

The pragmatics of manipulation: Exploiting im/politeness theories

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Received 18 April 2017; received in revised form 4 October 2017; accepted 4 October 2017



Abstract

This paper focuses on the pragmatic functioning of manipulation, dealing more specifically with its socio-psychological aspects that tend to be overlooked in Critical Discourse Analysis and pragma-cognitive approaches of the phenomenon. After exposing to what extent the study of Manipulative Discourse (MD) has been hampered by traditional philosophy of language and argumentative/persuasion theories predicated on a truth and morality bias, it demonstrates that MD is parasitic on both Grice's (1975, 1989) Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, going beyond both frameworks to propose a model of manipulation that puts equal emphasis on Self and Other. In an attempt at theoretically rebalancing the traditional emphasis on the Other's face wants in politeness theory, it brings to light three manipulative tactics – as exploited by some characters in the American political TV series *House of Cards* – that consist in 1. taking advantage of the victims' emotional vulnerability and/or face needs, 2. consenting to false Self Face-Threatening act (Chen, 2001), and 3. using Self Face-Flattering Acts to 'give a high value' to the Self as an enticing strategy. Among MD resources are impoliteness moves that are paradoxically exploited to 'draw in' the Other, thereby resolving conflict and bridging distance. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Manipulation; Cooperation; Politeness; Impoliteness; Influence; Face

1. Introduction

Manipulation has been studied in empirical studies by socio-psychologists since the end of the 1960s and has brought to light famous techniques that can exert an influence on human behaviour (especially in the fields of marketing and advertising). The art of controlling others by having them do something that is not in their interest has indeed a long history of experimental testing: we can name the famous 'foot in the door' tactic tested by Freedman and Fraser (1966), the 'door-in-the-face' strategy (Cialdini et al., 1975), the importance of 'the touch' in manipulative strategies (Smith et al., 1982; Goldman et al., 1985), the manipulation of 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957), the 'obedience to authority' testing (Milgram, 1963), and other 'weapons of influence' based on factors that affect decisions such as 'reciprocation' and 'liking' (Cialdini, 1984, 2001) or engagement through preparatory acts (Joule and Beauvois, 2002; Beauvois, 2011).

But in these studies the focus has been more on the factors that influence human behaviour than on discursive manipulation – the language of manipulation having been only marginally tackled (see Guéguen, 2011). Scholars in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis who have been interested in manipulation in discourse do so with the aim of exposing

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the deceptive tactics used by dominant groups. Fairclough (1989:6) for instance defines manipulation as “a devious way to control the others” and van Dijk (2006:359) as the ‘illegitimate’ domination of one powerful group over others with the goal of maintaining social inequality. Van Dijk (2006) has taken a cognitive turn, analysing manipulation in a triangular theoretical framework (discourse, society, cognition), showing how and why some linguistic properties can be more effective than others in the manipulation of the human mind. A theory of manipulation that would not take a cognitive perspective would indeed miss some important aspects of how the mind is (more or less covertly) manipulated into compliance. Addressing cognitive issues that Gricean and Neo-Gricean approaches seem to have no interest in, some pragma-cognitivists have recently delved into the issue of manipulation in very interesting ways, in their study of the *cognitive* processes involved while interpreting manipulative discourse. Basing their work on relevance theory (namely Sperber and Wilson, 1995), Saussure (2005, 2014), Herman and Oswald (2014), Maillat and Oswald (2009) and Maillat (2013, 2014) have shown how human cognition is tampered with by manipulators.

Van Dijk's triangular analysis of manipulation as well as the pragma-cognitivists' focus on tampered cognition seem however to leave aside a major aspect of manipulation that this paper is more specifically concerned with (although cognitive aspects cannot be discarded): they both put aside either social and/or psychological aspects pertaining to the social goals of the interlocutors and the psychological traits of each person involved in an interaction² – though this aspect has been partly covered by social cognition interested in such phenomena as popular belief and credulity (see for instance Clément, 2006). What is overlooked in cognitive and Critical Discourse approaches is indeed the psychological aspect of manipulation that often consists in exploiting the target's weaknesses or what Baron (2003:44) calls “emotional needs”. The approach in this paper thus differs from standard accounts of manipulation that solely focus on the informational/belief-based/cognitive impact of the phenomenon; manipulation is here defined in terms of the (a) ulterior motives behind a communicative effort and of the (b) course of actions the discourse generates. As expounded below (3.2), defining manipulation in conversational exchanges on that actional level allows taking into consideration both the Speaker's extralinguistic motives and goals and the perlocutionary effects of discursive manipulation. Indeed, the latter crosses the boundary between what a linguistic form can trigger during its interpretation (as represented by the Hearer) and its (perlocutionary) effects in terms of ensuing action.

After exposing the treatment ‘manipulation’ has received in traditional philosophy of language and some argumentative/persuasion theories (Section 2.1) and attempting to define its borders (2.2), this paper will show to what extent Manipulative Discourse (henceforth MD) can in fact be placed within a Gricean framework while going beyond it to include the discursive strategies of influence that Grice (1989:28) admitted his Cooperative Principle was too limited to integrate. Concentrating on the more (socio)psychological pragmatic aspects of manipulation implies a focus on the Speaker and the Hearer³ as individuals with their specific personality traits and egocentric agendas. To do so, it will be shown in 4.1 that politeness theory based on Goffman's (1967) notion of face has a key role to play in explaining these phenomena, if and only if politeness theory rebalances its primarily altruistic orientation – conceiving politeness as a means to attend to the Hearer's face. A balance should indeed be reinstated between the ‘cooperative’ aspect of politeness that has been the object of much scientific investigation and a ‘manipulative’ exploitation of the same maxims of politeness involving a (more or less covert) focus on the Self that has not been sufficiently researched (see below).

Three manipulative exploitations will then be singled out (4.2–4.4), based on a fictional corpus set in a political context, the popular American TV series *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013–2017): 1. The use of politeness to enhance the Other's face, and in doing so, to conceal the Speaker's self-interest (and protect her own face). 2. On record Self-Face Threatening Act (Chen, 2001) that involves a cost to Self in view of a (postponed) higher gain (for Self). 3. Self-enhancement that paradoxically has an impact on the Other's sense of self-esteem. What these strategies show is that both politeness and impoliteness can be used conjointly to achieve the Speaker's “perlocutionary purposes” (Gu, 1993). In fact, MD operates by maintaining surface courtesy (for the aim is not to attack the Hearer but to obtain something from her) using at times what could be deemed impolite means whose underlying goals are to dominate the Other and drive the course of the conversation in a way that is relevant to the Self.

2. The whole spectrum of manipulative discourse

2.1. Manipulation as failed communication?

Dominant communicative theories are predicated on a philosophy of language based on cooperation between rational and reasonable human beings. In this theoretical context, manipulation has very often been seen and discarded as loss or

² To be fair, CDA is not concerned with interpersonal pragmatics and interaction as I am in this paper.

³ The pair Speaker (S)/Hearer (H) will be used to refer to interlocutory positions, as well as the couple Self (S)/Other (O) when dealing more specifically with self and other (psychological) attributes.

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