

Deniability in **AR**gumentation and **LIN**Guistics

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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 (Peet, 2015). This suggests that the plausibility of a denial does not only depend on *what* is denied (e.g., Bonalumi et al., 2023; Boogaart et al., 2021), 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). Yet, this does not clarify whether the whole denial or only part of it needs to be found relevant.

Commitment attribution (e.g., Morency et al., 2008; Oswald, 2016), is also a central notion when analyzing the plausibility of denials, because what is denied is the meaning that is attributed to the speaker. As shown in a series of experiments (Braun, 2024), 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
- Randomized appearance
- Two conditions
 - PAM (*plausible* AM)
 - IAM (*implausible* AM)

Example 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:

X₁: “You are always the one deciding who does what chore.”

Y₁: “Are you implying that I don’t divide chores equally?”

X₂: “I didn’t mean that!” OMA

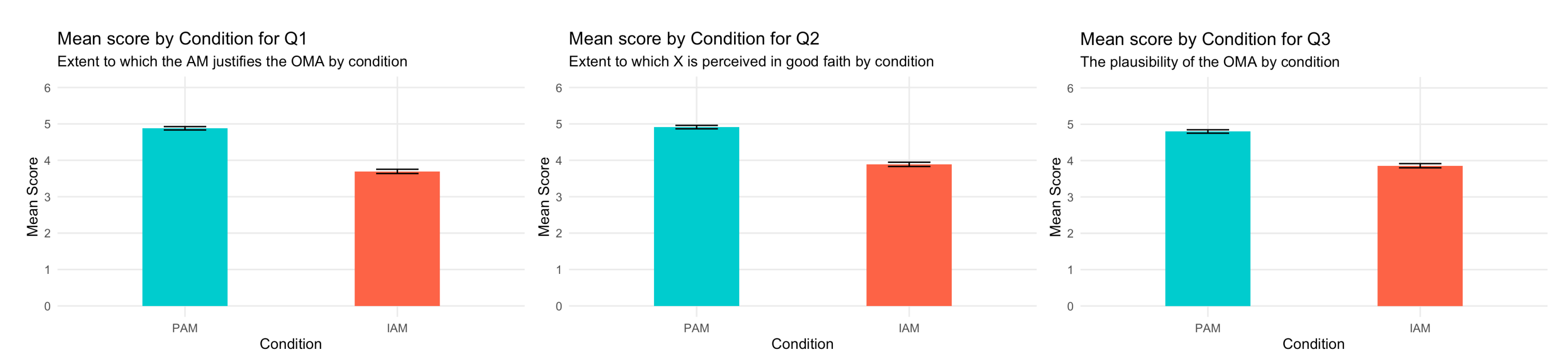
Y₂: “How so?”

X₃: “I meant that I’d also like to decide which chores I do sometimes.” AM (here PAM)

Discussion

Results indicate a higher perceived plausibility for the plausible AM condition for all three measures. This supports our claim that the plausibility of a denial does not only depend on *what* but also on *how* it is denied. Moreover, the results point to a resemblance between denials and arguments.

Results



Denials as arguments

Arguments

1. Arguments articulate premises with conclusions (Wholrapp, 2026, 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 premise(s).

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. p
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

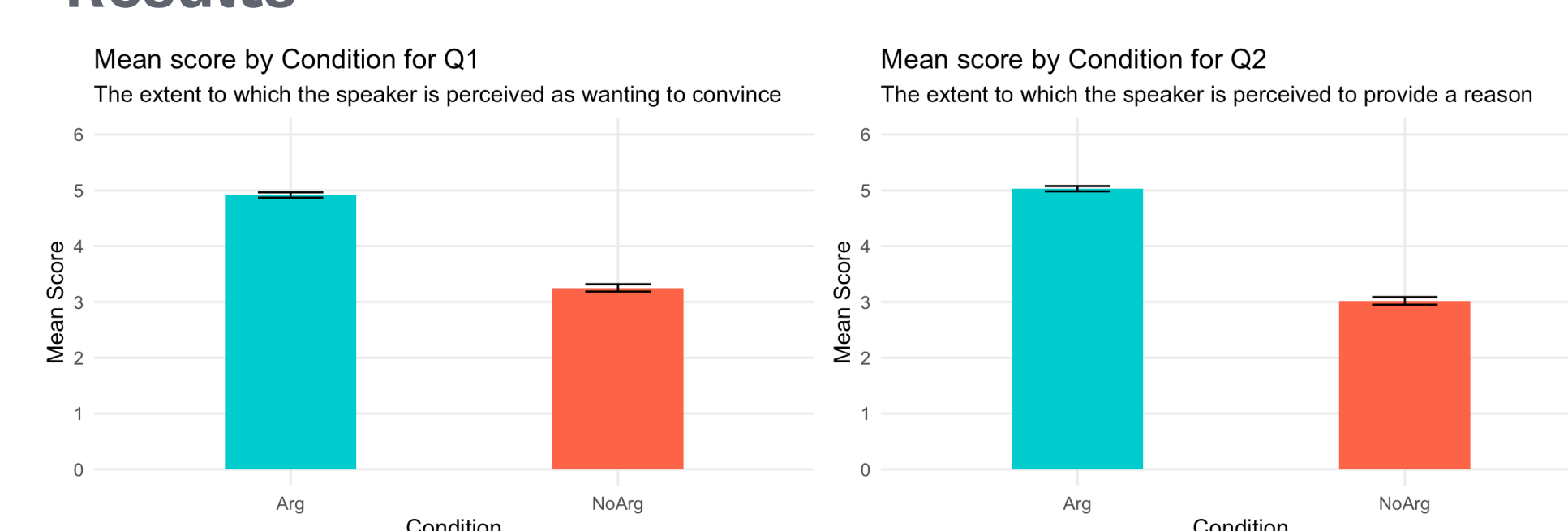
For this exploratory experiment, we took 12 of the 16 items from Experiment 1, adapted their structure to accommodate a less obvious argumentative presentation, and changed the conditions to either *Arg* (i.e., an OMA followed by an PAM) or *NoArg* (i.e., an OMA followed by another utterance, such as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

Discussion

The results of this second experiment indicate a higher perceived argumentativeness when the OMA is accompanied by an AM than when it’s accompanied by another type of utterance. This supports the hypothesis of a perceived argumentative function to denials.

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

Results



Bibliography:

