Insinuated vs Asserted Ad Hominem: An Experimental Approach to their Rhetorical Effectiveness on Ethos

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ABSTRACT: As they are usually plausibly deniable and not explicitly stated, insinuations are assumed to preserve the image speakers want to project to their audience. We experimentally investigated the effect of insinuated ad hominem on perceived ability, benevolence and integrity – building on Mayer et al. (1995)'s framework for trust assessment. We assumed and observed that insinuated ad hominem attacks help mitigate the consequences of personal attacks on these characteristics when competing with asserted ad hominem attacks.

KEYWORDS: ad hominem arguments, ethos, experimental pragmatics, insinuation, rhetoric, trust

1. INTRODUCTION

In a campaign meeting during the 2016 US presidential race, Donald Trump referred to Hillary Clinton's plans regarding the 2nd Amendment. He told his audience: "Hillary wants to abolish – essentially abolish the 2nd amendment. By the way, and if she gets to pick... (crowd booing) if she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks, although... (Trump pausing) *the second Amendment people maybe there is* I don't know... (crowd laughing)" (Corasaniti & Haberman, 2016). After being accused of implicitly inciting Second Amendment (henceforth, 2A) supporters to shoot Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump clarified his point on Twitter: "Media desperate to distract from Clinton's anti-2A stance. I said pro-2A citizens must organize and get out to vote to save our Constitution!" (Donald J. Trump, 2016), thereby claiming that he meant that 2A supporters should vote for him, not that they should kill his opponent. Trump's utterance conveys controversial content in the form of an insinuation against his political rival. In his tweet, he provides himself with a "way out", not only by denying his intention to insinuate but also by suggesting a much safer alternative interpretation of his words and accusing the media of malicious intent. Yet, whatever the politician's intention, the crowd seems to have grasped a message that provoked laughter.

Insinuations are classically defined as "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). The example given above gives us a glimpse into the many rhetorical advantages that insinuation can bring: it allows speakers to avoid reputational sanctions and preserve the image they want to project to the audience (by suggesting an alternative 'safe' interpretation), to hold the audience responsible for reaching a disparaging interpretation

(by blaming the "desperate" media), to stain the reputation of a target, and to provoke laughter and possible complicity with the audience (here, with the crowd, who ended up laughing at his words, as can be seen in the background of the video). Because they are likely to be rhetorically effective, it stands to reason that insinuations can play a role in an argumentative setting. More specifically, and to the extent that they are used to disparage, it seems reasonable to assume that they may be used in personal attacks, in particular to express the abusive variant of the *Ad hominem* (AH) argument.

Abusive AH "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). The corresponding argument scheme is used as a refutation of someone's claim: the speaker who launches the AH expresses their disagreement ("I don't think A") and supports it by an explicit[1] personal attack ("because [+ personal attack]"). van Eemeren et al. (2000) experimentally investigated the normative acceptability of various types of asserted AH (henceforth AAH), namely the abusive, the circumstantial, and the *tu quoque* variants, while comparing them to sound argumentation. They found that the perceived reasonableness of either AAH argument was lower than that of sound arguments.

In our work, we explore the idea that insinuations could be incorporated into this argumentative structure by playing the role of the reason behind the disagreement. The structure would then be a disagreement ("I don't think A") supported by an insinuated personal attack ("because [+ insinuation]"). In the same vein as van Eemeren et al.'s (2009) experiment, we assume that an insinuated AH (henceforth IAH) is perceived as more reasonable than an AAH.

The relevant literature has started to compare effects of explicit vs. implicit meaning in relation to personal attacks. Among other contributions, Mazzarella et al. (2018) experimentally found that speakers implying false accusations (using presuppositions and implicatures) risk lower reputational sanctions than speakers asserting them. Oswald (2022) also suggests that insinuation protects the speaker's image because the implicit content of insinuations can be plausibly deniable. For our purposes, we note that "image" projected by the speaker *during* the discourse can be translated into the "ethos" in Aristotelian terms. For Aristotle (Aristotle & Barnes, 1995), *ethos* is made up of three elements: practical wisdom (*phronesis*), goodwill (*eunoia*), and reliability/honesty (*arete*). Our purpose in this study is to assess whether IAH behaves differently than AAH when it comes to assessing these *ethotic* dimensions.

