Introduction (English version)

In a way, rhetoric is an art or a cognitive technique – more than a science. Numerous works have highlighted the social relevance of rhetoric, which spreads across different discourse genres, such as the deliberative, the judicial and the epidictic. These in turn represent different social links: the agora, the court of law, the city. Yet, the art of expressing oneself in concrete situations in the hope of gaining the audience’s consent on a given issue requires the operation of a cognitive ability that is nowadays referred to with the term metarepresentation. Ancient treatises of rhetoric, as we know, abound with this cardinal dimension of oratory art, namely audience adaptation. How can I achieve an accurate representation of the audience’s values, beliefs and other mental states? What is likely to move or to annoy its members? How can I design my arguments in order not to rush the judge? Ever since Corax and Tisias, the major stake in this endeavour has been to master the cognitive responses of the judge; if we follow the evolution of thought that gradually built against sophistic rhetoric over the centuries, it appears that the success of the latter is an indication of the quasi-magical power of words.

Nonetheless, once we consider that rhetorical or sophistic techniques influence people’s representations, verbal deception becomes a matter of social regulation, together with issues of credibility and credulity. The mythical birth of rhetoric, which was founded on the possibility of unconstrained speech and the emergence of democratic institutions, thus paradoxically instantiates a form of speech tyranny reserved to those who master it and are able to exploit our natural inclination to take reasoning shortcuts. Cognitive and behavioural sciences have largely documented and illustrated cognitive illusions (Pohl 2004), dual-system inferences (Kahneman 2011, Evans & Over 1996), peripheral routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo 1986) and approximate heuristics (Tversky & Khaneman 1974, Gigerenzer et al. 2011). And yet, we could surmise that sophists already had some awareness of the intrinsic fragility of our art of reasoning. The distinctive example of Phryne’s trial, where the beauty of Phryne managed to win an apparently lost case, perfectly illustrates the fear of being persuaded for the wrong reasons:
Failing to move the judges and anticipating her condemnation, Hyperides, Phryne’s advocate, decided to expose her by tearing her tunic apart, thus revealing her chest to everyone. He then formulated arguments that were so pathetic that the judges, suddenly falling prey to the superstitious fear of a servant and priestess of Aphrodite, were swayed by mercy and refrained from putting her to death. (Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophistae*, XIII, 59)

In a democratic context fostering a form of dependence towards other people’s information, the necessity of believing everything and the possibility of being duped are challenges for both the social management of the City and the evaluation of information (and of its source). The rhetoric of plausibility – more than the rhetoric of truth – and the rhetoric of opinion – more than that of the fair and the unfair (Plato, *Gorgias*, 455a) – are at the same time a blessing, insofar as rhetoric is the daughter of democracy and serves its main institutions, and a threat. The tension between the ideal “rhetoric for Gods” (Danblon 2005: 31) Plato had wished for and Aristotle’s down-to-earth rhetoric has philosophically and historically been well documented; we believe the insights cognitive science is able to contribute to this debate justify this volume. However, the contribution of several chapters of this book is neither to be found in the condemnation of the fallacious effects of specific argument schemes nor in the addition of yet another layer to fallacy criticism. From Plato to modern schools of argumentation professing Critical Thinking (Herman 2011), critical norms have been summoned against language abuse, argumentative fault, logical illusions and so forth (see e.g. Hamblin 1970). We can of course teach fallacious arguments and ways to fight them – but this is still problematic: how do we distinguish fallaciousness from clumsiness, abuse from approximation, argumentative rigour from the rhetorical freedom it goes with? Yet, some argumentative movements traditionally classified as fallacious, such as the *ad hominem* (Johnstone 1978, Walton 1998), the *ad populum* (Maillat, this volume) and the *ad verecundiam* (Herman, this volume), are oftentimes reinterpreted as less fallacious than they seem, if not as common argumentative resources: “the fallacy is not the exception, it is the rule” (Angenot 2008: 92). This volume therefore proposes neither some sort of prophylaxis against fallacies, nor tentative remedies to their ‘nuisance’; in a nutshell, this volume is not about what happens in communication before or after a fallacy is committed, but rather about the way they work *hoc et nunc*, and thus about the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms at play when
fallacious arguments are ‘performed’. This book, which gathers papers presented during the international conference Communication & Cognition: manipulation, persuasion and biases in language, held at the University of Neuchâtel in January 2011, explores the interface between language, cognition and society, through contributions which have been double-blind reviewed by a panel of experts, whom we take the opportunity to thank here.

