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Linguistic Choices and Argumentative Effects: An Experimental Investigation of Presentational Means in the ‘Van Gelder’ Court Case

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Abstract

This study assesses whether the linguistic choices that Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen identified in the so-called ‘Van Gelder’ court case (as reported in a.o. *Journal of Argumentation in Context* 10(1), 97-120, 2021) have empirically demonstrable argumentative effects. This case revolves around proceedings that Yuri van Gelder brought against the Dutch Olympic committee, given his removal from the Olympic gymnastics final due to misbehaviour. Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen’s analysis demonstrates that the lawyers used a variety of linguistic choices in their pleas that are argumentatively instrumental for defending their position: Van Gelder’s lawyer uses a series of linguistic choices that serve to minimise the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour and paint him as a victim, while the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer’s linguistic choices maximise the reprehensibility of the behaviour and frame Van Gelder as solely responsible for his situation.

209 participants read either an original or a manipulated fragment of one of the pleas and evaluated the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour, his responsibility for the situation and their agreement with the judge’s decision (which favoured the Dutch Olympic committee). Results suggest that whether participants had read the original or the manipulated plea did not affect their evaluations. The content of the pleas did matter, however, as participants who read the plea by the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer were more negative about Van Gelder than those who had read Van Gelder’s lawyer’s plea. While the topical selection choices thus do seem to affect readers’ evaluations, our linguistic manipulations of the argumentative moves may have been too subtle to make a difference.

Keywords Linguistic choices · Presentational dimension of argumentation · Quantitative research · Text manipulation

1 Introduction

In the study of argumentation, the wording or linguistic design of argumentative moves is widely acknowledged to be an important instrument for arguers to reach their argumentative goals.¹ According to the framework of Strategic Manoeuvring (Van Eemeren 2018; Eemeren 2010), for instance, argumentative moves consist of three (inseparable) aspects: choices from the topical potential, presentational choices and adaptation of both types of choices to audience demand. In this framework, linguistic choices are an important subset of presentational choices (Van Eemeren 2010, p. 119). They are seen as a means that arguers can use to steer the discourse toward the achievement of certain communicative and interactional effects, as linguistic variants offer different ‘perspectives’ (Van Eemeren 2010, pp. 119–120) on the phenomena described. That is, they provide different ‘construals’ of objects or states of affairs in reality (Stukker and Verhagen 2019, pp. 26–32; Hart 2025, pp. 36–37; Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021, pp. 101–102; Langacker 1990, p. 61). In this view, it makes a difference whether a glass is described as half-full or half-empty, migrants are depicted as ‘refugees’ or ‘fortune seekers’, whether a country has started a ‘special military operation’ or a ‘war’, etc., since such alternative phrasings differ in the kind of ‘framing’ of the discourse they provide (Van Eemeren 2010, p. 119). This linguistic framing matters for how readers or listeners appreciate a phenomenon or state of affairs, a conclusion that is also supported by experimental research (see, e.g., Holleman & Pander Maat 2009; Levin, Schneider & Gaeth 1998; Fausey and Matlock 2011 and the references mentioned in Sect. 2 of this paper). Investigating effects of different ‘construals’ is thus interesting for the study of argumentation, as they have the potential to be effective in convincing an audience of a particular standpoint (Van Leeuwen and Van Haaften 2025).²

Of course, argumentative consequences of linguistic construals are not only studied within the framework of Strategic Manoeuvring (for a concise overview of such studies, see Boogaart et al. 2021, p. 3), but also in other approaches to argumentation. For instance, there is a growing body of recent research that examines the argumentative effects of construals through the lens of argumentative inferences triggered by linguistic (and broader semiotic) choices in highly polarised societal contexts such as debates around migration (cf., e.g., Serafis et al. 2021; Serafis et al. 2020). In this line of research, argumentation-theoretical insights (especially from the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti and Greco 2019) are integrated with insights from the Dis-

¹ This paper is based on Van Leeuwen, De Mulder & Den Hollander (2022), published in Dutch in *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing* 44 (3), 156–175, <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVT2022.3.002.LEEU>.

² According to the theory of Strategic Manoeuvring, a certain ‘framing’ of argumentative discourse is not only the result of (systematic) presentational choices, but also encompasses (systematic) choices with respect to the other two aspects of strategic manoeuvring, i.e., topical potential and audience demand (cf. Van Poppel 2013, p. 38; Van Haaften 2021, p. 10). From this perspective, ultimately, a particular framing of argumentative discourse is thus the result of (systematic) choices in terms of all three aspects of strategic manoeuvring, leading to a particular ‘argumentative style’ (Van Eemeren 2018; Van Eemeren and Van Haaften 2026). In this paper, we only focus on the presentational dimension, given that we only assess argumentative effects of linguistic choices. However, we recognise that it would be interesting to take into account the two other aspects of strategic manoeuvring as well (see also Sect. 5 in which we suggest this as a direction for future research).

course Historical Approach to Critical Discourse Studies (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Another example is the Discourse Historical Approach itself, in which explicit connections between argumentation and linguistic choices are made as well (Reisigl and Wodak 2016; see also, e.g., Boukala 2019).

The various approaches to argumentation in which the ‘construal function’ of linguistic choices is analysed have in common that empirical research into the argumentative consequences of linguistic choices is mostly qualitative in nature (cf. Van Eemeren & Van Haften 2023, p. 347). Claims about argumentative effects of linguistic choices are thus often claims about *assumed* effects (Van Leeuwen and Van Haften 2025): on the basis of a linguistic (i.e., semantic and/or pragmatic) analysis of the language forms and introspection, it is considered *plausible* that formulation choices have certain argumentative effects. This procedure can be illustrated with the following (fictional) example. Imagine a situation in which residents living near a touristic attraction in Amsterdam regularly find bicycles barring access to their houses and decide to put up a sign to dissuade people from doing this. The residents’ standpoint could be formulated as (1) or (2):

- (1) The residents prohibit parking bicycles in front of these houses.
- (2) Parking bicycles in front of these houses is prohibited.

In (1) and (2) the same standpoint is formulated, but this standpoint is construed in different ways by using the active or passive voice, respectively. More precisely, in (2) an agentless passive is used, in which it is left implicit who is responsible for the action expressed in the verb (Siewierska 1984). As a consequence, in (2), in contrast to (1), the standpoint is construed in such a way that it remains vague who is prohibiting the parking of bicycles. If the residents’ aim is to ensure that bicycles are not parked in prohibited areas, (2) is probably the more effective way to formulate their standpoint: by not mentioning under whose authority exactly the ban falls, the standpoint in (2) gets more general validity and thus minimises the room for discussion, making it more likely to be followed.

This brief example illustrates how, in the study of argumentation, claims about argumentative effects of linguistic choices are traditionally made: insights about the semantic and/or pragmatic characteristics of the phrasings involved are used to describe the kind of construals that these phrasings provide and an analysis is offered regarding how these construals are used argumentatively. In the example, insights about the difference in construal between an active and agentless passive construction are thus used to make motivated claims about the room for discussion that is offered regarding the standpoint. Such claims about the argumentative function of linguistic choices are not only substantiated by linguistic analysis, but also by an appeal to shared intuitions among language users: a critical reader can test the plausibility of the analysis (such as the one provided above) by checking it against their own linguistic intuitions (cf. Van Leeuwen and Van Haften 2025).

