

---

# DARLING

## La dénégation à l'interface de la pragmatique et de l'argumentation

---

Steve Oswald, Bruna Paz Schmid & Lou Odermatt

Université de Fribourg

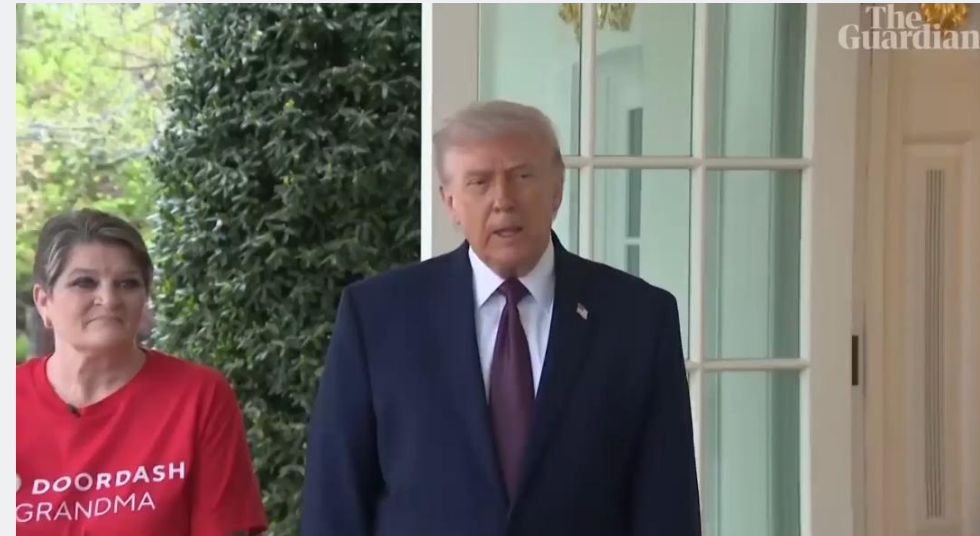
**DARLING**

# DARLING – Deniability in Argumentation and LINGuistics

---

- A propos:
  - projet FNS, catégorie ‘Encouragement de projets’ (Div I)
  - durée: 4 ans (2026-2029)
  - montant: 621’640 CHF
- Equipe:
  - Steve Oswald (chercheur principal), Bruna Paz Schmid (doctorante), Lou Odermatt (doctorant)
- Partenaires du projet:
  - Annette Hautli-Janisz (University of Passau)
  - Jan Albert van Laar (University of Groningen)
  - Diana Mazzarella (University of Neuchâtel)
  - Benedikt Pirker (University of Bern)

# Un exemple récent (13.04.2026)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDslXsg6gM0>

3 points à relever:

- l'exemple concerne ce que Trump a voulu dire en partageant cette image
- notre évaluation normative de sa dénégation
- la structure argumentative de sa dénégation

# Lacunes dans la recherche

---

- Pas d'**étude de corpus** sur les ressources, fonctions et usages de la dénégation
  - → besoin de **données**
- Peu d'études sur les **effets rhétoriques** de différents types de dénégation
  - toutes les études relèvent la question de la plausibilité des dénégations, certaines montrent qu'il en existe plusieurs types pragmatiques
  - → besoin **typologique: types pragmatiques et effets rhétoriques associés**
- Il n'y a aucun modèle argumentatif de la dénégation
  - or c'est une stratégie argumentative dynamique sur plusieurs tours de parole
  - besoin d'un **modèle argumentatif dialectique** de la dénégation

# Objectifs du projet

---

**O1:** produire un **modèle pragmatique de la dénégation** qui tienne compte de ses aspects **linguistiques, rhétoriques et dialectiques**

**O2:** produire un **corpus annoté** pour les **propriétés argumentatives** de la dénégation dans le discours naturel

**O3:** développer un **inventaire d'effets rhétoriques** pour différents types et formulations de dénégation

**O4:** décrire et expliquer les **perceptions normatives** liées à la **plausibilité** de ces types de dénégation

**O5:** fournir un modèle de la dénégation qui soit **empiriquement justifié**, fondé sur des **données** et **axé sur l'utilisateur** du langage pour mieux comprendre son utilisation stratégique en contexte juridique et politique

# 2 volets, 2 méthodologies

---

- Volet 1: linguistique de corpus
  - discours politique + discours juridique
  - → O1 + O2
- Volet 2: pragmatique expérimentale
  - expériences sur différents types de dénégation et leurs effets (perceptions normatives, effets rhétoriques)
  - → O3 + O4
- Intégration: comparaison des deux volets → O5

# Venez nous voir et nous parler!

- Session de posters A (10:05-11:15)
- Présentation de 2 expériences portant sur:
  - la plausibilité des dénégations
  - la nature argumentative de la dénégation

UNIFR Swiss National Science Foundation

## DARLING

### Deniability in ARGumentation and LINGuistics

Lou Odermatt, Bruna Paz Schmid, and Steve Oswald

#### What are (metalinguistic) denials?

**Metalinguistic denials (working definition)**  
Metalinguistic conversational moves by which a speaker provides an alternative interpretation of one of their previous utterances that is different from the one that their audience derived.

