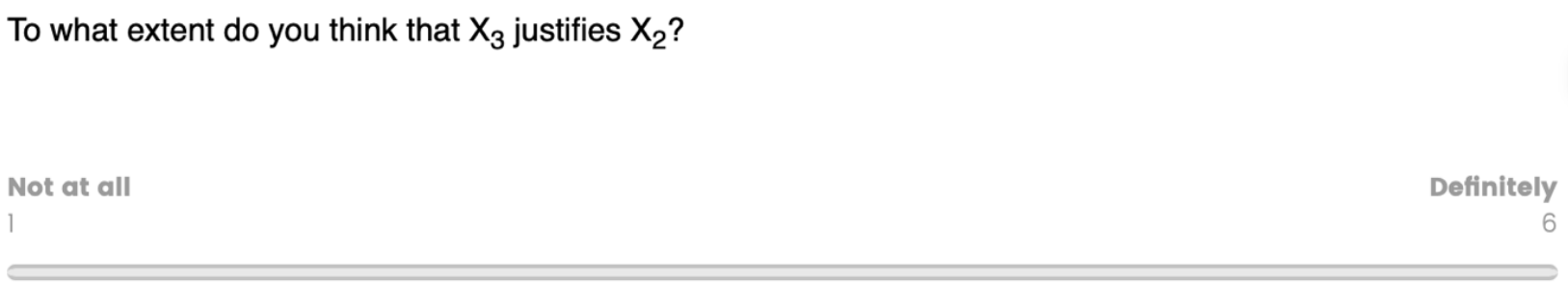
X_3: "I meant that it must be a burden for you to make those decisions every week.” **PAC (here iPAC)**

2 Experiment 1 – Material

Measures

- Q1: To what extent do you think X_3 (the PAC) justifies X_2 (the OCA)?
- Q2: To what extent do you think X (the denying speaker) is, overall, speaking in good faith?
- Q3: Based on the whole dialogue, to what extent do you think X_2 (the OCA) is plausible?

Participants were asked to evaluate these questions on a slider from 1 (Not at all) to 6 (Definitely).



2 Experiment 1 – Hypotheses & Design

Hypotheses (preregistered on OSF)

- Higher scores for all three measures for the plausible condition
- Significant correlation between all three measures

Design

Counterbalanced within-subject design (using a Latin-square):

- Participants were randomly assigned to one of two lists (List 1 and List 2)
- All items were displayed to all participants
- The condition under which the items appeared varied

2 Experiment 1 – Procedure

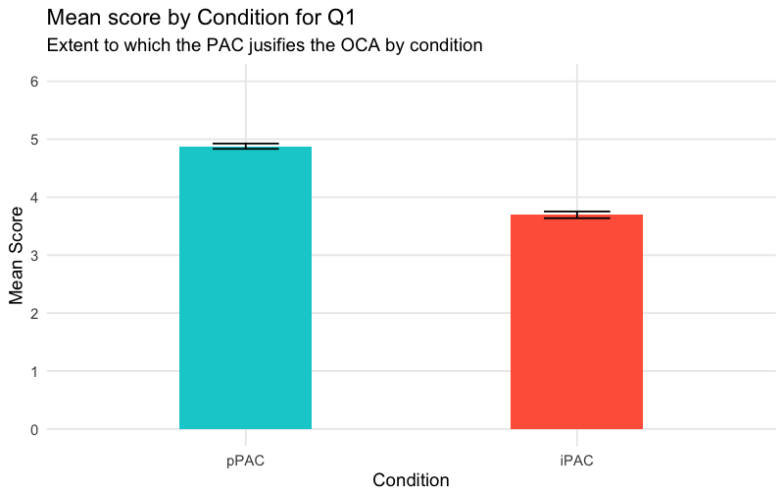
Standard procedure

1. Recruitment via Prolific
2. Display of welcome message and consent form
3. Display of sample Item
4. Display of items and ACQs

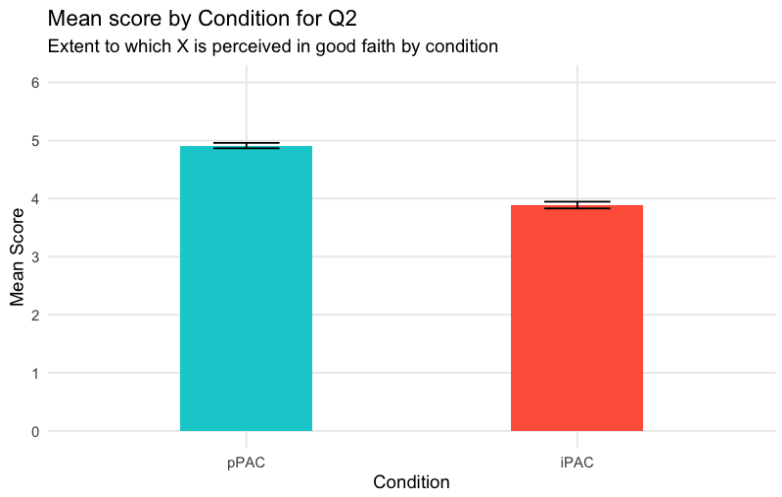
2 Experiment 1 – Results

- Significantly higher mean score for pPAC than iPAC
- Measures were highly correlated with each other (> .77)

