

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The Accusation Of Amalgame As A Meta-Argumentative Refutation



This paper proposes a descriptive approach of the question of norms in argumentation; it is based on a case study: the accusation of *amalgame* in everyday arguments. We consider after Hymes (1984) that speakers possess a communicative competence, which may be defined as a set of aptitudes owing to which one can communicate efficiently in various situations. This communicative competence comprises, besides the linguistic competence, an argumentative competence which enables speakers to take a stand and to elaborate their position through discursive devices in order to hold out against contention. The argumentative competence thus enables speakers to elaborate argumentative discourses; it also enables them to interpret argumentative discourses they are exposed to. Such an interpretative process implies at least two cognitive processes: a categorizing process, and an evaluative process.

In order to interpret an argument, speakers first “label” it owing to spontaneous argumentative categories provided by the language they use (Plantin 1995). Such categories may rely on general lexical items such as “argument”, “to argue”..., or they may refer to specific argumentative moves (such as “to concede”, “to refute”, “to justify”, “to object”...). They may even designate a precise type of argument: “example”, “analogy”, “appeal to authority”... *Once* the argument has been identified, it is characterized as acceptable or unacceptable by means of evaluation criteria which are often left implicit. The existence of the normative dimension of ordinary argumentative competence is attested through meta-comments which are frequent in polemical contexts. Such claims may be quite general (for instance: “that’s not a valid argument”); they may also be related to a specific argumentative device: “don’t appeal to authority”, “you should discuss facts rather than persons”, “stop making hasty generalizations”...

The whole interpretative process has in turn some effects on the production of arguments. Actually, once a speaker has received an argumentative utterance and has deemed it fallacious, he may reject in on behalf of this fallaciousness

judgement through a refutative move. The identification of the criteria which guide ordinary speakers in evaluating an argument as “sound” or fallacious is of great interest for the argumentation analyst. Such an identification may be achieved through the thorough examination of two ranges of phenomena:

- Refutative moves: the way a speaker refutes a specific argument is significant of the conditions under which, in *his* view, this argument can be accepted. Consider for instance a speaker A who tries to support *p* by saying that X, a well known authority on the question under discussion, agrees that *p*. A’s claim can be challenged by a speaker B who contests X’s status as an authority. Thus for B, the acceptability of an appeal to authority depends on the evaluation of X as an expert: if no consensus exists among his peers as whether or not he may constitute a reliable authority on *p* matters, then the appeal to authority should be rejected as fallacious (Doury 1999).

- Meta-argumentative comments: a sharp attention should be paid to meta-argumentative comments in polemical contexts, in order to identify the spontaneous argumentative categories ordinary speakers use to classify and interpret the various argumentative moves they are addressed. Such categories may be neutral (like the “analogy” category mentioned before), or they may be evaluative: it is the case for the French word “amalgame”, which will be studied here. Contrary to an analogy, which can be “good” or “bad”, an “amalgame” is always fallacious. The lexical characterization of the word “amalgame” excludes the possibility of an utterance such as “what a good amalgame you’ve made!”.

The present paper is devoted to the description of the accusation of amalgame in French argumentative discussions. The data consist in sequences in which a speaker identifies the opponent’s argument as an amalgame in various argumentative discourses: everyday conversations, newspapers, TV debates... We will first show that the word “amalgame” is a French meta-argumentative expression the purpose of which is to disqualify an antagonistic argumentation as fallacious. We will then identify the argumentative devices which can be characterized as “amalgames”, in order to elaborate a definition of the meaning of this word. The detailed analysis of examples will put to the fore the fact that the word “amalgame” as it is used in everyday argument refers to various argumentative devices, such as causal correlations, analogy relationships, inductive reasonings... It may even be confined to a refutative function, without any consistent meaning.

We will conclude with underlining the interest of a descriptive approach of the

normative component of ordinary speakers' argumentative competence.

1. *The French word "amalgame"*

The French word "amalgame" originally refers to a blend of various components such as a metal alloy or a culinary preparation. Thus, its initial meaning is concrete. In the figurative sense, "amalgame" refers to the association of two concepts, and is close to 'synthesis'.