In their Model of Organisational Trust (MOT), Mayer et al. (1995) identified the components of trust as three elements parallel to those that make up the Aristotelian *ethos* and define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Deciding to trust, that is, to make oneself vulnerable is the result of an assessment of three criteria, namely: ability (how skilled, expert or competent the person in the domain under consideration is), benevolence (how much the person cares for me and my interests), and integrity (how honest, fair and sincere the person is). This model has been notably tested in a corpus study of the discursive and pragmatic dynamics of trust-repair strategies used

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[1] Nothing in Walton's definition specifies that the attack must be explicit (although he may have implied it), which is why we are careful to distinguish between *asserted* ad hominem (AAH) and *insinuated* ad hominem (IAH).

by BP after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 (Fuoli & Paradis, 2014) or the analysis of strategies used by fictitious pharmaceutical companies in the denial of allegations to maintain the population's trust (Fuoli & Hart, 2018).

While many studies have described the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuations, only some, if any, have tested it experimentally, let alone in an argumentative setting, and thus hypotheses remain mainly theoretical and in need of robust empirical evidence. The advantage of the MOT is that it offers an interesting experimental setup by dividing trust (which is challenging to define unequivocally) into three less abstract components. Our goal is to operationalise the latter into an experimental design to assess whether these three criteria may be influenced by *how* speakers phrase their attacks. In other words, we are concerned here with whether pragmatic phenomena affect rhetorical phenomena. By only manipulating the explicitness of the reason given to support the disagreement, we assume that speakers will be perceived as having more ability, benevolence and integrity when they phrase their personal attacks implicitly instead of explicitly.

Section 2 sets out our experimental methodology testing the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuated ad hominem on *ethos*. Section 3 presents the data analysis strategy and the results we obtained. Section 4 concluded with a discussion of our findings and experimental manipulations that could overcome potential limitations and develop new directions of investigation.

2. METHOD

The main difference between the study of van Eemeren et al. (2009) and ours is that we are not interested in the perceived reasonableness of the AH arguments but in their effect on the trust placed in the insinuating speakers. Moreover, only the implicitness of the personal attack in the justification of the disagreement was manipulated and only AH arguments of the abusive type were used. Finally, we ensured that only the reasons for disagreement contained the attack, not the formulation of the disagreement. The reason for implementing this constraint systematically comes from an observation of van Eemeren et al. (2009)'s experiment, which we think may turn out to be problematic for the consistency of our items. In their study, van Eemeren et al. contrasted formulations of disagreement that already seemed to attack the proponent in the standpoint (e.g., "What do *you* know about ethics? [+ personal attack]" or "*You* can't judge anything about this! [+ personal attack]") to formulations in which the standpoint did not contain any attack, combined to sound arguments (e.g., "I don't believe *that* at all! [+ sound argument]" or "No one believes *that*! [+ sound argument]"; emphasis added).

Our items were structured as follows (see Figure 1 for sample item and structure): a context is presented, and a dialogue unfolds afterwards. In the dialogue, the first character (A) defends a claim with which the second character (B) disagrees. B then supports the disagreement with either (i) an argument with an asserted attack (AAH), (ii) an argument with the same attack, but insinuated (IAH), or (iii) a neutral and sound argument without any personal attack (Neu). The latter condition was added to replicate the results on the perceived reasonableness of van Eemeren et al. (2009) with the measures on trust and to control the effectiveness of our attacks. Thirty-nine dialogues were created and used in our

experiment, each presented under one condition. Participants were distributed into three lists according to a Latin square design and were presented with the three conditions.

To make sure that the terms "ability", "benevolence", and "integrity" had been acquired, participants went through a training session which featured a slide with definitions (according to Mayer and Davis, 1999, p. 124, with minor changes) which they were asked to read carefully, and were told that there would be a knowledge check stage after the sample item. Thus, *ability* was defined as a "group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that allow a party to have influence within some domain. [For instance,] for a member of management, this [includes] both the formal and informal influence they are perceived to have in the organisation, as well as their perceived competence and skills". *Benevolence* was defined as the "extent to which a trustee [(i.e., the one who is trusted)] is believed to want to do good to the trustor [(i.e., the one who trusts)], aside from [personal interest]. [For instance,] if an employee believes a manager cares about the employee's interests, the manager will be seen as having benevolence for the employee.". Finally, *Integrity* was presented as the "trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable. This [includes] not only that a manager [observes] values that the employee sees as positive, but also that the manager acts in a way that is consistent with [these] values".