Several contributions explicitly or implicitly take on board the assumption that we necessarily have some cognitive filter of epistemic vigilance: “We could not be mutually trustful unless we were mutually vigilant” (Sperber et al. 2010: 364). We have thus decided to open our volume with a French translation of “Epistemic vigilance” to provide a stimulating explanatory framework for many of the phenomena discussed throughout the book. The advantageous stance of trust towards communicated information and the presumption of truth on which human communication must be able to rely require at the same time, in asymmetrical contexts of diverging interests, the possibility of circumspection in the vein of what rhetoric calls *phronèsis*, or cautiousness. When a judge is presented with an argumentative scheme such as the *corax*, which defends the innocence of a suspect with the suspicious abundance of clues and motives rather than with the lack thereof, is to us a typical situation in which the possibilities offered by the framework of epistemic vigilance can be exploited, and even tested. The possibility of overturning arguments (which fascinated the classical tradition, as evidenced by *dissoï logoï* exercises and antilogies) and convictions (as illustrated for instance in the film *Twelve angry men* (Lumet 1957)) irremediably ties the social stakes of rhetoric to the cognitive and potentially persuasive effects of argumentative speech. Even if Sperber et al. make no mention of rhetoric, scholars in the discipline will not be surprised to find that the factors influencing acceptation or rejection of a given piece of information have to do with its source and its content. The authors consider that source reliability can be measured in terms of competence and benevolence: this is reminiscent of the Aristotelian *ethos*, made of prudence (*phronèsis*), virtue (*arête*) and benevolence (*eunoïa*). In terms of content, the authors draw on Relevance Theory to account for the mechanisms information evaluation and background assumption selection. In so doing, they explore the relationship between cognition and the language sciences, while the social
dimension of the phenomenon is tackled towards the end of the paper by transposing epistemic vigilance on the scale of a population.

Didier Maillat exploits this stimulating and innovative framework to account for manipulation (see also Maillat & Oswald 2009, 2011). Concerned with reception rather than production, Maillat construes manipulation as a constraint on interpretative procedures. Manipulation enforces selection constraints on relevant contexts: either it makes accessible a context in which the manipulative utterance is found relevant or it weakens a context in which the manipulative utterance would be found inconsistent and eliminated. In a nutshell, manipulation takes advantage of our natural propensity to look for relevant information in cost-effective ways: in case a context is relevant enough to reject the manipulative utterance, the manipulator will need to make the effort required to access that context greater than the effort required to mobilise a context in which the target utterance is unchallenged. Maillat illustrates his point with the relentlessness with which some arguments in advertising and propaganda are repeated, in order to increase the accessibility of a given slogan, for instance. The linguistic dimension of such strategies is illustrated by the ad populum fallacy, which according to Maillat is an argumentative movement that linguistically simulates the effects of physical repetition of a same idea by different sources. From a rhetorical viewpoint, Maillat thus explores one of the crucial aspects of discursive effectiveness. The eternal quest for rhetorical technè in effective strategies of discursive construction – invention, dispositio and elocution – accordingly finds in his contribution an explanatory assumption regarding the effectiveness of certain fallacious moves. At the same time, his proposal makes room for a potential dialogue between rhetoric and cognition, which is one of the main concerns behind this volume and the conference from which it originated.

Vasco Correia’s contribution frontally addresses the relationship between cognitive biases and fallacious arguments, this time not from the perspective of argument reception, but from that of argument production. He specifically defends the idea that biased motivations are responsible for the unintentional argumentative errors that people can be led to commit. Correia presents three motivational biases linked to emotions, namely wishful thinking, aversive thinking and fretful thinking. He then highlights the links between these three biases and recognized patterns of fallacious argumentation (the slippery slope for fretful thinking, for instance) and discusses different
techniques meant to counter the effect of these biases to ensure the quality of argumentative exchanges. Correia accordingly addresses argument production in a dialogical perspective to show that the fallacious nature of certain arguments can be accounted for by a cognitive model of information processing, notably in terms of the motivations at play behind beliefs. Towards the end of the chapter, he reflects on different self-control techniques meant to constrain these motivational biases, in an attempt to ensure a reasoned, and even ethical, ideal of argumentative practice. Correia could therefore be seen as being closer to Plato than to Aristotle, despite his contribution being largely characterized by an explanatory rather than normative outlook. He illustrates in a way that well-intended speakers can commit fragile or fallacious arguments that no argumentative or reasoning norm could grasp, even more so if we consider that speakers may always a posteriori rationalize the beliefs they have acquired under the influence of motivational biases. By the same token, he brings rhetoric back to the measure of man and reminds us that argumentative weakness is not only the weakness of the reason, but also the weakness of man.