All in all, the way in which claims about argumentative effects of linguistic choices are traditionally made in the study of argumentation can be said to have a well-founded and intersubjective basis (cf. Van Leeuwen and Van Haften 2025, p. 131; Stukker and Verhagen 2019, pp. 56–57; Van Leeuwen 2015, p. 180). At the

same time, however, it is clear that such claims still consist of motivated *hypotheses*. Applied to the example above, we can thus ask the question whether the construal in (2) really does evoke less room for discussion than the formulation in (1) in terms of the perceptions of those exposed to the standpoint. That is, whether it is the more effective formulation in actual practice.

In order to study whether alleged argumentative effects *actually* occur, linguistic analysis of construals and linguistic intuition is not enough: experimental research building on these argumentative-analytic insights is also needed. As Oswald (2023, p. 153) remarks, such investigations are starting to be developed in the field (see also Schumann 2025, pp. 83–103). The aim of this paper is to contribute to this development, by focusing on argumentative texts that have actually been used in a judicial context and for which the argumentative functions of linguistic choices have been systematically analysed from an argumentation-theoretical perspective. The case that we focus on, the so-called ‘Van Gelder case’, revolves around summary proceedings that gymnast Yuri van Gelder brought against the Dutch Olympic committee, as they had removed him from the Olympic gymnastics final in 2016 due to misbehaviour. Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018)³ provide an in-depth linguistic-stylistic and argumentative analysis of the lawyers’ pleas in this case. They demonstrate that during the court case, both Van Gelder’s lawyer and the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer argued strategically by using a set of different linguistic means in order to convince the judge of the validity of their case. However, as Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) did not test the argumentative effects of these linguistic choices experimentally, the question remains whether they do in fact lead to the argumentative effects that the lawyers were presumably aiming for.

In this study, we want to answer this question. By testing the alleged argumentative functions of the strategic linguistic choices in the lawyers’ pleas experimentally, we not only want to delve further into the argumentative effects associated with this particular case, we also want to demonstrate how text-analytic and experimental research into the presentational dimension of argumentative texts can complement each other. Testing the argumentative effects of linguistic choices in the pleas that were used in the Van Gelder case is a means to this end. Focusing on this particular case also entails that we assess argumentative effects in ‘real life’ by using ‘real’ texts, in contrast to the fictive materials that have generally been used in other experimental investigations in the field of argumentation (cf., e.g., the overview in Schumann 2025, pp. 83–103).

In the next section, we will sketch the relevant background regarding the Van Gelder court case and Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen’s (2021; 2018) analysis. In Sects. 3 and 4, we describe the methodology (Sect. 3) and the results (Sect. 4) of our experiment. In Sect. 5, we reflect on its outcomes and on how text-analytic and experimental investigations into the argumentative effects of linguistic choices can strengthen each other.

³ These references actually refer to Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021) and Van Leeuwen and Van Haaften (2018), but, for the sake of brevity, we will refer to these publications as Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018).

2 Linguistic choices in the Van Gelder court case

During the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, the Dutch gymnast Yuri van Gelder qualified for the finals of the rings competition for the first time. This occurred after a decade of ups and downs in his sporting career (e.g., he became world champion, but was also suspended and withdrawn from the national team because of cocaine use). In order to celebrate his qualification, Van Gelder went to the Holland Heineken House, the meeting place for Dutch Olympians and their supporters during the Olympics. Van Gelder, who was supposed to train the next morning with the Dutch gymnastics team, had been warned not to drink any alcohol, and he had promised his coach to be back in his hotel around midnight. However, he proceeded to drink several glasses of beer at the Holland Heineken House, and then left the Olympic village, something that was strictly prohibited due to the safety risks that that entailed. He then returned to his hotel early in the morning and, according to his teammates, displayed drunk and disorderly behaviour. Van Gelder overslept and missed the scheduled morning training with the gymnastics team. The Dutch Olympic committee suspended Van Gelder and sent him back home to the Netherlands immediately for violating the team's code of conduct – which meant that Van Gelder could not compete in the finals. According to the Dutch Olympic committee, this drastic measure was necessary since Van Gelder had demonstrated a “gross transgression” of the norms and values of the Olympic team with his “inadmissible” behaviour (NOS 2016).

Back in the Netherlands, Van Gelder took the Dutch Olympic committee to court in a so-called ‘civil summary judgment procedure’, which was broadcast live on Dutch national television. In this procedure, Van Gelder was represented by his lawyer, Cor Hellingman; the Dutch Olympic committee was defended by the lawyer Haro Knijff. Hellingman demanded that Van Gelder would be reinstated in the Dutch Olympic team; Knijff argued that the decision to send Van Gelder home was justified. The court decided in favour of the Dutch Olympic committee: the judge rejected the claim that Van Gelder should be reinstated as a member of the Dutch Olympic team (Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021: 105–106).

Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) provide a linguistic-stylistic and argumentative analysis of the pleas of both lawyers. They show that both Hellingman and Knijff systematically make use of linguistic choices that can be considered instrumental in supporting their argumentative position in the court case. In describing the events that led to Van Gelder's dismissal, Hellingman uses a series of linguistic choices that construe these events in such a way that their reprehensibility is downplayed. For instance, he characterises Van Gelder's night out as an ‘avondje’ (literally: ‘small evening’), in which the diminutive suffix ‘-je’ construes the incident as relatively unimportant. Such a euphemistic portrayal can also be found in other linguistic choices made by Hellingman: for instance, he states that Van Gelder ‘slips inside’ the Olympic village – which suggests that Van Gelder was very quiet and did not disrupt his team members. The morning training that he failed to attend was a ‘scheduled’ training and missing this training allowed Van Gelder to ‘rest well’, which suggests that Van Gelder's presence at the training was not compulsory and that this absence reflected a sensible decision on the part of Van Gelder. Knijff, on the other hand, employs a series of linguistic choices that steer listeners towards a con-

strual of the events in which their reprehensibility is maximised. So, for instance, he systematically uses plural forms: he refers to Van Gelder's 'behaviours', 'adventures' and 'nightly escapades' and 'all the risks' this entailed in terms of his safety. Knijff could have used singular forms instead of plural forms here, but, in that case, the magnitude of Van Gelder's misconduct would have been portrayed as less serious. Knijff also uses intensifiers to stress the intensity of the message: Van Gelder engaged in 'escapades' (which construes the events as quite bacchanalian), Van Gelder is portrayed as having been 'untraceable', that he acted against 'all' agreements, and 'in defiance' of the rules, etc. Furthermore, Knijff moves strategically from using the past tense to a present imperfective form when he states that 'Van Gelder has a bad influence on the team' – which construes this negative influence as ongoing.

As Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) argue, these linguistic choices by both lawyers serve an argumentative function. In order to convince the judge of the standpoint that Van Gelder should be reinstated (Hellingman) or that Van Gelder's dismissal was justified (Knijff), a crucial question was to what extent Van Gelder should be blamed for the events that led to his dismissal. For Hellingman, it was important to argue that Van Gelder's behaviour wasn't reprehensible enough to warrant the measures taken by the Dutch Olympic committee; for Knijff, it was important to argue that Van Gelder's behaviour was in fact very reprehensible. The linguistic construal of the events provided by both lawyers can be seen as instrumental for defending these opposite argumentative positions: Hellingman's linguistic construal represents the events in such a way that they steer towards the conclusion that the events that led to Van Gelder's dismissal were not so serious in nature that they warranted sending him home; Knijff linguistically construes the events such that they steer towards the opposite conclusion.

Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) also point to another opposite pattern in the linguistic choices by both lawyers: Van Gelder as a victim vs. Van Gelder as an offender. Hellingman chooses his formulations in such a way that they steer towards a construal of Van Gelder as being a victim. It is striking, for instance, that Van Gelder is explicitly presented as the agent for activities that are not harmful to his reputation (e.g. 'He ordered soft drinks'), but that Hellingman uses a passive construction (which construes Van Gelder grammatically as the patient) when the reprehensible beers are mentioned ('he was given a beer a few times'). The use of intensifiers to portray Van Gelder as a victim is also prominent in Hellingman's plea: in describing the measures taken by the Dutch Olympic committee, Hellingman refers to Van Gelder being subjected to 'an interrogation' by his coaches, he was 'immediately' put on a plane, making him 'disappear'; he was 'abducted under escort', like 'a thief in the night' and 'kicked out of the country'. As Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. 121) argue, these intensifiers are hyperbolic in nature and meant to support the notion that Van Gelder is not an offender, but should primarily be seen as a victim. Knijff, in contrast, chooses his formulations in such a way that they construe Van Gelder as being an offender. Van Gelder is systematically presented as the agent of the controversial actions. For instance, Knijff states that Van Gelder 'brought himself in a position' such that it became impossible for him to join the mandatory morning training (i.e., missing the training was self-inflicted, he didn't just 'find himself' in this position). An additional observation that can be made (not mentioned in Van

Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021; 2018) is that Knijff explicitly links Van Gelder to the controversial actions by using personal pronouns where definite articles could also have been used: ‘his [Van Gelder’s] behaviours’, ‘his teammates’, ‘his nightly adventures’, etc.

Again, following Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen’s (2021; 2018) line of argument, these linguistic choices by both lawyers serve an argumentative function. For the assessment of the case, a crucial question was not only whether the events that led to Van Gelder’s dismissal were sufficiently reprehensible to warrant dismissal, but also to what extent Van Gelder should be seen as responsible for the situation that had arisen. For Hellingman, it was important to downplay Van Gelder’s responsibility as much as possible, while for Knijff, it was important to argue that Van Gelder was wholly accountable for his behaviour. The linguistic construal of Van Gelder’s role in the events provided by both lawyers can be seen as instrumental for defending these opposite argumentative positions: Hellingman thus linguistically construes the events in such a way that Van Gelder’s responsibility for the events is downplayed, whereas Knijff does exactly the opposite (Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021; 2018).

In the rest of this article we test whether the linguistic choices that are employed argumentatively by both lawyers do indeed lead to the argumentative effects that they are assumed to have. That is, we investigated experimentally whether these linguistic choices influenced the perception of the reprehensibility of the behaviour that led to Van Gelder’s removal from the Olympic team, and whether they influenced the extent to which Van Gelder was considered to be responsible for his situation. Since both lawyers’ strategies were aimed at convincing the judge of their respective standpoints, we also investigated whether the lawyers’ linguistic choices influenced assessments regarding the fairness of the judge’s final decision. In order to assess the argumentative effects of the lawyers’ pleas, our participants received either an ‘original’ version of a relevant part of one of the two lawyers’ pleas or a manipulated version of that segment of the plea. In the manipulated version, the relevant linguistic choices were modified such that they would less obviously steer the participant in the direction intended by the lawyer, as identified in the analysis presented by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018). More specifically, participants who read the original version of Van Gelder’s lawyer’s plea were thus expected to consider Van Gelder’s behaviour as less reprehensible and Van Gelder himself as less blameworthy than participants who read the manipulated version of this plea. They were also expected to agree less with the judge’s verdict (which was in favour of the Dutch Olympic committee) than participants who read the manipulated version. Similarly, we expected the participants who read the original version of the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer’s plea to consider Van Gelder’s behaviour to be more reprehensible in nature, Van Gelder to be more blameworthy and the judge’s decision to be fairer than participants who had read the manipulated version of this same plea.

The main motivation for these hypotheses lies in the linguistic-argumentative analysis presented by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) discussed above. Their analysis is based on linguistic insights regarding the semantic and/or pragmatic characteristics of the relevant language forms, leading to motivated claims of the kind of construals the linguistic choices provide and how these construals are used

argumentatively.⁴ However, there is also experimental research that gives reason to believe that the linguistic construals identified by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) can have argumentative effects. For instance, there is experimental evidence that suggests that linguistic framing has the potential to influence people's evaluations in the courtroom (e.g., Dijkstra and Van Stekelenburg 2021; Benski et al. 2003; Schmid and Fiedler 1998; Danet 1980), and that it can influence the perception of guilt (see Hansson et al. (2024) for an overview). Furthermore, for some of the linguistic phenomena that we manipulated, previous experimental research indicates that these linguistic phenomena can be used to construe objects or states of affairs in a particular way, leading to different perceptions of the phenomena involved. For instance, Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) have shown that participants who read a short report about the 2004 Superbowl 'wardrobe malfunction' (in which Justin Timberlake ripped part of Janet Jackson's costume off) perceived Timberlake to be more blameworthy and financially liable when the description they read was agentive (with Timberlake explicitly mentioned as the agent) vs. non-agentive (with Timberlake as the implied agent). This strengthens our idea that manipulating the construal of agentivity in the lawyers' pleas can lead to different argumentative effects (that is, it can influence people's attitudes about particular standpoints). Similarly, experimental research on other linguistic phenomena that play a role in the Van Gelder case, such as euphemisms (Walker et al. 2021), intensifiers (cf. the overview in Liebrecht 2015, pp. 13–25; see also Loftus and Palmer 1974) and verb tense (Hart & Albaracín 2011), has suggested that these linguistic techniques have the potential to sway people's perceptions. Although these specific previous studies do not focus on how various portrayals of a situation are used to defend a particular standpoint (i.e., their argumentative effects), such experimental studies do indicate that these kinds of linguistic choices lead to particular construals which affect people's perceptions of the events that they refer to. This reinforces the idea that the specific linguistic choices that Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) highlight in their analysis could lead to the argumentative effects that they are presumed to have.

3 Methods

3.1 Materials

To assess whether the lawyers' linguistic choices indeed have the argumentative effects that they are presumed to have, a version of the plea that incorporates the linguistic choices that were identified by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018)

⁴ As Van Haaften and Van Eemeren, 2019 p. 100) point out, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a particular linguistic choice and a particular argumentative effect. That is, a particular argumentative effect can be realised by various linguistic choices and a linguistic choice can be used to achieve different argumentative effects. The latter means that the linguistic choices identified by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2018; 2021) in the Van Gelder case, could also have *other* argumentative effects that are not the focus of this study (the use of intensifiers, for instance, might also contribute to offering less room for discussion, cf. Van Leeuwen 2014, pp. 229–230). Whether this is the case falls beyond the scope of the current study, but could be considered in further research.

in combination with some additional relevant linguistic observations of our own, is compared to a version of the plea in which these linguistic choices have been manipulated. Based on the lawyers' original plea notes⁵, two versions of the relevant sections of these notes were created for each lawyer: an 'original' version of the text (that contained the relevant linguistic devices), and a 'manipulated' version of the text in which these devices are adapted. The study thus focused on four different texts:

- An 'original' version of Hellingman's plea (Van Gelder's lawyer);
- A 'manipulated' version of Hellingman's plea (Van Gelder's lawyer);
- An 'original' version of Knijff's plea (Dutch Olympic committee lawyer);
- A 'manipulated' version of Knijff's plea (Dutch Olympic committee lawyer).