Figure 1
Sample item with structure and conditions
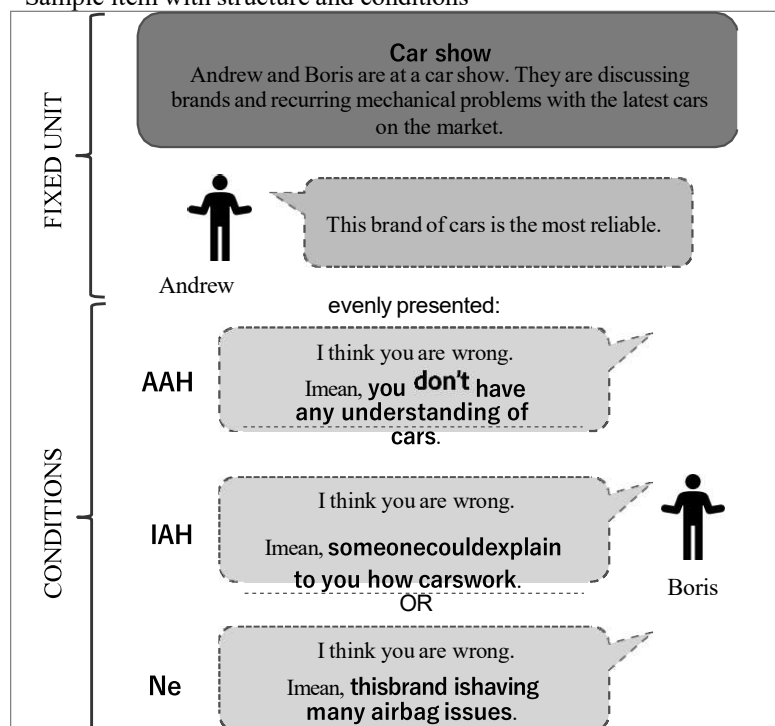
Once the definitions were assimilated, participants went through the structure of the dialogues with a sample item where the structure of each element was presented (context, 1st claim, 2nd claim consisting of a disagreement followed by an argument, response to measures of trust, etc.). At the end of the training session, participants had to drag the

definitions presented previously and drop them under the appropriate characteristic of trust. They could not proceed until the definitions had been correctly assigned. For each item, the three characteristics presented in random order had to be assessed on an 11-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (absolutely).

Fifty participants were recruited on the Prolific platform (prolific.co), completed the questionnaire (see Table 1 for sample demographics) and paid for their contribution. All participants were fluent and first-language English speakers. The theoretical framework, number of participants, assumptions and data analysis strategy were preregistered.

Table 1
Sample demographics, completion and remuneration

Sample size	50
Age (years)	
m (*sd*)	35.44 (11.74)
range	[20 − 71]
Gender	
Female	23 (46%)
Male	26 (52%)
Other	1 (2%)
Completion (min)	
mdn (*IQR*)	30.29 (21.54)
Remuneration (£/h)	£3.15 (£6.20/h)

Note. n indicates sample sizes. *m* and *sd* indicate means and standard deviations, respectively. *mdn* and *IQR* indicate median and interquartile range, respectively.

3. RESULTS

To test our hypotheses and avoid fixed effect fallacies by separating by-participant and by-item analyses, linear mixed models (LMM) have been computed in R. These LMM analyses allow the variability of the items and participants to be taken into account and controlled when calculating the effects of our factors. The LMM included the argument condition, trust characteristics and their interaction as fixed factors, and the items and participants as random intercepts. To test our hypotheses, post hoc tests within the LMM will be carried out to determine for which *ethos* characteristics IAH and AAH differ.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics on the effect of argument condition on trust characteristics

	Ability	**Benevolence**	**Integrity**
Argument condition, *m* (*sd*)			
Asserted AH (AAH)	3.35 (1.59)	2.47 (1.41)	3.20 (1.48)
Insinuated AH (IAH)	3.73 (1.52)	3.06 (1.50)	3.78 (1.36)
Neutral argument (Neu)	6.17 (1.30)	5.52 (1.17)	6.05 (1.27)

Note. n indicates sample sizes. *m* and *sd* indicate means and standard deviations, respectively.