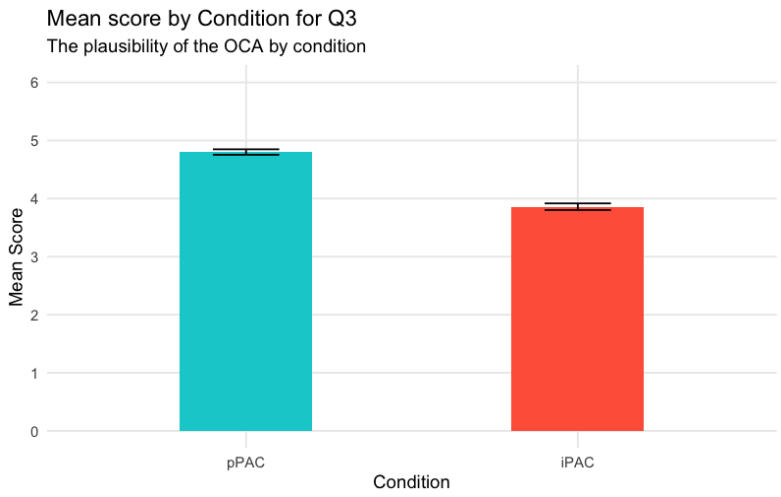
Q1



Q2



Q3



2 Experiment 1 – Discussion

The plausibility of the PAC influences:

- The perception of justification between the PAC and the OCA
- The image of the speaker
- The plausibility of MDs (OCA+PAC)

This suggests that:

- The plausibility of a denial does not only depend on *what* is denied, but also on ***how*** it is denied
- The PAC of a denial is important for the denial as a whole

Similar to arguments

On the argumentativeness of MDs

3 Experiment 2 – Argumentative denials

Goals

Provide evidence for:

- The hypothesis that people treat denials and arguments similarly
- The inherent argumentative function of denials

This is only an **exploratory experiment**

Measures

- Q1: To what extent do you think that X wants to convince Y in X_2 (the fullMD)?
- Q2: To what extent do you think X is giving Y a reason in X_2 (the MD)?

3 Experiment 2 – Sample item

X and Y are siblings. They are discussing the distribution of weekly chores, and Y comes up with an already-made distribution of tasks for both X and Y. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

X_1: "You are always the one deciding who does what chore."

Y_1: "Are you implying that I don't divide chores equally?"

X_2: "I didn't mean that! I meant that I'd also like to decide which chores I do sometimes."

OCA — Arg (PAC)

3 Experiment 2 – Sample item

X and Y are siblings. They are discussing the distribution of weekly chores, and Y comes up with an already-made distribution of tasks for both X and Y. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

X_1: "You are always the one deciding who does what chore."

Y_1: "Are you implying that I don't divide chores equally?"

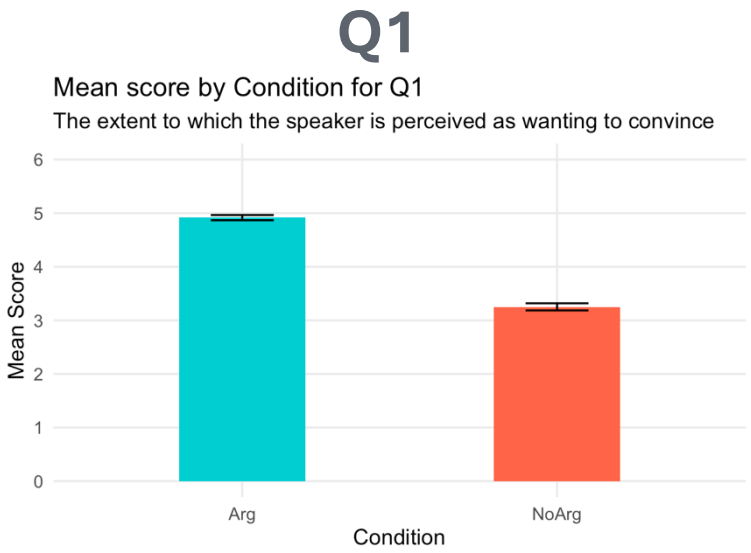
X_2: "I didn't mean that! Sorry that I gave you this impression."