For the 'original' version of Hellingman's plea, we combined various sentences from the existing plea notes that included the relevant linguistic devices. To ensure text coherence and clarity, it was sometimes necessary to add one or more words to the sentences in the notes or to merge two sentences into one. The manipulated text version for Hellingman was derived from this 'original' version by systematically replacing relevant linguistic choices with alternative formulations that less obviously minimise the reprehensibility of the events and that reduce the extent to which Van Gelder is portrayed as a victim. These decisions were based largely on the linguistic-stylistic analysis conducted by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021;2018), with various additions where they were deemed necessary.

In Table 1, we provide an English translation of both the original and the manipulated versions of Hellingman's plea. Sentence numbers have been added to facilitate the comparison of the two versions of the text (these numbers were not included in the version shown to participants). Linguistic devices that relate to minimising the reprehensibility of Van Gelder's behaviour are rendered in boldface; linguistic devices that are involved in construing Van Gelder as a victim are in italics. In order to create a manipulated text version in which the reprehensibility of Van Gelder's behaviour is minimised less obviously, we changed euphemistic formulation choices into less euphemistic ones (cf., e.g., 'a beer' (Dutch: *biertje*) => 'beer' (Dutch: *bier*) in [1], 'slips inside' => 'returns' in [3], 'catch up on sleep' => 'stay in bed' in [4], 'scheduled' => 'mandatory' in [5] and a 'night out' => a 'party night' in [8]). For the same reason, we changed the grammatical structure of sentence [6]. In order to portray Van Gelder less as a victim, Van Gelder was allocated a more agentive role in the manipulated text version, (cf., e.g., '*he was given a beer*' => *he drank beer* in [1] and 'alcohol consumption' => 'consuming alcohol' in [8]), and we changed intensifying/hyperbolic language into weaker variants (cf., e.g., 'interrogate' => 'ask questions' in [7], 'sent home' => 'going home' in [9], 'disappears' => 'leaves' in [10]).

⁵ These plea notes are the texts that the lawyers had written prior to the court session in order to prepare for their actual pleas as uttered in court. As such, what was actually said in court will differ somewhat from these notes (and more was said than just the text that our participants were exposed to), but the general line of argumentation will be very similar.

Table 1 English translation of text versions ‘Hellingman-original’ and ‘Hellingman-manipulated’. Linguistic devices that relate to the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour are rendered in boldface; linguistic devices that are involved Van Gelder’s portrayal as a victim are in italics.

Hellingman-original	Hellingman-manipulated
[1] Although he [Van Gelder] also ordered soft drinks, <i>he was given a beer</i> a few times.	[1] Although he [Van Gelder] also ordered soft drinks, <i>he drank beer</i> a few times.
[2] At his guests’ request, he accompanies them to their apartment.	[2] At his guests’ request, he accompanies them to their apartment.
[3] Van Gelder slips inside the Olympic village early in the morning .	[3] Van Gelder returns to the Olympic village in the middle of the night .
[4] <i>Due</i> to his late return home, Van Gelder must catch up on lost sleep and he sleeps the entire morning .	[4] <i>Because</i> he came home so late, Van Gelder stays in bed until halfway through the afternoon .
[5] He does convey at some point, albeit late , that he will not attend the scheduled training .	[5] He does convey at some point, but rather late in the day , that he won’t attend the mandatory training .
[6] He misses one morning training session, but rests well .	[6] He rests, but misses the training session .
[7] On the 9th of August, Van Gelder is requested to meet with Maurits Hendriks (Chef de Mission NOC*NSF) and Hans Gootjes (Technical Director KNGU), who <i>interrogate</i> him about what happened without providing an indication of what is at stake.*	[7] On the 9th of August, Van Gelder is requested to meet with Maurits Hendriks (Chef de Mission NOC*NSF) and Hans Gootjes (Technical Director KNGU), who <i>ask</i> him <i>questions</i> about the night out , without providing an indication of what is at stake.
[8] To wit, Van Gelder was never warned by NOC*NSF that he would be sent home <i>immediately, without any delay</i> , in case of alcohol consumption or a night out while competing in the finals.	[8] To wit, Van Gelder was never warned by NOC*NSF that he would be sent home by consuming alcohol or going on a party night while competing in the finals.
[9] After this <i>interrogation</i> , <i>Van Gelder is informed</i> that <i>he will be withdrawn</i> and sent home.	[9] After this <i>talk</i> , <i>Van Gelder hears</i> that <i>he is no longer participating in the competition</i> and <i>is going home</i> .
[10] <i>On the very same day</i> , Van Gelder is <i>put on the plane under escort</i> .	[10] <i>The same day</i> , Van Gelder <i>takes the plane back</i> .
[11] <i>He disappears</i> from Rio <i>like a thief in the night</i> .	[11] He <i>leaves</i> Rio.

*‘NOC*NSF’ is the abbreviation of the Dutch Olympic committee. ‘KNGU’ is the abbreviation of the Royal Dutch Gymnastics Union.

It should be noted that not all of the (sometimes rather subtle) differences between the Dutch versions translate well to English (translations are provided here for illustrative purposes, participants only read Dutch texts). This holds, for instance, for the difference between ‘biertje’ (‘a beer’) and ‘bier’ (‘beer’) (cf. [1]), as described above, as well as for a phrase like ‘what happened’ as a translation of ‘*het gebeurde*’ in [7]. In Dutch, ‘*het gebeurde*’ is a very vague way of referring to something that happened (literally ‘the happened’ meaning ‘the thing (or things) that happened’). Similarly, the difference between ‘due to’ (in the original text version) and ‘because’ (in the manipulated text version) in the English translations in [4] does not entirely cover the difference in Dutch between the connectives ‘*doordat*’ and ‘*omdat*’ (cf. Pit 2007 and the references mentioned there). By using *doordat* instead of *omdat*, the cause for oversleeping (i.e., Van Gelder’s late return) is presented more strongly as something that was outside Van Gelder’s influence, and thus as something unavoidable and beyond Van Gelder’s control. This contrast cannot clearly be made with a single lexi-

cal item in English in the way that it can in Dutch. At a more general level (beyond examples of specific translational issues), the linguistic-stylistic analysis that our study is based on hinges crucially on an assessment of speakers' intuitions regarding what effects the formulation choices are likely to have. We try to illustrate these for non-Dutch readers by using translations that we consider to be as close as possible to the original texts, but since the kind of construals that particular linguistic choices provide will not necessarily always be the same across languages (see Stukker and Verhagen 2019, pp. 233–234 and Verhagen 2012 for some concrete evidence on the language dependence of construals), the intuitions that our translations give rise to may not always align with the intuitions that the originals are likely to yield in native speakers of Dutch. We thus include Table 1 in order to provide insight into the nature of the pleas and to give some sense of the differences between the original and the manipulated version for those who do not understand Dutch, but we do not assume to be able to fully convey the nature of the manipulations in this way (the same caveat applies to Table 2 below). A step-by-step guide that details how the 'original' version of the plea was transformed into the manipulated version can be found in the online Supplementary Materials (in Dutch), accessible via https://osf.io/xutj9/files/osfstora/view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbeb7bdbd0c7f.

