

Persuasion Versus Manipulation: The Input of Pragmatics and C.D.A.

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To cite this article:

Mounir Triki. Persuasion Versus Manipulation: The Input of Pragmatics and C.D.A. *Arabic Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 6, No. 4, 2021, pp. 77-81. doi: 10.11648/j.allc.20210604.11

Received: August 30, 2021; **Accepted:** September 17, 2021; **Published:** November 24, 2021

Abstract: Considering the pervasiveness of manipulation, and the widespread fallacy about its presumed unidirectional agency attributed to the manipulator acting on a passive manipulated person, the paper offers a theoretical discussion that advocates the necessity of fine-tuning various shades of persuasion vs manipulation placed on a cline. To this effect, the paper proffers a critical review of the various typologies on manipulation. Based on this theoretical discussion, and in addition to the time-honored rhetorical vantage point, the paper spells out some pragmatic factors to take into account when tackling manipulation, the ethical dimension of manipulation from a C.D.A. perspective, qualifying it as illegitimate control, the inherent vagueness of the term, its connection with deception from a Forensic Linguistic perspective, and a shift in focus towards the effects of manipulation from a Media Effects perspective. Thus, the deconstruction of manipulation is inevitably interdisciplinary as it is at the cross-roads of all these perspectives. In view of the complexity of the issue and its various manifestations, its analysis can only be thick.

Keywords: Persuasion, Manipulation, Coercion, Deception, Power, Control, Agency, Influence

1. Background to the Study

Research has shown the pervasiveness of manipulation both synchronically and diachronically. From time immemorial, people have always acted upon one another in various ways that ranged from persuasion, through manipulation and deception, to coercion. With recent technological developments, manipulation is manifesting itself in many aspects of life: in advertising, politics, and in both professional and intimate relations [10].

One widespread fallacy about manipulation is its presumed unidirectional agency attributed to the manipulator acting on a passive manipulated person. However, this fallacy has been debunked [10] by considering manipulation to be a kind of influence, one that is characteristically distinct from coercion – either in kind or in degree. But, like coercion, manipulation is often thought to be antithetical to autonomy: the extent to which one is effectively manipulated is an extent to which one can be called "a puppet on a string" [10]. Conversely, critics contend that being manipulated never entails being a fully passive victim or instrument. Rather, the manipulated person does something, and does it voluntarily [10]. These

authors maintain that successful manipulation entails some behavior or mental act that is attributable to the manipulated party [41].

Various taxonomies of manipulation have been proposed, namely:

Manipulation of a Situation vs. Direct Manipulation of a Person [5].

Manipulation that Targets Emotions vs. Manipulation that Targets Beliefs [5].

Manipulative Emotional Appeals vs. Non-Manipulative Emotional Appeals [5].

Paternalistic vs. Non-Paternalistic Manipulation [5].

Manipulating Behavior vs. Manipulating Mental States [5].

Intricate Manipulation vs. Blunt Manipulation [5].

Covert Manipulation vs. Overt Manipulation (the extent to which the manipulated person does or does not realize the way in which she is being influenced) [5].

Manipulation as Deceptive Influence or Covert Influence: Goodwin has been cited to the effect that manipulation is, but need not be, deceptive or covert influence of some sort [5].

Manipulation as Defective Persuasion [5].

Manipulation as Non-Persuasive Influence [5].

The rhetorical dimension of manipulation has been well argued in the literature [8], by setting a high premium on the common boundaries between communication and manipulation as they both take place in the public space. The theatricality and audience consciousness of both processes causes these two concepts to “hide complex linguistic and psychological mechanisms”. In this vein, the literature has detected a marked shift of focus towards the effects of manipulation. Indeed, Barnhill [5] transcends the focus on the means of manipulation as a form of influence (be it in the form of covert means of influence, or misplaced arguments in the guise of good arguments) towards a more pronounced focus on the effect on its target (such as exploiting the targets’ weaknesses, or influencing them without improving their understanding). Faden and Beauchamp’s classification [15] of manipulation into three distinct kinds: namely the manipulation of options, the manipulation of information, and psychological manipulation has been cited in the literature [5].

Moreover, one of the most common domains where manipulation is so rife is that of Political Discourse. For instance, Naif [27] studied the abuse of power and the strategies of social and cognitive manipulations used by some British politicians before the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq. His main finding is that politicians manage to manipulate people through recourse to long and influential speeches that affect their minds and actions, to the point of violating people’s norms by causing them to behave against their will. A similar study was conducted [2] on countering ISIS strategies targeting European women who travelled to Syria for Jihad. Another interesting case study tackled [29] the (ab)use of language in Nigerian politics to understand how political discourse is used to (mis)represent politicians (in relation to Buku Haram). A multi-modal analysis of metaphors in a corpus of Donald Trump’s speeches on immigration in the 2016 American presidential election aimed to determine the depiction of migrants and the impact of metaphors for the manipulation of voters [25].