Its pejorative argumentative meaning seems to be very recent; it is not even mentioned in the *Trésor de la Langue Française* (a French reference dictionary). Nevertheless its frequency in ordinary conversations makes it a central instrument of the normative activity related to the argumentative competence.

The examination of data from newspapers shows that the word "amalgame" appears not only in the body of articles but also in titles and subtitles. Examples 1 to 5 are titles taken from French newspapers in which the word "amalgame" appears.

1.
"Amalgame": titre de l'éditorial de Jacques Amalric, *Libération*, 17-18 novembre 2001.

"Amalgame": *title of an editorial by Jacques Amalric, Libération, November 17-18, 2001.*

2.
"L'érudition ne met pas JFK à l'abri de l'amalgame": titre d'un article, *Marianne*, 15-21 novembre 1999, p.5.

"*Erudition does not protect JFK from 'amalgame'*": *title taken from Libération, March 13, 2001. (JFK = Jean-François Kahn, a French journalist)*

3.
"Non à l'amalgame. Le mot "pédophile" est un concept qui mélange tout et permet de justifier une législation disproportionnée à la gravité de certains actes", titre d'un article de *Libération*, 13 mars 2001.

"*Stop using 'amalgame'. The word 'pedophile' is a concept which mixes everything and is used as a justification for a legislation which is out of proportion with the seriousness of some crimes*", *title taken from Libération, March 13, 2001.*

4.
"Amalgames" = intertitre de l'article "Les Turcs de Barr sous le choc", *Libération*, 4 janvier 2002.

“Amalgames” = subtitle from the article entitled “Turkish people from Barr in shock”, Libération, January 4, 2002.

5.

“Loi sécuritaire, loi liberticide. La loi ‘sécurité quotidienne’ (LSQ) fait l’amalgame entre délinquance et terrorisme tout en servant les intérêts politiques du Premier ministre.” Libération, 8 novembre 2001, rubrique “Rebonds”.

“Security act, a threat for freedom. ‘Daily Security’ Act (DSA) makes an amalgame between criminality and terrorism while serving the Prime Minister’s political interests.” Libération, November 8, 2001.

Besides, the word “amalgame” is itself the subject of meta-linguistic comments, as illustrated in example 6.

6.

“ ‘Amalgame’ est sans doute le mot le plus employé à Vitry depuis le début de l’année. Dans le discours des membres de l’ACCMV [Association culturelle et cultuelle des musulmans de Vitry], il revient à chaque phrase, tour à tour mise en garde ou prière.” (Marianne, 7-13 janvier 2002, p.23)

“No doubt ‘amalgame’ has become the most often used word in Vitry since the beginning of the year. It appears in every sentence, whether warning or plea, in the speeches of the members of ACCMV (Cultural and Religious Association of Muslims from Vitry)” (Marianne, January 7-13, 2002, p.23)

Such strategic positions testify to its function as an argumentation organizer.

2. Qualifying an argumentation of “amalgame” is a way of rejecting it as unacceptable

Apart from very rare utterances, the word “amalgame” in argumentative contexts works as a disqualifying device. It must be pointed out that:

- the person accused of making an amalgame is always the opponent;
- in a confrontational context, such an accusation is always challenged.

An amalgame is something you deny having made, as in example 7; an amalgame is a pitfall one must avoid, according to ex. 8 and 9; an amalgame is something you cannot make (cf. example 10); an amalgame is something which is feared (example 11), from which you have to protect yourself (example 2).

The negative evaluation associated with the word “amalgame” is also made obvious by the choice of adjectives which are applied to it. “Amalgame” is deemed “fallacious” and “unfair” in example 12, “dangerous” in example 13. “Amalgame” is associated with “mistake” in ex. 12.

7.

(Informations, Europe 1, 2002): "Le président de la République s'est défendu de tout *amalgame* entre insécurité et drame de Nanterre. Le droit et l'honneur du Président de la République, c'est d'essayer de comprendre"

(News, Europe 1 radio, 2002): "*The President of the Republic denied having made an amalgame between insecurity and the Nanterre drama. It is the President's right and honor to strive to understand such an event.*"

8.