To create the 'original' version of the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer's text, we selected a complete section from Knijff's plea notes that Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018) had previously analysed in terms of the strategies that are relevant in this case (i.e., maximising the reprehensibility of the behaviour and portraying Van Gelder as an offender). Following the same process as for the Hellingman

Table 2 English translation of the text versions 'Knijff-original' and 'Knijff-manipulated'. Linguistic devices that relate to the reprehensibility of Van Gelder's behaviour are rendered in boldface; linguistic devices that are involved Van Gelder's portrayal as a victim are in italics.

Knijff-original	Knijff-manipulated
[1] <i>Van Gelder did not follow instructions</i> from the team leaders on multiple occasions .	[1] The instruction from the team leaders <i>was not followed on a few occasions</i> .
[2] He was untraceable twice, with all the risks this entails .	[2] He was unable to be found twice, which entailed a risk .
[3] <i>He brought himself in a position</i> in which he could not be present at a training session, due to excessive consumption of alcohol and nightly escapades .	[3] Due to <i>drinks</i> and a night out , there <i>was an absence</i> at a training session.
[4] Time and again he gave contradictive explanations about his behaviours .	[4] Different explanations regarding the behaviour <i>have been made</i> .
[5] Contrary to all agreements , <i>he drank alcohol</i> , while <i>he still was in competition and had a chance of winning a medal</i> .	[5] Contrary to the agreement , <i>alcohol was drunk</i> , while <i>the competition was still ongoing and there was still a chance of winning a medal</i> .
[6] <i>Van Gelder</i> has a bad influence on the team.	[6] <i>The behaviour</i> has not had a good influence on the team.
[7] <i>His teammates</i> have taken offence of <i>his</i> confused and disoriented behaviour after <i>his</i> nightly adventures , and <i>his</i> attitude of acting in defiance of the rules of the team .	[7] <i>Teammates</i> have blamed him for <i>the</i> confused and disoriented behaviour after <i>the</i> night out and for not adhering to team regulations .
[8] <i>Van Gelder</i> has flagrantly violated the norms and values that TeamNL adheres to.	[8] The norms and values that are adhered to by TeamNL <i>have been</i> violated.

text, a linguistic-stylistic analysis was applied in order to create a ‘manipulated’ text variant, which built on, and extended, the initial analysis by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018). In order to create a text version in which the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour is emphasised less strongly, we changed, for instance, plurals into singular forms (e.g., ‘instructions’ => ‘instruction’ in [1], ‘risks’ => ‘risk’ in [2], ‘behaviours’ => ‘behaviour’ in [4] and ‘agreements’ => ‘agreement’ in [5], etc.). In [6], we changed the past tense into a present imperfective form to downplay the suggestion that Van Gelder’s negative influence was still ongoing (cf. Section 2), and intensifying/hyperbolic formulations were changed to weaker alternatives (e.g., ‘untraceable’ => ‘unable to be found’ in [2], ‘nightly adventures’ => ‘a night out’ in [7], ‘flagrantly’ violating norms and values => ‘violating’ norms and values in [8], etc.). In order to portray Van Gelder as an offender less clearly, we manipulated Knijff’s plea in such a way that it was less clear that Van Gelder was the agent of the controversial actions, for instance by changing active constructions into agentless passive constructions (cf., e.g., ‘Van Gelder did not follow instructions’ => ‘instructions were not followed’ in [1], ‘he gave explanations’ => ‘explanations have been made’ in [4] and ‘Van Gelder has violated the norms and values’ => ‘The norms and values have been violated’ in [8]). To avoid an explicit connection between Van Gelder and the controversial actions, we also changed personal pronouns into definite articles (cf., e.g., ‘his behaviour’ => ‘the behaviour’ in [4] and [7], and ‘his teammates’ => ‘teammates’ in [7]).

Table 2 shows a translation of the original and manipulated versions of Knijff’s plea. As in Table 1, sentence numbers have been added to allow easier comparison between the two versions. Linguistic devices that are considered relevant in terms of maximising the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour are rendered in boldface and those that function to portray Van Gelder as an offender are in italics. See online Supplementary Materials (in Dutch, https://osf.io/xutj9/files/osfstorage?view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbcb7bdbd0c7f) for a step-by-step guide on the creation of this manipulated version of the text.

3.2 Design and Instrumentation

The four text versions (see Sect. 3.1) were presented to respondents in a between-subjects design, with respondents being randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (the ‘original’ and manipulated version of Van Gelder’s lawyer’s plea and the ‘original’ and manipulated version of the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer’s plea). In the analysis, data from respondents who read the text version ‘Hellingman-original’ were compared with data from respondents who read the text version ‘Hellingman-manipulated.’ Additionally, data from respondents in the ‘Knijff-original’ condition were compared with data in the ‘Knijff-manipulated’ condition. In this way, we aimed to assess how the independent variable ‘text version’ would affect our three dependent variables, each assessed using one question: perceptions regarding the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour, the extent to which he should be considered responsible for his situation and the fairness of the judge’s ruling.

The ‘reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour’ variable is focused on assessing, on the one hand, the extent to which Hellingman’s linguistic choices diminish the

perceived reprehensibility of Van Gelder's behaviour, and, on the other, how Knijff's linguistic choices emphasise the reprehensibility of his actions. According to Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018), these construals are related to the extent to which Van Gelder's night out can be seen as reprehensible (cf. Sect. 2). For this first question, respondents indicated on an 11-point scale how reprehensible they found Van Gelder's behaviour (with 0 entailing 'not reprehensible at all', 5 conveying 'no opinion' and 10 indicating 'very reprehensible').

The 'responsibility of Van Gelder' variable assesses the extent to which Van Gelder is perceived as a victim or an offender (with Hellingman's phrasing more in line with the victim perspective and Knijff's linguistic choices portraying him as an offender). According to Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021; 2018), the degree to which Van Gelder is perceived as a victim or as an offender is related to the extent to which he is considered to be responsible for his situation (cf. Sect. 2). For the second question, respondents were therefore asked to indicate, again on an 11-point scale, how responsible they believed Van Gelder to be for missing out on the Olympic final (0 = 'not at all responsible', 5 = 'no opinion', 10 = 'completely responsible').