Research on manipulation is closely associated with work on the media. For instance, researchers have explored the rhetorical propaganda patterns used by the media to make reference to the Boko Haram crises in Nigeria [12]. In their turn, some scholars have critically examined the Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western Media, with reference to the concept of “Islamophobia” [32, 26]. Moreover, some studies have tackled the question of stance manipulation in Asharq Al-Awsat news coverage of the Gulf crisis [1]. In the same vein, other researchers have discourse analytically explored the representation of the Syrian conflict in the Syrian online news [22]. Even well established channels, with a reputation for impartiality and professional reporting, like the BBC, have been exposed for spreading fake news from a critical discourse analytic perspective [42]. Moreover, manipulation has been shown to inform translations of TV shows and religious discourse [6].

With the advent of digital rhetoric, manipulation through Social Media has become the major focus of research on

manipulation. For instance, some scholars studied online manipulation through the analytic concepts of “bonding” and “autonomy” [28], “Social Bots and Social Media Manipulation” [9], and “Privacy and Manipulation in the Digital Age” [43]. Moreover, other scholars have debunked the assumption that Social Media promote democratic discourse on social and political issues [4]. Their corpus analysis has shown that these platforms are guilty of allowing “hostile actors to exploit online discussions in an attempt to manipulate public opinion” [4]. The political manipulation of Social Media in Pakistan is a case in point [40]. Scholars have developed multimodal analysis [7] and visual literacy [19] to help counteract this tendency.

Literary Pragmatics has shown how literature is not free from manipulation. For instance, some researchers investigated the linguistic representation of power in Edward Bond’s *Lear* (1978) through strategies that include “euphemism, myth-making, positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, and politeness strategies” [23] and proffered a critical discourse analysis of Orwell’s *Animal Farm* to highlight ploys of manipulation [24].

2. Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding this abundance of typologies on manipulation, the literature has drawn attention to the fuzziness of this term. For instance, some scholars [34] highlight the problematic nature of manipulation in discourse, or of manipulative discourse, due to very fuzzy borders involving extremely heterogeneous aspects. To this effect, these scholars [34] attribute to most trends in contemporary discourse analysis the assumption that the analysis consists in resorting to a ‘control filter’ mediating between the interpretation of discourse and its evaluation. In his turn, de Saussure [11] avers that every researcher approaching the field of manipulation, be it in linguistics, discourse analysis, psychology or political science, is aware of the vagueness, the semantic complexity and the lack of clear-cut definitions for the concept of manipulation. To help disambiguate this term, the present paper seeks to shed light on the factors that account for its complexity.

3. Pragmatic Factors at Stake in Manipulation

The question of manipulation involves hot theoretical issues on meaning assignment [13, 31]. Indeed, Sorlin [35] discusses the pragmatic nature of manipulation through a specific focus on the exploitation of im/politeness theories, paying special attention to its socio-psychological aspects that tend, in this author’s view, to be overlooked in Critical Discourse Analysis and pragma-cognitive angles on the phenomenon.

Furthermore, the literature has spelled out some pragmatic factors to take into account when tackling manipulation. In this vein, some scholars [34] recommend that manipulative

discourse pay attention to:

1. The nature of the material that is being communicated,
2. The various modes of realization of communication (including the 'packaging' of information through formal aspects of sentence semantics and syntax, hence the connection with Framing theories),
3. The identification of the intentions of the speaker and the recovery of these intentions by the addressee,
4. The extent to which the addressee's consent to the propositions conveyed is sincere,
5. The determination of which specific phenomena should be tackled under the label 'manipulation'. That involves the identification of what specific tools allow for the identification of manipulative discourse, and what links can be assumed between morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics when they all converge in building up a manipulative discourse,
6. The exploration of whether there are several types of linguistic/discursive manipulative behaviors,
7. Determining the extent to which specific problems of coherence and of logic appear exclusively in manipulative discourses,
8. Working on synthesizing apparently incompatible theories (for example cognitive theories vs. psychosocial theories, objectivist approaches vs. anti-objectivist approaches, formal models vs. informal trends, etc.) to achieve a better mastery of this topic, and, finally, the identification of what kind of speech act is performed when manipulating.

Furthermore, manipulation has been treated from a Relevance Theoretic perspective as a pragmatic problem [33]. To this effect, de Saussure [11] argues that, in view of the fact that the speaker aims at making manifest a certain number of assumptions to the hearers in order to have them consent to these assumptions, and that such assumptions would be rejected under normal conditions, manipulative discourse is a pragmatic problem that can be identified only through notions like goals, intentions, and broader aspects of pragmatic processing. This author [11] concludes that one of the core problems of manipulation in language resides in the degree of success in the identification by the hearer of the speaker's manipulative intention through formal and non-formal features; when this detection fails, manipulation is effective.