Figure 2

Graphical representation and effect sizes of the effect of argument condition on trust characteristics
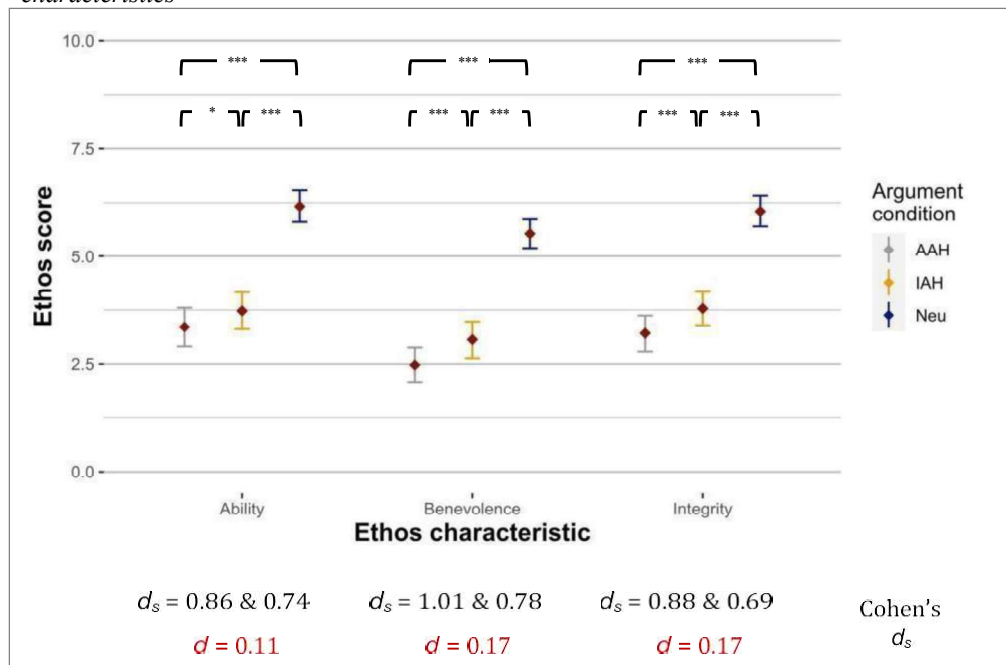
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. *** indicates *p* < .001. * indicates *p* < .05. AAH, IAH, and Neu represent Asserted Ad Hominem, Insinuated Ad Hominem, and Neutral arguments, respectively. Cohen's d_s in black represent effect sizes of the Neu-AAH and Neu- IAH differences, respectively. Cohen's *d* in red represents effect sizes of the AAH-IAH differences.

Means, confidence intervals of the argument and trust conditions and effect sizes are displayed in Figure 2, and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. We have found that neutral arguments are more trust-eliciting than AH arguments for each trust characteristic. These findings replicate those of van Eemeren et al. (2009) on measures of trust within a more standardised and controlled protocol. In line with our hypotheses, we found that IAH is significantly more trust-eliciting than AAH in each trust characteristic. The difference between AAH and IAH is minor in terms of perceived ability. Such a more

negligible difference makes sense in that both conditions are not supposed to show any asymmetry in expertise, as their content is presumed to be similar. In the contrast between Neu and AH, this difference in ability is most substantial because Neu puts forward elements that can testify to some knowledge of the proponent in the issue.

4. DISCUSSION

In this experiment, we observed that pragmatic variations in the formulation of the personal attack do influence rhetorical effects. As a reminder, we confirmed that insinuations are preferred to asserted attacks when assessing the trust that can be placed in a speaker. Nevertheless, arguments without attacks (i.e., Neu) remain by far the preferred method for supporting disagreement. This is not only in line with van Eemeren et al. (2009) results but also indicates that participants identify something problematic in AH arguments.