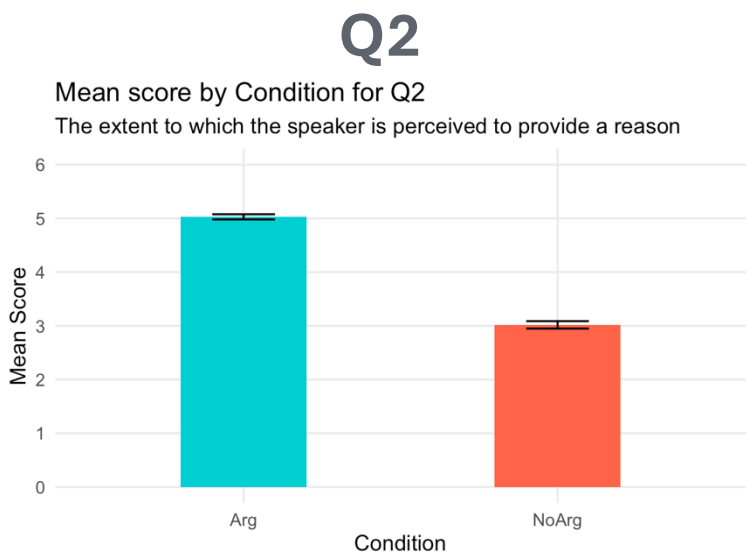
OCA

NoArg (no PAC)

3 Experiment 2 – Results

- Significantly higher mean score for items with PAC (*Arg*) than with no PAC (*NoArg*)





3 Experiment 2 – Discussion

When a PAC is offered in an MD:

- Speakers are perceived as more likely to want to convince
- Speakers are more perceived to be offering a reason than when there is no PAC

This supports the hypothesis that denials are processed similarly to arguments, since these are two of their defining features

3 Conclusion

Our results align with the hypothesis that denials are argumentative

- Theoretically, denials and arguments share many similarities
- Experiment 1 shows:
  - That OCAs and PACs are strongly linked
  - The importance of the PAC's perceived plausibility in the evaluation of the full denial's plausibility
- Experiment 2 gives evidence for the perceived argumentativeness of denials

So, what now?

- On the argumentation side: further experimental evidence for the argumentativeness of denials
- On the pragmatics side: assessment of possible differences in perception between denials of communicative vs. denials of epistemic commitment

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Appendix – Results (tables)

Experiment 1

Q1

Experiment 1

Repeated-measures ANOVA results for Q1

Effect	df	df_error	F	p	η²
(Intercept)	1	98	2,518.820	< .001	0.935
Condition	1	98	62.093	< .001	0.217

Experiment 1

Descriptive statistics for Q1

Condition	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
PAM	99	4.880	0.968	0.097	4.687	5.073
IAM	99	3.696	1.275	0.128	3.441	3.950

Q2

Experiment 1

Repeated-measures ANOVA results for Q2

Effect	df	df_error	F	p	η²
(Intercept)	1	98	2,461.315	< .001	0.934
Condition	1	98	43.494	< .001	0.161

Experiment 1

Descriptive statistics for Q2

Condition	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
PAM	99	4.913	1.007	0.101	4.712	5.114
IAM	99	3.889	1.318	0.132	3.626	4.152

Q3

Experiment 1

Repeated-measures ANOVA results for Q3

Effect	df	df_error	F	p	η²
(Intercept)	1	98	2,486.017	< .001	0.937
Condition	1	98	41.140	< .001	0.149

Experiment 1

Descriptive statistics for Q3

Condition	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
PAM	99	4.802	0.993	0.100	4.604	5.00
IAM	99	3.860	1.255	0.126	3.609	4.11

Appendix – Results (tables)

Experiment 2

Q1

Experiment 2

Repeated-measures ANOVA results for Q1

Effect	df	df_error	F	p	η²
(Intercept)	1	96	2,830.857	< .001	0.940
Condition	1	96	135.011	< .001	0.396

Experiment 2

Descriptive statistics for Q1

Condition	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Arg	97	4.916	0.847	0.086	4.745	5.086
NoArg	97	3.251	1.192	0.121	3.011	3.491

Q2

Experiment 2

Repeated-measures ANOVA results for Q2

Effect	df	df_error	F	p	η²
(Intercept)	1	96	2,806.864	< .001	0.929
Condition	1	96	141.306	< .001	0.449

Experiment 2

Descriptive statistics for Q2

Condition	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Arg	97	5.029	0.910	0.092	4.846	5.213
NoArg	97	3.019	1.296	0.132	2.758	3.280

Appendix – Pretest

Example items

X and Y are in a relationship with each other. They are discussing who to see during the weekend, and Y suggests seeing Y's friends. X responds to Y's proposal in the following way:

X: "You always prioritize meeting your friends over mine."

Based on what X just said, how annoyed do you think X is?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Definitely 6

The conversation between X and Y continues as follows:

Y: "Are you implying that I don't like your friends?"

X: "I didn't mean that!"

Y: "What did you mean then?"

X: "I meant that I'd like to choose who we see sometimes."

Based on the dialogue, to what extent would you find X's last sentence plausible?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Definitely 6

Appendix – Experiment 2

Example Arg item

X and Y are siblings. They are discussing the distribution of weekly chores, and Y comes up with an already-made distribution of tasks for both X and Y. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

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Y_1: "Are you implying that I don't divide chores equally?"

X_2: "I didn't mean that! I meant that I'd also like to decide which chores I do sometimes."

OCA **PAC (Arg)**

Appendix – Experiment 2

Example NoArg item

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X_2: "I didn't mean that! Sorry that I gave you this impression."

OCA **NoArg**