Our third dependent variable, the 'fairness of the judge's ruling', is indirectly related to the lawyers' argumentative goal of convincing the judge. If the linguistic choices in the lawyers' pleas influence the extent to which respondents are persuaded by their message, this may also affect their agreement with the judge's ruling (the actual ruling in the case was provided to participants prior to answering this question). For the third question, respondents were thus required to indicate on an 11-point scale how fair they considered the judge's ruling in the case to be (0 = 'very unfair', 5 = 'no opinion', 10 = 'very fair').⁶

In addition to these three test questions, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they thought the text they had just read sounded natural (in order to ensure that the manipulated version of the text did not sound 'strange' as compared to the 'original' version). Furthermore, respondents were presented with two simple multiple-choice questions about the text in order to verify that they had read it attentively. Only data from respondents who answered both of these control questions correctly were included in the analysis (see also Sect. 3.3). Finally, respondents were asked six questions regarding their demographic characteristics (i.e., regarding gender, age, native language, and their level of education) and six questions regarding their knowledge of the background of the case (whether they had prior knowledge of Van Gelder, Van Gelder's case and its outcome, their attitude towards gymnastics in general and Van Gelder in particular, and whether they considered themselves to be knowledgeable regarding their understanding of the legal system). In total, participants were thus required to respond to 18 questions.⁷

⁶ An overview of these three dependent variables and how they were operationalised can be found online, see Supplementary Materials (in Dutch): https://osf.io/xutj9/files/osfstorage?view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbeb7bdbd0c7f.

⁷ See Supplementary Materials for an overview of the control questions and the prior knowledge questions (in Dutch): https://osf.io/xutj9/files/osfstorage?view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbeb7bdbd0c7f.

3.3 Respondents

A total of 232 individuals participated in the study. Five individuals started the questionnaire, but did not meet the requirements for completing it, either because they did not grant permission for the use of their data, or they indicated that Dutch was not their native language (given that the relevant linguistic choices may be too subtle for non-native speakers of Dutch to fully appreciate, we only included those who reported Dutch as their first language or one of their first languages). Data from a further 15 individuals was not included in the analysis because one or both control questions (see Sect. 3.2) were answered incorrectly, suggesting that these respondents had not read the text attentively. Three individuals failed to reaffirm their consent for using their data at the end of the experiment and were thus also deleted from the dataset. As a result of these exclusions, data from 209 individuals was included in the analysis (mean age = 36.73, $SD = 17.87$, age range = 18–76 years old). Of the respondents, 71 identified as male (34%), 138 as female (66%) and none chose the ‘other, please specify’ option. Most of the respondents (56%) had attained a higher professional or university degree (HBO/WO), while 22% had completed vocational education (MBO). For 20%, a high school diploma was the highest level of education achieved (but note that 49% of respondents were still engaged in education at the time of completing the questionnaire). The remaining 2% reported having completed other educational programs.

3.4 Procedure

The questionnaire was developed using the survey tool Qualtrics. Respondents could participate in the study by following a link to the survey. On opening the survey, they were presented with an informed consent document that included a request for permission to use the data that would be obtained in the study.⁸ The survey did not proceed further if respondents did not consent to the use of their data or if they indicated not being a native speaker of Dutch. In the following screen, participants were provided with some background information on the case in order to familiarise them with the legal proceedings. Respondents were then presented with one of the four text versions and were asked to indicate how natural they thought that the text they had just read sounded. The three main questions (regarding the reprehensibility of the behaviour, Van Gelder’s responsibility and the fairness of the judge’s ruling) were presented to the respondents on this same screen. The next screen then required the respondents to complete the control questions and to answer the questions regarding their background knowledge of the case and their demographic characteristics. In a final debriefing screen, respondents were asked what they thought the objective of the study was and received a condition-specific explanation detailing the study’s purpose. Finally, respondents were once again asked for consent regarding the use of their data and were thanked for their participation. It took approximately five minutes for respondents to complete the questionnaire.

⁸ The informed consent document can be found in the Supplementary Materials (in Dutch): https://osf.io/xutj9/files/hgk7a?view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbeb7bdbd0c7f.

4 Results

As a first analysis, MANOVA's were used in order to assess whether the groups were comparable in terms of their responses to the background knowledge questions (regarding knowledge about the case, their own legal knowledge, etc. see Sect. 3.2) and the extent to which they considered the texts they had read to sound natural. There were no significant differences between the 'Hellingman-original' and 'Hellingman-manipulated' groups in any of these respects. However, a difference was found in the respondents' self-proclaimed legal knowledge between the 'Knijff-original' and 'Knijff-manipulated' groups. That is, respondents in the 'Knijff-original' group reported greater legal knowledge ($M=2.69$; $SD=0.54$) compared to the 'Knijff-manipulated' group ($M=2.40$; $SD=0.72$), $F(1, 105)=5.54$, $p=.02$. To account for this difference in self-reported legal knowledge, these groups were compared using a MANCOVA with self-reported legal knowledge as a covariate in further analyses (see Sect. 4.2).

4.1 Van Gelder's lawyer: 'Hellingman-original' vs. 'Hellingman-manipulated'

To what extent do Hellingman's linguistic choices influence the way in which Van Gelder and his behaviour are perceived? Do respondents who read Hellingman's original version of the plea perceive Van Gelder's behaviour to be less reprehensible, do they consider him to be less responsible for his situation, and do they deem the judge's verdict to be less justified than respondents who read the manipulated version of Hellingman's plea? A MANOVA was conducted to determine whether the 'Hellingman-original' group would indeed score lower on these three dependent variables as compared to the 'Hellingman-manipulated' group. The results are presented in Table 3.

There were no statistically significant differences between these two groups for any of the dependent variables that were assessed. That is, respondents in the 'Hellingman-original' group did not view Van Gelder's behaviour as less reprehensible, they did not see him as less responsible for his situation, and they did not consider the judge's verdict to be less justified than respondents in the 'Hellingman-manipulated' group.

4.2 The Dutch Olympic committee lawyer: 'Knijff-original' vs. 'Knijff-manipulated'

To what extent do Knijff's linguistic choices affect the way Van Gelder and his behaviour are perceived? Do respondents who read the original version of Knijff's plea

Table 3 Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and outcomes of the MANOVA for the dependent variables for 'Hellingman-original' vs. 'Hellingman-manipulated'.

	Hellingman-original = ($N=50$)	Hellingman- manipu- lated ($N=52$)	MANOVA
Reprehensibility behaviour Van Gelder	$M=6.48$, $SD=2.35$	$M=6.44$, $SD=1.76$	$F(1, 100)=.01$, $p=.93$
Responsibility Van Gelder	$M=7.82$, $SD=1.30$	$M=7.71$, $SD=1.72$	$F(1, 100)=.13$, $p=.72$
Fairness judgement	$M=6.14$, $SD=2.54$	$M=6.12$, $SD=2.52$	$F(1, 100)=.00$, $p=.96$

view Van Gelder's behaviour as more reprehensible, do they consider him to be more responsible for the situation he found himself in, and do they deem the judge's verdict to be more justified than respondents who read the manipulated version of the plea? A MANCOVA was conducted to determine whether the 'Knijff-original' group scored higher on these three dependent variables as compared to the 'Knijff-manipulated' group, with 'legal knowledge' as a covariate (given the fact that the two groups differ on this variable).

Again, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups on any of the dependent variables (see Table 4). Respondents in the 'Knijff-original' group did thus not rate Van Gelder's behaviour as more reprehensible than those in the 'Knijff-manipulated' group. Furthermore, there were no differences between the groups in terms of the extent to which Van Gelder was considered to be responsible for the situation, or regarding how fair they deemed the judge's verdict to be.