"Il faut, par ailleurs, se garder des amalgames." (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 7-13 mars 2002, p.104, "L'autre cauchemar des victimes")

"*Besides, it is imperative to avoid amalgames.*" (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 7-13, 2002, p.104, "Victims' other nightmare")

9.

"Conscient des tensions latentes, qu'il estime néanmoins 'mesurées', le maire Gilbert Scholly a tenté de calmer le jeu: 'Il faut éviter les amalgames.'" = intertitre de l'article "Les Turcs de Barr sous le choc", *Libération*, 4 janvier 2002.

"*Aware of latent tensions (which he nevertheless deems 'moderate'), said Mayor Gilbert Scholly to calm people down: 'One must avoid making amalgames.'*" (subtitle from the article "Turkish people from Barr in shock", *Libération*, January 4, 2002)

10.

"On peut pas faire l'amalgame et c'est pas parce qu'il y a eu quatre cinq mauvaises personnes qui ont envahi un stade que ça y est, quoi" (Franck Leboeuf, 1er mars 2002, France 2, réaction à l'invasion de la pelouse par des supporters algériens lors du 1er match amical OM / sélection algérienne à Alger)

"*You can't make amalgame and say 'we are there' just because four or five bad people invaded the stadium*" (Franck Leboeuf, March 1, 2002, France 2, reacting to the invasion of the pitch by a few supporters of the Algeria team during a match between the Olympique de Marseille and an Algerian selection in Algiers)

11.

"L'amalgame, c'est la plus grande crainte de Sami, Azzedine et Abdrachid." (*Marianne*, 7-13 janvier 2002, p.23)

"*Amalgame is Sami, Azzedine and Abdrachid's major fear*" (*Marianne*, January 7-13, 2002, p.23)

12.

(Au courrier du "*Monde*", 02/12/2001, "Des surréalistes chez Ben Laden?"): Jean Clair m'a surpris par son parti pris anti-surréaliste (*Le Monde* du 22 novembre) et

surtout par les nombreux *amalgames* et erreurs qu'il contient. S'il n'est pas douteux que les surréalistes aient voulu "démoraliser l'Occident", il me paraît fallacieux de les présenter comme des précurseurs des terroristes du 11 septembre. (...) L'amalgame qui est fait avec Filippo Tommaso Marinetti n'est pas juste non plus."

(Le Monde, *Letters to the Editor*, 02/12/2001, "Surrealists at Ben Laden's?"): *Jean Clair's anti-surrealist option surprised me (Le Monde, November 22), above all because of the many amalgames and mistakes it contains. Although there is no doubt surrealists intended to "demoralize Western countries", presenting them as precursors of the eleventh-of-September terrorists seems fallacious to me. (...) The amalgame which is being made with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti is unfair too."*

13.

"D'abord parce que ce texte relève justement de cette pratique de l'amalgame, toujours dangereuse, en particulier en période électorale" (Editorial de Jacques Amalric, *Libération*, 17-18 novembre 2001, article "Amalgame").

"First because this text is a relevant illustration of this amalgame practice which is always dangerous, especially during election time" (Editorial by Jacques Amalric, Libération, November 17-18, 2001, article: "Amalgame").

3. Other expressions used for accusing someone of making an amalgame

Besides the use of the very word of "amalgame", other expressions designating the same device are often met. In example 14, "amalgame" refers to the "confusion" of facts which should be kept distinct. In example 15, the word "confusion" is associated with "amalgame"; French also uses the verb "*assimiler*" as an alternative for "making an amalgame"; in this sense, "assimiler" means "to consider as equivalent", or "to treat in the same way". In Example 16 an amalgame is "a rag-bag of a concept" which "mixes" and "confuses" different things. The accusation of amalgame, when taking the form of an injonction ("you shouldn't make amalgames"), is closely linked with expressions such as "you shouldn't lump different things all together", as in example 17.

14.