The first point to emerge from these results is that insinuation does not only seem to protect the image of speakers *after* denial (i.e., after the speaker has resorted to plausible deniability), in the case where they are accused of having intended a problematic statement, but also *before* any form of denial. In other words, you are better off, in terms of *ethos*, if you insinuate, rather than assert a personal attack. There are several possible explanations for this finding. Firstly, it could be explained by politeness considerations. The attack behind the argument is less confrontational and face-threatening, more 'softened' and appears to be more readily accepted when it remains implicit, which is a hallmark of implicit face threats (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indeed, as indicated by our results, insinuating speakers are perceived as more benevolent or, under the definition assimilated by our participants, they are "believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from [personal interests]". Thus, independently from the simple aim of being able to deny any hurtful comment if accused, speakers may have been perceived as not having had the intention to use malicious words towards a person that could be their friend or colleague.

The experiment reported here was the fourth in a series testing the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuations in an argumentative setting (see de Oliveira et al., in press). The first experiment, which measured to what extent participants thought the disagreement was supported by the personal attack, did not establish any difference between IAH and AAH. We hypothesised that this was because asking participants to judge whether the personal attack (however it may have been conveyed) supports the disagreement might have focused their attention on the *content* of the attack rather than on the way it was formulated – and, consequently, since the content of IAH is extremely similar to that of AAH, we might have unwittingly lost the effect of insinuation altogether. In our second experiment, which we ran with all items previously elaborated (and those which the experiment reported here used as well), we found that a disagreement supported by an IAH was in fact still perceived as more persuasive than a disagreement supported by an AAH. These findings may be supported by the fact that insinuating speakers are perceived as more trustworthy, which, in turn, influences the extent to which their claims are perceived as more persuasive. However, we could not at that point state any causal or temporality with certainty and were limited to assuming a correlation between these two phenomena, which would have to be tested in a follow-up study. Our limitation with that second experiment was that, unlike the fourth study we reported above, we did not define

"persuasiveness" to the participants and left them free to interpret it. It is thus also possible that participants judged the adequacy of the disagreeing reply rather than its persuasiveness. All these reasons led us to a penultimate experiment, in which we found no difference between IAH and AAH in agreement with either the proponent or the opponent. This supported the marginal effect in the second study, where the rhetorical interest of insinuations does not seem to be found to lie entirely in its persuasive force. We were thus led to conclude that the perceived persuasiveness of insinuations, which we established in the second experiment, does not seem to rest on issues of content, namely on *logos*, but that the *ethotic* implications of the use of insinuation as a personal attack may be relevant here – which is what we indeed found in the experiment described above.

Now, we are aware of at least three limitations in our study. Even though IAH may differ from AAH, the former arguments remained low on the scale compared with neutral arguments. It may be that neutral arguments contrast too strongly with AH arguments and reduce the preference for the latter: removing neutral arguments in our experimental design could widen this difference between AAH and IAH. A second alternative would have been to direct personal attacks toward a third person not involved in the conversation. This way, insinuators would no longer be seen as confrontational towards their interlocutor and could be better regarded (in terms of persuasion, agreement and image). This option would allow us to determine whether personal attacks that are insinuated perform even better rhetorically once we remove them from a dialogue in which they target the addressee – which seems to be problematic also for politeness reasons, as face-threats, be they explicit or implicit, conveyed to the addressee might be perceived as more problematic than those directed at a non-present third party. Finally, the way opponents expressed their disagreement in their standpoint also appears to be conflictive in our items, as expressing disagreement as "I think *you* are wrong" might be tantamount to engaging in a conflict about the person. A more neutral expression such as "I don't believe *that*" would have the advantage of keeping the conflict at the level of opinions instead of making it personal. As a result, IAH could leave more room for innocuous interpretations as the disagreement is expressed in more open terms.

5. CONCLUSION

These results are the first to experimentally test the rhetorical effectiveness of insinuations in *ad hominem* arguments. They provide the first set of evidence on essentially theoretical assumptions and open up several avenues of research in experimental pragmatics, mainly with regard to implicit meaning as it is used in argumentative settings. It has been observed that insinuations are not preferred tools for persuading an audience, but above all, that they seem to positively affect the perception of how trustworthy the insinuator is in the eyes of their audience. Whether this effect carries over to other directions evoked in what precedes, and whether we can establish it more prominently is the object of current experimental work at the interface of pragmatics and argumentation.

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