4.3 A further exploration: 'Hellingman-original' vs. 'Knijff-original'

As no statistically significant differences were found for the three dependent variables for the comparisons of interest (i.e., the original and manipulated versions of the Hellingman plea and the original and manipulated versions of the Knijff plea), it seems that our manipulations did not yield the presumed argumentative effects. This raises the question whether the content of the plea (i.e., advocating for Van Gelder's innocence (Hellingman) or guilt (Knijff) influences the respondents' evaluations of the situation, or whether the particular textual information that the respondents received simply just did not affect their opinions on the matter. Formulated more precisely, in terms of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring (Van Eemeren 2010): we did not find evidence for our assumption that the manipulations of presentational means would be effective, but what about the topical selection of the pleas by Hellingman and Knijff? Since the texts differ, at least to some extent, in terms of the aspects of the events that led to Van Gelder's dismissal that they highlighted, it is interesting to investigate whether these specific topical choices have any effects on our participants' perceptions. To address this question, a MANOVA was conducted to examine whether the respondents exposed to the original text versions ('Hellingman-original' and 'Knijff-original') would differ from one another in terms of their evaluations of the reprehensibility of Van Gelder's behaviour, his responsibility for the situation and the fairness of the judge's verdict (note that there were no differences between these two groups in terms of their background knowledge). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5..

Table 4. Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and outcomes of the MANCOVA for the dependent variables for 'Knijff-original' vs. 'Knijff-manipulated'

	Knijff-original (N = 54)	Knijff-manipulated (N = 53)	MANCOVA
Reprehensibility behaviour Van Gelder	$M = 7.46, SD = 1.89$	$M = 7.32, SD = 2.23$	$F(1, 104) = .03, p = .87$
Responsibility Van Gelder	$M = 8.37, SD = 1.59$	$M = 8.40, SD = 1.45$	$F(1, 104) = .10, p = .76$
Fairness judgement	$M = 7.80, SD = 1.70$	$M = 7.30, SD = 2.16$	$F(1, 104) = .64, p = .43$

Table 5. Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and outcomes of the MANOVA for the dependent variables for ‘Knijff-original’ vs. ‘Hellingman-original’.

	Knijff-original (<i>N</i> = 54)	Hellingman-original (<i>N</i> = 50)	MANOVA
Reprehensibility behaviour Van Gelder	<i>M</i> = 7.46, <i>SD</i> = 1.89	<i>M</i> = 6.48, <i>SD</i> = 2.35	$F(1, 102) = 5.56, p = .02$
Responsibility Van Gelder	<i>M</i> = 8.37, <i>SD</i> = 1.59	<i>M</i> = 7.82, <i>SD</i> = 1.30	$F(1, 102) = 3.68, p = .06$
Fairness judgement	<i>M</i> = 7.79, <i>SD</i> = 1.70	<i>M</i> = 6.14, <i>SD</i> = 2.54	$F(1, 102) = 15.50, p < .001$

Respondents in the ‘Knijff-original’ group rated Van Gelder’s behaviour as significantly more reprehensible and found the judge’s verdict to be fairer compared to respondents in the ‘Hellingman-original’ group. However, the two groups did not differ significantly in terms of the level of responsibility they attributed to Van Gelder (although there was a trend in the expected direction).

This suggests that the topical selection that respondents were exposed to did have an effect: reading a text that is focused on demonstrating Van Gelder’s guilt is associated with more negative evaluations of Van Gelder’s behaviour and more agreement with the final verdict (which sided against Van Gelder) than reading a text that aims to portray Van Gelder in a positive light. What respondents read prior to providing their evaluations thus does seem to influence the way events are perceived and evaluated. However, the same conclusion cannot be drawn regarding the specific linguistic choices that were manipulated in the current study.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to recent developments within the field of argumentation to test experimentally whether alleged argumentative effects of linguistic choices actually occur. More specifically, we investigated argumentative effects of linguistic choices in the so-called ‘Van Gelder’ court case, by testing whether the strategic linguistic choices made by both lawyers in this case (as analysed by Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021; 2018) actually influenced readers’ evaluations regarding the reprehensibility of Van Gelder’s behaviour, his responsibility for the situation, and the fairness of the judge’s final decision. The outcomes of the experiment suggest that our linguistic manipulations did not lead to the argumentative effects that we assumed them to have. That is, while the content (the topical choices) of the texts had an argumentative effect (reading the plea by Van Gelder’s lawyer made participants take his side more than if they read the plea by the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer), such a conclusion cannot be drawn for the linguistic choices that we manipulated.

The results of our experiment are contrary to expectation. Based on a semantic and/or pragmatic analysis of the language forms (cf. Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021; 2018), we expected the strategic linguistic choices to have argumentative effects. This expectation was further strengthened by previous research on some of the linguistic phenomena that we manipulated in texts that are not necessarily argumentative in nature, showing that these linguistic means have the potential to sway people’s attitudes. For instance, experiments by Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) indi-

cate that agentivity (whether someone is presented as the person responsible for certain actions), influences judgements regarding perceived blame and financial liability. In our texts, agentivity was manipulated as well (cf., for instance, in Table 2 the formulation of sentence [1], in which we changed an active construction ('Van Gelder did not follow instructions [...]') to an agentless passive ('The instruction [...] was not followed'), but in our experiment these agentivity manipulations did not seem to have the expected argumentative effect. Something similar holds for euphemistic formulation choices: previous experiments have shown that euphemisms have the potential to influence the appreciation of phenomena or states of affairs (cf. Gladney and Rittenburg 2005; and Walker et al. 2021), but the euphemistic word choices in our text manipulations (cf. in Table 1, for instance Hellingman's use of 'catch up on lost sleep' instead of 'stays in bed until halfway through the afternoon' or his use of a 'night out' instead of a 'party night') again did not seem to have the expected argumentative effect.

These unexpected findings are thus in need of explanation. One possible issue is that we investigated argumentative effects of *combinations* of linguistic choices, i.e., we manipulated series of linguistic choices that seem to reinforce each other and together lead to a particular construal. The rationale for manipulating the pleas in this way was that this approach would lead to the biggest chance of finding any argumentative effects. If we had indeed found such effects, further research could then have been carried out to test the contribution of individual linguistic techniques to those effects. However, since we did not find any argumentative effects of these combinations of linguistic choices, we can, strictly speaking, only conclude that the *combination* of our text manipulations did not make any argumentative difference. We cannot completely rule out the possibility that some linguistic techniques had an argumentative effect in the expected direction that were counterbalanced by some other linguistic techniques that had an argumentative effect in the opposite direction. In our view, this is not a very plausible scenario, since our text manipulations were based on a linguistic (i.e., a semantic and/or pragmatic) analysis of the language forms, leading to *motivated* hypotheses about the argumentative effects of these text manipulations. In other words, we do not consider it very likely that some of these text manipulations would give rise to diametrically opposed argumentative effects. At the same time, we also recognise that a disadvantage of the experimental design that we used (asking participants to provide answers by giving ratings on a scale) is that such a design does not provide insights into the participant's underlying reasoning that leads to their ratings. In follow-up research (currently underway) we thus focus on assessing argumentative effects of linguistic choices in a mixed methods design, combining insights derived from quantitative ratings with qualitative reflection regarding the motivation for providing specific quantitative ratings. With this design we aim to assess whether specific linguistic choices actually figure in participants' decisions (that is, whether they find particular linguistic choices worthy of note in explaining their reasoning). And, if this is indeed the case, whether these linguistic choices have the argumentative effects that they are assumed to have following linguistic-argumentative analysis.