Emmanuelle Danblon echoes these contributions by situating her work in a radically naturalistic and interdisciplinary framework meant to avoid both reductionism and post-modern relativism. While formulating some reservations towards Sperber’s naturalistic vision, which she considers to be reductionist, Danblon insists on the practical dimension of human intelligence. Following Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca’s famous dichotomy between convincing and persuading, which loosens their notion of rationality, Danblon reflects on persuasion outside the boundaries of its effects in a technical framework compatible with the proper sense of technē, i.e., craftsmanship. Within that framework, the praxis, constituted of rules, experiences and intuitions throughout many social frames, allows for rhetorical production, or poiésis, which targets effectiveness in view of reaching a goal. The poiésis is in turn made possible by – and also makes possible – both the civic disposition to persuade and that of being persuaded, i.e. the hèxis. As a consequence, Danblon speaks from a naturalistic stance and tries to avoid the “purely cognitive dimension of reason”. The social context of persuasion, which is civic and pragmatic in nature, licenses the development of rhetoric, which we could then define as a form of ‘handcrafted dexterity’ in the absence of any moral considerations.
Evgenia Paparouni discusses the role played by emotions in the analysis of argumentation from a rhetorical perspective. The main issue she tackles is the following: if, on the one hand, emotion is traditionally considered to be an obstacle to reasoned discussion, and if, on the other, emotion is nevertheless considered to be a rhetorical means of conviction/persuasion on a par with *ethos* and *logos*, how can emotion partake in a coherent research framework for rhetoric (i.e., a framework that could dispose of the traditional problem of linking fallacious argumentation to the use of emotions, and at the same time a framework that could place limits upon their use)? This contribution examines the input cognitive science and the philosophy of mind can provide to the study of emotions, in order to show that Cartesian dualism is no longer an option in the field and that this entails that we are now free to think about the compatibility between rhetoric and cognitive science. The question that rhetorical practice might help answering is no longer that of knowing if emotions are responsible for argumentative flaws (to the extent that they are instrumental to manipulation), but rather that of knowing how the practice of rhetoric – with an emotional component – can constitute a responsible way of avoiding such flaws.

Thierry Herman sets out to rethink another rhetorical resource traditionally considered to be fallacious, namely the appeal to authority. Grounded in a linguistic and rhetorical framework, his reflection integrates a cognitive dimension as he investigates the effects of the relationship between the linguistic act of asserting and the rhetorical status of authority. He shows that arguments from authority cannot be reduced to their classical description and that they impose the idea of indubitability of a supposed truth, rather than the factual truth itself. While observing that the argument from authority is usually realised in discourse as a single premise – the conclusion *X is true* being trivial –, Herman shows how an argument from authority partakes in a more complex argumentation, which, among other things, favours the idea of imposing a certainty. As he further decomposes the structure of the argument from authority, Herman evaluates the different definitional criteria he comes up with and proposes to treat the argument from authority and authoritative assertions on a par, as both these phenomena share the idea of imposing the certainty of a given content. He investigates different linguistic structures in this framework and the effects of this rhetorical form of authority.
Somehow in continuity with the previous contribution, Sara Greco Morasso and Carlo Morasso address the particular case of arguments from expert opinion in scientific journalism. The appeal to authority is seen here in the tension between the necessity of trusting scientific expertise and the scepticism towards it within an asymmetrical relationship between experts and the general public. This study of appeals to expert opinion in scientific journalism – even if this form of argument is itself condemned by scientists – builds on the analysis of an example according to two mainstream models of argument analysis: Walton’s critical questions model and the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT). The results show that the fallacious resource linked to expert opinion consists in remaining vague on the sources that are mobilised to support the claim. The (non)fallacious nature of the argument is thus revisited and a novel critical question is added to Douglas Walton’s existing list of critical questions associated to the scheme.

Ioana Agatha Filimon studies the features and the uses of ambivalent messages (defined as messages that defend a claim but also contain counter-claims and counter-arguments, which are then refuted) in a very specific corpus: introductory letters to shareholders and stakeholders from annual and corporate social responsibility reports. Filimon combines in an original way the tools of argumentation theory (grounded on Pragma-Dialectics) and those provided by persuasion research (following O’Keefe for the most part). This contribution is resolutely situated in the study of rhetoric but has strong implications for cognitive research as well. On the one hand, it tries to provide an answer to the two major questions behind argumentation research (building on the analysis of a corpus): are the arguments valid/acceptable? Are the arguments effective? On the other hand, Filimon’s analysis identifies not only the constraints that are inherent to the type of corpus considered, but also those that affect the credibility of these messages: her analysis show that the authors of these reports are very often led to use ambivalent messages in order to increase the credibility of managers.