Manipulation of an individual is directly related to applying constraints, in particular constraints that the individual is not aware of [11], affecting the process of information treatment and built up with more or less efficient and sophisticated tacit strategies whose aim is misleading the hearer in one way or another. As for the felicity conditions for manipulation to take place, this scholar [11] requires that the commitment of the addressee to the propositions conveyed by the discourse be sincere (or taken for sincere) while the propositions expressed are problematic at several levels. Furthermore, the necessity of hidden strategies, in the eyes of de Saussure [11], stems from the fact that obvious and brutal force cannot guarantee sincere commitment. This

author contends that freedom of thought, or at least the illusion of it, is a necessary condition for manipulation [11].

Moreover, manipulation involves blocking of one's rational device. As has been cogently argued by de Saussure [11], a number of strategies inform the process of manipulation in order to block access to the truth, and make difficult the likelihood and acceptability checking, as well as consistency checking; all of these dimensions are based on the necessity of blocking the identification of the manipulative intention of the speaker. Consequently, for de Saussure [11], manipulation is a case of covertly transmitted information leading to the blocking of one's rational device in such a way that certain operations about beliefs are accomplished by the manipulated person himself [37].

De Saussure [11] takes manipulation in discourse to be clearly a pragmatic and contextual problem, where the notion of context is understood as the subset of the hearer's cognitive environment which allows for the interpretation to be constructed. As such, manipulation involves cognitive processes. Indeed, for de Saussure [11], among all manipulation strategies, linguistic ones are crucial for the manipulator to obtain sincere consent, particularly fuzziness [37]. Indeed, for de Saussure [11], fuzziness is not restricted to vague terms, complicated sentences and overuse of metaphors. On the contrary, de Saussure avers [11] that, among the most important strategies used within manipulative discourses is the creation of a global fuzziness, so much so that even parts of the discourse that seem clear and simple lead to interpretative problems for the addressee (see the rhetorical concepts of tergiversation and equivocation).

4. The Input of C.D.A.

Operating within a C.D.A. perspective, van Dijk [39] offers a triangulated approach to manipulation as a form of social power abuse, cognitive mind control and discursive interaction. At the social level, manipulation is defined as illegitimate domination confirming social inequality. At the cognitive level, manipulation as mind control involves the interference with processes of understanding, the formation of biased mental models and social representations such as knowledge and ideologies. Finally, at the discursive level, manipulation generally involves the usual forms and formats of ideological discourse, such as emphasizing "Our good things", and emphasizing "Their bad things" [39]. In line with this orientation, Vadai has tackled manipulation through what he claims to be a new integrative analytical tool, namely the Power, Ideology and Manipulation Identification (PIMI) instrument [38].

Moreover, research has highlighted the ethical dimension of manipulation, qualifying it as illegitimate control. In this vein, van Dijk [39] takes manipulation to be a communicative and interactional practice in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests. In everyday usage, the concept of manipulation has negative associations because such a practice violates social

norms. Indeed, this discourse analyst [39] concludes that manipulation is illegitimate in a democratic society, because it (re)produces, or may reproduce, inequality: it is in the best interests of powerful groups and speakers, and damages the interests of less powerful groups and speakers [39]. This means that the definition is not so much based on the intentions of the manipulators, or on the more or less conscious awareness of manipulation by the recipients, but it is rather perceived in terms of its societal consequences [39]. However, the ethical dimension of research on manipulation is a controversial issue that has been critically reviewed by some scholars to the effect that CDA's project has an unavoidably moralizing pursuit whose declared aims are to beneficially make social and political systems more equal and democratic [17].

5. Overall Conclusion

The paper has attempted to show the historicity and context-situatedness of any act of production or reception of any discourse. Discourse is born, received and exchanged as part of social strife with all its negotiations and power (im)balances and the fine-tuning of manipulation versus all its analogous terms is at the heart of this power negotiation. Moreover, the paper has highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of any analysis of manipulative discourse (with interlocking perspectives from Rhetoric, Cognitive Science, Pragmatics, C.D.A., Forensic Linguistics, Framing Theory and Media Studies). To optimize this demystification process, avenues for future research should set a high premium on multi-modal analysis and the opening on various technologies (i.e. the cultural semiotic dimension). This will entail the necessity of backing up pragmatic research with empirical ethno-methodological investigations. It would, also, be necessary to look at manipulation across different cultures (i.e. the cross-cultural pragmatic dimension).

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