**Internal structure (building on Mazzarella (2021))**  
Full-fledged denials:  
- Objection to meaning attribution (OMA)  
- Alternative meaning (AM)  
"I didn't mean X, I meant Y"

#### Experiment 1: Plausibility and denials

**Rationale for Experiment 1: What makes a denial plausible?**  
If a denial's plausibility solely depended on what is denied (i.e., on an utterance's deniability as in Pinker (2007)), most utterances would have deniability (Dew, 2015). This suggests that the plausibility of a denial does not only depend on what is denied (e.g., Kordami et al., 2023; Roggiani et al., 2023), but also on how it is denied.

From a relevance-theoretic perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), a judgement of plausibility can be said to follow from the extent to which the denial is found relevant (Mazzarella, 2021; Oswald, 2022). Yes, this does not clarify whether the whole denial or only part of it needs to be found relevant.

Commitment contribution (e.g., Manning et al., 2016; Oswald, 2015), is also a central notion when studying the plausibility of denials, because what is denied is the meaning that is attributed to the speaker. As shown in a series of experiments (Dew, 2015), the speaker's commitment to the hearer's interpretation decreases if a salient and likely alternative meaning is provided. This in turn suggests that the plausibility of the AM of a denial could influence the plausibility of the denial as a whole. Experiment 1 aims at providing experimental support for this claim.

**Method**  
We used a counterbalanced within-subject design with two pretested conditions (plausible and implausible alternative meanings) to test three measures: extent to which the AM is perceived as justifying the OMA, extent to which X is perceived as being in good faith, and extent to which the OMA is perceived as being plausible.

**Hypotheses and predictions**  
Our (preregistered) hypotheses were that the plausibility of the AM would significantly influence (i) the perceived plausibility of the OMA, (ii) the perceived level of the speaker being in good faith, and (iii) the perceived plausibility of the denial as a whole (OMA + AM). We predicted that all of these measures would be significantly higher in the plausible condition than in the implausible condition.

**Material**  
- 16 dialogues (with context)  
- Between two characters  
- Topics were neutral  
- Randomised appearance  
- Two conditions  
- AM (plausible AM)  
- AM (implausible AM)

**Example Item:**  
X: I've been thinking about the distribution of weekly chores, and I come up with an extremely neat distribution of tasks for both of us. The dialogue proceeds as follows:  
Y: "You are always the one deciding who does what chores."  
X: "I'm not trying to be that much more equal."  
Y: "I didn't mean that."  
X: "I mean, for if I do this, then I decide which chores I do sometimes." AM (here AM)

**Results**  
Bar charts showing perceived plausibility scores for OMA, speaker in good faith, and denial as a whole across plausible and implausible AM conditions.

#### Denials as arguments

**Arguments**  
1. Arguments articulate premises with conclusions (Whorapp, 2006, p. 16). Premises are used to justify the conclusions.  
2. Arguments may contain argumentative indicators (see van Eemeren et al. (2007)) such as, for example, because.  
3. Arguments are anchored in a context of disagreement or doubt (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).  
4. The normative acceptability of arguments depends, at least partly, on the acceptability of its premises.

**Denials**  
1. Denials are also structured in two parts, with one part (the AM) being used to justify the other part (the OMA).  
2. The two parts of a denial can be linked through an argumentative indicator. For example, in "I didn't mean X, because I meant Y".  
3. Denials are anchored in argumentative contexts, given that denials are used to manage disagreement.  
4. The acceptability (i.e., plausibility) of a denial also depends on the plausibility of its alternative meaning (see results Experiment 1).

#### Experiment 2: the argumentative function of denials

**Goals**  
The goal of this exploratory experiment is to provide evidence for (i) the hypothesis that people treat arguments and denials similarly, and (ii) the inherent argumentative function of denials.

**Method**  
We used a counterbalanced within-subject design with two conditions (Arg and NoArg denials) to test two measures: extent to which the presence of an AM in a denial makes a character be perceived as wanting to convince more, and the extent to which the presence of an AM in a denial makes a character be perceived as providing a reason.

**Hypotheses and predictions**  
We hypothesized that the presence of an AM in a denial (i.e., the Arg condition), as opposed to the presence of another type of follow-up to the OMA (i.e., the NoArg condition), significantly influences the argumentative function of the denial. We predicted that the Arg condition will have significantly higher scores for both measures than the NoArg condition.

**Material**  
For this exploratory experiment, we took 12 of the 16 items from Experiment 1, adapted their structure to accommodate a less obvious argumentative presentation, and changed the conditions to either Arg (i.e., an OMA followed by an AM) or NoArg (i.e., an OMA followed by another type of utterance, such as "Sorry that I gave you this impression").

**Results**  
Bar charts showing scores for perceived convincingness and reason-providing across Arg and NoArg conditions.

To fully confirm our claim, more evidence is needed. For instance by incorporating an Arg/NoArg condition to the experiment to compare denials to arguments.