[Sur le fait que des pratiques d'abus sexuel par du personnel humanitaire ont été révélées à l'encontre de réfugiés dans des camps d'Afrique de l'Ouest:] "Il faut, par ailleurs, se garder des amalgames. (...). Il semble, selon certaines données de ce rapport, qu'aient été confondus des actes relevant de la pure criminalité sexuelle et des faits de prostitution qui, bien qu'indéfendables, ne sont pas du

tout la même chose.”(*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 7-13 mars 2002, p.104, “L’autre cauchemar des victimes”)

[*about the disclosure of sexual abuse by humanitarian staff on refugees in West Africa camps*] “Besides, one must avoid making amalgames. (...) It appears that, according to some elements of this report, there has been a confusion between crimes coming under pure sexual criminality and prostitution events which, although indefensible, are not at all the same thing.” (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 7-13, 2002, p.104, “Victims’ other nightmare”)

15.

“L’érudition ne met pas JFK à l’abri de l’amalgame (...) L’article de JFK sur Jeanne d’Arc témoigne d’une grande culture historique, certainement supérieure à celle du modeste licencié en histoire que je suis. Mais il me semble cependant qu’il n’échappe pas à une certaine confusion due à l’utilisation abusive des termes ‘gauche’ et ‘droite’, ‘réformistes’ et ‘conservateurs’, pour désigner les protagonistes de cet épisode de notre histoire. JFK semble assimiler à la droite tous les partisans du renforcement de l’autorité royale, et à la gauche tous les adversaires de la monarchie absolue favorables à un contrôle parlementaire.” (*Marianne*, 15-21 novembre 1999, p.5)

“Erudition does not protect JFK from amalgame. (...) JFK’s paper on Jeanne d’Arc displays a great historical culture, no doubt superior to my own as a modest Bachelor of History. Nevertheless it seems to me that he still falls into a certain confusion due to the misuse of such words as ‘left’ and ‘right’, ‘reformists’ and ‘conservatives’, to designate the protagonists of this episode of our history. JFK seems to consider [assimiler] all the defenders of the reinforcement of royal authority as belonging to the ‘right’, and all the opponents to absolute monarchy, favourable to a parliamentary control, as belonging to the ‘left’”. (*Marianne*, November 15-21, 1999, p.5)

16.

“premièrement, on a créé un ‘concept’ fourre-tout, amalgame de notions hétéroclites où l’on mélange des bébés de deux ans et des adolescents largement pubères, des liaisons consenties avec des violentes, où l’on confond des caresses avec des assassinats, où les moindres gestes avoisinent des crimes sordides (qui souvent ne concernent pas des enfants) et sont eux-mêmes criminalisés. Vocabulaire qui frappe d’infâmie, au même titre, actes, regards et pensées.” (“Non à l’amalgame”, rubrique “Rebonds”, *Libération*, 13 mars 2001)

“first a rag-bag of a ‘concept’ was created, an amalgame of heterogeneous notions in which two-years old babies are mixed with amply pubescent teenagers, willing

partner affairs with violent ones, an amalgame in which caresses are mistaken for murders, in which the slightest gestures border on sordid crimes (which often do not even deal with children) and themselves are criminalized. This word covers acts, looks and thoughts with infamy in the same way." (*"Stop amalgame"*, Libération, March 13, 2001).

17.

"La communauté a beau se répéter qu'il s'agit d' "actes individuels délirants", expliquer qu' "il ne faut pas mettre tous les Turcs dans le même sac", elle sait bien qu'il va lui falloir faire front." (Libération, "Les Turcs de Barr sous le choc", 4 janvier 2002).

"However often the Turkish community repeats that it is a matter of insane individual acts or explains that "one should not lump all Turkish people together", they are fully aware of the fact that they will have to face things in the end." (Libération, "Turkish people from Barr in shock", January 4, 2002).

Such expressions (as "confusing", "mixing", "assimiler") may appear in association with the word "amalgame", like in the former examples. But in many cases the analyst is bound to identify the accusation of amalgame even if the very word is not uttered. Example 18 illustrates such a case.

18.