A second possible explanation for the lack of argumentative effects associated with the linguistic choices in our study relates to the fact that we used 'real lan-

guage’ as the basis for our text manipulations. That is, the text passages that we used were composed of sentences that were actually used by both lawyers. This imposed restrictions on the experimental conditions: if we had used fictive texts, we could have made bigger contrasts between the ‘original’ and ‘manipulated’ text versions. For instance, Knijff (the Dutch Olympic committee lawyer) speaks about ‘alcohol consumption’ in the original text version, but for his argumentative aims (maximising the reprehensibility of the events and painting Van Gelder as an offender) it would likely have been more convincing to use the term ‘alcohol abuse’ instead. Similarly, he could have argued that the ‘rules’ had not been followed, instead of ‘instructions’ – which was the formulation that he actually chose (cf. Table 2). If Knijff had used such alternative linguistic choices, the difference between the ‘original’ and ‘manipulated’ Knijff-text would have been bigger and could thus perhaps have swayed opinions more forcefully. So, not finding any argumentative effects of linguistic choices in our experiment does not necessarily mean that these choices do not matter: the lack of argumentative effects in our experiment may be related specifically to the nature of our text manipulations.

A third factor that can potentially explain the lack of argumentative effects of linguistic choices in our experiment, is the role of prior knowledge. Almost all participants indicated that they knew Van Gelder and the vast majority had heard of the case prior to reading about it in our study. Van Gelder’s behaviour in Rio had been widely reported in the media. For a while, he went viral on social media (Vogelaar 2016), where his behaviour was ridiculed (e.g., by changing his nickname, ‘Lord of the Rings’, into ‘Lord of the Drinks’). These are indications that Van Gelder’s position in the court case was difficult, since it was (at least in the eyes of the general public at that time) pretty clear what had happened and who was responsible. While previous research (e.g., Fausey and Boroditsky 2010) has suggested that linguistic formulations can affect evaluations even when people have substantial prior knowledge about an event, we cannot rule out the possibility that our text manipulations were too subtle to change these pre-existing opinions.

The fact that the use of ‘real language’ as the basis for our experiment and prior knowledge about the Van Gelder case might both have influenced the outcomes of our study, does not mean, in our view, that such factors necessarily should be avoided. Using real argumentative text, that actually functioned in a specific argumentative context, increases the ecological validity of the research (Boeynaems et al. 2017, pp. 130–131). This is important, given that, in the end, we are not so much interested in argumentative effects of linguistic choices in ‘laboratory settings’, but whether such effects occur in the real world. Using ‘real language’ from a ‘real case’ is a step in that direction. At the same time, this does not mean that the ecological validity in our case study was ideal. After all, we asked anonymous language users to respond to an online questionnaire about a case that happened five years earlier.⁹ Our respondents thus quite likely engaged with the texts in a very different way than those who were following the court case (either physically in the court room or via the live media broadcast) and thus may have experienced their effects quite differently as well.

⁹ The Van Gelder court case took place in 2016; we conducted the experiment in 2021.

From an argumentation-theoretical perspective it can be said that in our experiment we manipulated the presentational dimension of certain *argumentative strategies* (cf. Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021, pp. 99–100). According to the theory of Strategic Manoeuvring (Van Eemeren 2018; Eemeren 2010), an argumentative strategy consists of various argumentative moves that are coordinated in such a way that they reinforce each other – both in terms of the succession of various argumentative moves and in terms of the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring that can be distinguished within each argumentative move (topical selection, presentational choice and adaptation to audience demand). In our experiment, we only manipulated the presentational dimension, taking the widely acknowledged idea that linguistic choices provide specific construals which lead to a particular ‘framing’ of reality as our starting point (cf. Sect. 1 and the references mentioned there, as well as the final paragraph of Sect. 2). On this basis, we thus assumed that a particular linguistic presentation of argumentative moves could have specific argumentative effects. At the same time, we recognise that the topical dimension likely also influences the specific argumentative effects that are obtained. Further research could thus be conducted in which this dimension is taken into account in a systematic fashion (that is, by varying the propositional content of the argumentative moves themselves, as well as or instead of the linguistic presentation of argumentative moves). Indeed, although we did not manipulate the topical dimension of the pleas, it is striking to note that respondents who read the plea by Van Gelder’s lawyer were more positive about him than those who read the plea by the lawyer of the Dutch Olympic committee. This raises various questions, for instance, what the argumentative effects of fully-fledged argumentative strategies would be, and to what extent the various dimensions of such strategies contribute to these effects.

Finally, the aim of our experiment was not only to test argumentative effects of a series of linguistic choices in a real court case, but also to demonstrate how text-analytic and experimental research into the presentational dimension of argumentative texts can complement each other. In our view, experimental research into the effects of linguistic choices is indispensable: based on text-analytic research, the case can be made that certain linguistic choices lead to particular argumentative effects, but whether these effects actually occur, is something that can only be determined by testing these linguistic choices experimentally. However, even if it turns out that argumentative effects that one would expect based on a linguistic (i.e., a semantic and/or pragmatic) analysis of the language forms do not occur, such a finding does not mean that text-analytic research into these linguistic means was useless. After all, the two types of research lead to different kinds of outcomes that are complementary to each other. Text-analytic research into argumentative effects of linguistic choices is necessary to point out the kind of strategies that are used by arguers in an attempt to reach their argumentative goals. In the Van Gelder court case, for instance, such text-analytic research clearly indicates that both lawyers actively *tried* to sway people’s perceptions in terms of their evaluation of the events (Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen 2021; 2018). Making these kinds of strategies visible, can make people critically aware of the tactics that are being used. Raising ‘critical’ awareness can of course, still mean different things, partly dependent on the goals of the linguistic-argumentative analysis and the specific framework in which it is embedded. For instance, in

the various approaches to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), making people ‘critically’ aware means they are pointed towards dominant and/or hidden ideologies in the text(s) under investigation, whereas in the framework of Strategic Manoeuvring, a ‘critical’ analysis is related to the rules for a ‘critical discussion’ and the fallaciousness of argumentative moves. Within these different frameworks, all kinds of methodological tools have been developed that enable researchers to come up with well-founded insights about the argumentative use of linguistic choices.¹⁰ By subsequently investigating the argumentative effects of these tactics experimentally, as our study aimed to do, more solid conclusions can be drawn about their actual effects.

Author contributions MVL and HDM conceived and supervised the experiment and wrote the article. ADH conducted the experiment and the analyses. All authors read and agreed on the final manuscript.

Data Availability The dataset that was analysed in the current study can be found at https://osf.io/xutj9/files/osfstorage?view_only=13fa779b32624c06946fbeb7bdbd0c7f

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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¹⁰ Good starting points for exploring tools for the analysis of linguistic means in various approaches to CDS are for instance Flowerdew and Richardson (2018) and Wodak & Meyer (2016). Tools for the systematic analysis of linguistic choices within the framework of Strategic Manoeuvring can be found in Van Haaften and Van Leeuwen (2021). An overview of valuable methodological tools for the identification and argumentative analysis of linguistic choices can be found in Van Leeuwen and Van Haaften (2025).

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