Fabrizio Macagno’s contribution deals with the particular scheme of argument by definition. Like Herman, who addresses the effects of presupposed authority, Macagno studies the implicit redefinition of reality, which then turns out to be considered as given. The act of presupposing a redefinition is approached through the lens of its potential persuasive effects. Building on Stevenson’s work, Macagno reminds us of the descriptive
component of definitions and designations, but also of their emotional component, as he recalls how the Obama administration at one point switched from using the expression “war on terror” to privileging “Overseas Contingency Operation”. Through the study of the various fundamental logics giving their structure to arguments from classification, which cater more for the descriptive than the emotional component of designation, Macagno works his way in the framework of schemes relating to values, which are likely to prompt for action. From a more general viewpoint, he shows how redefined words – an example of which is Obama’s decision not to talk about “hostilities” in Libya as long as no troops are fighting on the field – can cause action and reminds us of the importance of linguistic presupposition, which he puts on a par with reasoning from presumption. The persuasive and deceptive power of presupposed and a priori unshared, rather than exposed, redefinitions is brought to the fore. His contribution is thus particularly relevant to this volume, as it tackles the cognitive effects of linguistic strategies in the rhetorical context of persuasive attempts.

With Saussure’s chapter, the reflection on the importance of presupposition in persuasive movements is given additional attention. As he examines issues of presupposition accommodation, Saussure considers the type of inferred contents covered by the notion. Somewhere in-between semantic presupposition and implicature, Saussure postulates the existence of discursive presuppositions, which also need to be inferred to make sense of speaker intention. Processing an utterance such as “Firearms are prohibited in this sector” triggers the inference of additional contents such as “Firearms can be authorised in other sectors”, which are neither presupposed nor conversationally implicated. They often belong to the conversational background, but this need not be the case: in this sense, they can also be accommodated and pass for old information. To take an example, the Swiss vote against the construction of minarets that took place in 2009 had to discursively presuppose some sort of danger or threat in order for voters to be able to make sense of initiative. Such a discursive presupposition is highly relevant despite being backgrounded: Saussure thus speaks of background relevance. This contribution resonates with many others in the volume by addressing persuasive effects beyond explicit argumentative structures, which limit or circumvent our epistemic vigilance filters to favour some vision of the world.
Oswald and Lewiński’s chapter concludes our volume and specifically engages with its guiding thread by proposing an analysis of the cognitive mechanisms underlying the well-known straw man fallacy. Theirs is thus an account located at the interface of rhetoric and cognitive science. They discuss the relationship between cognitive heuristics and fallacious argumentation (yet, in complementarity to Correia’s contribution, they tackle reception more than production) in light of the notion of epistemic vigilance developed by Sperber et al. at the beginning of the volume. Their reflection leads them to conclude that if fallacious arguments have some prospect of being effective in a persuasive attempt, it is precisely because from a cognitive perspective they influence our epistemic vigilance filters: in this sense, a fallacy generates an illusion of competence and benevolence (in terms of the source of information) and at the same time mimics the content’s coherence (including its contextual relevance). It is thus by disposing of critical reservations – or by preventing them – that fallacies come to be successful. The case of the straw man fallacy, an argumentative movement involving the misattribution of content to its target, is discussed in light of an example taken from a political debate in the Swiss National Council. The analysis carried out holds in particular that the chances of success of the straw man largely rest on its capacity to make said misattribution undetectable, which, in cognitive terms, amounts to the misattribution’s accessibility and epistemic strength being lowered.

In the end, even if the set of contributions to this volume is at times heterogeneous in terms of their scope, we trust that our interdisciplinary concern has allowed us to explore the interface between language science and social and cognitive science, which in our view the study of rhetoric should systematically incorporate. On the more practical side, the examination of multiple argumentative schemes, be they fallacious or not in their form, their effects and, in some contributions, in delineated discursive practices, has allowed us to explore some operational facets of rhetorical practices. By adopting a descriptive and explanatory stance tailored to understand the mechanics of these schemes, our contributors have explicitly – and sometimes implicitly – displayed the advantages of a cognitive take on rhetoric; this is a direction that has seldom been explored in recent publications in the field, which are more inclined to assess rhetoric’s vivacity in contemporary contexts. A number of original proposals and stimulating
hypotheses emerge throughout this volume: we hope that these will inspire researchers in the language sciences who specialise in rhetoric to take on board cognitive scientific insights and also researchers in cognitive science to engage with the rhetoricity of their own research.

Bibliographie / References