"On connaît la pensée, ou plutôt la tactique, d'Ariel Sharon. Voilà près de trois mois, en effet, qu'il martèle l'équation "Arafat = Ben Laden" pour mieux repousser aux calendes grecques toute approche politique de l'affrontement israélo-palestinien. Que Yasser Arafat lui ait donné des arguments en adoptant une position plus qu'ambiguë par rapport au terrorisme et en s'arc-boutant sur le droit au retour - en tout état de cause inacceptable pour Israël - de la diaspora palestinienne est un fait. Mais cela n'autorise en aucun cas d'évacuer la question nationale palestinienne en l'assimilant au délire sanglant, messianique et suicidaire à la fois, des fous d'Allah de l'internationale islamiste. Les Palestiniens, que l'on sache, ne rêvent pas d'étendre la charia à toute la planète mais ils sont en manque d'un Etat." (Editorial de Jacques Amalric, "Jeu de clone", Libération, 5 décembre 2001)

"Ariel Sharon's ideas - let's say his tactics - are well known. He's been hammering out the equation "Arafat = Bin Laden" for almost three months in order to postpone indefinitely any political approach to the israelo-palestinian conflict. Undoubtedly, Yasser Arafat provided him with arguments by taking a most ambiguous stand on terrorism and by clinging to the right of the Palestinian diaspora to come back - which in any case is unacceptable for Israel. But it does

not justify, on any account, eluding the question of a Palestinian nation by associating it with the bloody delirium, at the same time messianic and suicidal, of the Allah disciples of the Islamist International Group. Palestinian people, as far as we know, are not dreaming of extending the Charia to the whole planet but they are in quest of a state.” (Editorial by Jacques Amalric, Libération, December 5, 2001).

In brief, examples 14 to 18 show that the accusation of amalgame can take various forms, where the word “amalgame” is not always present. Nevertheless we will focus only on cases where the word “amalgame” is used. It may be assumed that the existence in French of a lexicalised preferential form meant to carry such an argumentative strategy actually increases the refuting potential of the accusation of amalgame.

4. What does the accusation of amalgame refer to?

The choice we have made not to propose any English translation for “amalgame” is due to the fact that the English equivalents which are available are much too restrictive. For instance, the *Robert and Collins French-to-English electronic dictionary* proposes an ‘exploded’ definition which develops into three directions:

amalgame [amalgam] nom masculin

(péj: mélange) (strange) mixture ou blend

(Métal, Dentisterie) amalgam

un amalgame d’idées à: **LET OP A MET STREEPJE MOET PIJL ZIJN, VET GEMAAKT!!** hotchpotch ou (strange) mixture of ideas

faire l’amalgame entre deux idées à to confuse two ideas

il ne faut pas faire l’amalgame (fig Pol)à you shouldn’t make generalizations

Each of the proposals corresponds to a specification of the meaning of “amalgame”, and therefore cannot serve as a unified definition.

The examination of our examples brings out two main categories of argumentative devices which may be considered as ‘amalgames’ in a polemical context:

4.1. associating two objects x and y on the basis of properties which are presented as shared and conclusive

The accusation of amalgame may be triggered by:

- a parallel or a comparison between two objects x and y:

Example 19 is taken from a TV debate on astrology. The astrologer, ET, is

confronted with DB, astronomer, who denies the very principle of astral influence, and concludes that astrology has no value.

19.

ET: Vous savez qui vous me rappelez?

DB: Peu m'importe, peu m'importe.

ET: Lord Kelvin qui au début du XXème siècle disait "l'aviation n'existe pas, on ne pourra jamais voler parce que le métal est plus lourd que l'air; voilà ce que vous me rappelez.

DB: Nous sommes au XXème siècle, non non non non, rien à voir, c'est un amalgame. C'est un amalgame, vous faites des amalgames extrêmement savants et ces amalgames, je veux les dénoncer parce que ça c'est scandaleux.

ET: Mais si! et Galilée, alors? et Galilée? alors...

ET: you know who you remind me of?

DB: I don't care, I don't care

ET: Lord Kelvin who, in the beginning of the 20th Century kept saying: "aviation does not exist, planes will never fly because metal is heavier than air"; that's what you remind me of.

DB: We are in the 20th century, no no no no, nothing to do with that; that's an amalgame, you're making extremely learned amalgames, and these amalgames I want to denounce them because doing that is scandalous.

ET: Yes, yes! What about Galileo? What about Galileo?

Here the astrologer arguments from the precedent. She draws a parallel between Lord Kelvin's position on aviation in the beginning of the century, and DB's position on astrology today. This parallel rests on some characteristics which are shared by both situations and which are left implicit. The astrologer attempts to transfer the judgment about the past situation to the present situation, namely: Lord Kelvin was not clear-sighted, Lord Kelvin was wrong - and so is DB. This parallel is rejected by the astronomer as a "scandalous amalgame". DB supports the accusation of amalgame by making explicit a difference, presented as crucial, between the two situations: "we are in the 20th century". The astrologer persists in her strategy and proposes another likening key figure: Galileo. The second parallel is between the astronomer and the Holy Office on the one hand, and between heliocentrism and astrology on the other hand.

The accusation of amalgame may also concern

- *a generalizing claim rejected as a hasty generalization:*

This case is illustrated by example 20, taken from a TV debate on parapsychology. The skeptical guest PB claims that parapsychologists fool their clients in order to get money out of them.

20.

PB: écoutez, ils ramassent des millions quand même avec ça

GD: [*acteur, montrant un invité qui affirme avoir des dons de prémonition*]: non monsieur, pas ce jeune homme, pas même la personne dont je parle; voilà, ok.

PB: d'autres! d'autres, d'autres! d'autres ramassent des millions avec ça

GD: vous faites un amalgame; mais non, mais vous faites un amalgame

PB: mais non, il n'y a aucun amalgame qui est fait; il y a des gens qui souffrent tous les jours de ça, il y a des gens qui ramassent des millions, nous on leur demande des preuves.

(“Ciel mon mardi”, “les pouvoirs de l'esprit”, 10/10/2000)

PB: listen, they collect millions with that

GD: [a French actor, pointing to a guest who claims to possess premonition gifts]: no sir, not this young man, not even the person I am speaking about; okay, that's it.

PB: others! others, others! Others collect millions with that.

GD: You're making an amalgame; no non, you're making an amalgame.

PB: No, there's no amalgame being made. Everyday people suffer from that, people collect millions and WE want them to give us proofs.

(“Ciel mon mardi” programme, “spirit powers”, 10/10/2000)

Here the generalizing claim “they collect millions with that” is challenged by two counter-examples (“no sir, not this young man, not even the person I am speaking about”). The skeptical guest does not refute the counter-examples; nevertheless he persists in accusing all parapsychologists but the two persons mentioned. This persistence triggers the accusation of amalgame, which he in turn rejects (“no, there's no amalgame being made”). At last, PB reiterates his initial position (“people collect millions”) and associates it with an *ad misericordiam* (“everyday people suffer from that”).

The accusation of amalgame may also be due to a disagreement on

- *a class extension definition*

The accusation of amalgame is addressed to a speaker who is blamed for having excessively broadened a class extension: either one claims the object under discussion does not possess the properties which are characteristic of the class,

or he contests these very properties.

Thus, after a mass murderer shot at representatives during a town council meeting in Nanterre, killing several people, Jacques Chirac declared: "Insecurity ranges from ordinary incivility to the drama we experienced tonight". He was criticized for this declaration, which was perceived as an excessive use of a tragical event. Denial was prompt (ex. 21).

21.

(Informations, Europe 1, mars 2002): "Le président de la République s'est défendu de tout amalgame entre insécurité et drame de Nanterre. Le droit et l'honneur du Président de la République, c'est d'essayer de comprendre".

(News, Europe 1 radio, 2002): "*The President of the Republic denied having made an amalgame between insecurity and the Nanterre drama. It is the President's right and honor to strive to understand such an event.*"

Here, the point is how to define the class referred to as "insecurity events". Such a class is not stabilized and may be defined in various ways (it may even include offences to highway code, which contribute to making car driving "insecure"). The reactions to Jacques Chirac's declaration emphasize the fact that there is no agreement on the extension of this class. Furthermore, in this case, such a disagreement was not a "cold", purely intellectual one: the definition of insecurity proposed by Chirac was seen as part of a wider political strategy aiming at using the public emotion generated by the "Nanterre drama" to gain support to Chirac's national security proposals. Once again, the accusation of amalgame is directed towards a connection which is condemned not only as intellectually disputable, but also as ethically or strategically disputable.

A similar case occurs when an opponent disqualifies a whole class C because of a few nasty elements X it contains. This opponent may be accused of making an amalgame between "good" Xs and "bad" Xs, the C class being confined to "good Xs". In other words, the "good" property is added to defining properties of C, so that "bad" Xs are no longer considered as "true Xs". Example 22 illustrates this case. PB is a herbal medicine practitioner, and he defends herbal medicine from critics deriving from a few unacceptable practices by considering that people guilty of such practices are not "true herbal medicine practitioners".

22.

PB: Mais ça, ce sont des abus des obésologues pour lesquels nous payons actuellement, monsieur (...); or je voudrais pas que vous fassiez l'amalgame, nous

n'avons rien à voir avec ces gens-là, nous nous sommes des phytothérapeutes, nous sommes des cliniciens depuis vingt ans (...)

PB: Sir, this is obesity specialist excesses for which we are now suffering (...); so I wouldn't want you to make the amalgame, we have nothing to do with these people, we are herbal medicine practitioners, we have been health technicians for twenty years (...)

The second main category of devices identified as 'amalgames' is based on

4.2. The connection between two objects x and y because of a dependence relationship between them

Most of the time, the accusation of amalgame concerns a causal relationship which is held to be erroneous. In example 23, the word "amalgame" is applied to the claim that there is a causal relationship between musical piracy on the Internet and CD sales drop. The interviewee supports such an amalgame accusation by proposing other causes ("To my mind, several factors account for it, such as piracy, possibly the poor quality of artistic directors or the concentration of major recording companies who do not facilitate the arrival of new actors").

23.

mercredi 5 décembre 2001, 16h45 (Dépêche AFP):

01net.: A combien évaluez-vous les pertes financières causées par le piratage de la musique?

Catherine Kerr-Vignale (Sacem): Nous ne pouvons chiffrer précisément les pertes de l'industrie du disque imputables au piratage. Cependant, l'Ifpi (l'industrie phonographique) donne des chiffres que l'on peut analyser comme une tendance. Surtout, il ne faut pas faire d'amalgame entre l'utilisation d'Internet et la baisse des ventes de CD dans le monde. Ce n'est pas parce qu'un internaute va télécharger illégalement de la musique qu'il n'achètera pas le CD du chanteur ensuite. En fait, on ne sait pas réellement à quoi cette baisse est due. A mon avis, c'est un ensemble de facteurs comme le piratage, peut-être la mauvaise qualité des directeurs artistiques ou la concentration des majors qui ne favorise pas l'arrivée de nouveaux acteurs.

December 5, 2001, 16.45 (AFP dispatch):

01net.: How much money do you think was lost by music pirating?

Catherine Kerr-Vignale (Sacem): We cannot estimate with any precisions the amount of money which was lost by the record industry that can be directly attributed to piracy. However IFPI (phonographic industry) provides figures that

can be analyzed as a trend. However one must not make an amalgame between Internet and the decreasing sales of CD round the world. You can't consider that simply because an internaut illegally downloads music, he will not buy the singer's CD afterwards. In fact, one doesn't really know what explains this drop. To my mind, several factors account for it, such as piracy, possibly the poor quality of artistic directors or the concentration of major recording companies who do not facilitate the arrival of new actors.

5. Difficulties in identifying what the accusation of amalgame is about

The examination of further examples reveals a difficulty often met by the analyst in identifying what the accusation of amalgame precisely concerns. In many cases, the accusation of amalgame is produced in reaction to circulating discourses, the general reasoning of which can be easily hypothesized, but the literal formulation of which is inaccessible.

In such cases one cannot define what precisely triggers the accusation of amalgame. As an example, let us consider the recurring accusations of amalgame concerning the connection between "communism and nazism", or between "the way Israel behaves with regard to the Palestinian people and the way the nazis behaved with regard to Jews", or the connection between "Bin Laden and Yasser Arafat". Sometimes one can establish a link with a precise declaration recently made by a politician; but most of the time, the accusation of amalgame refers to a fuzzy set of circulating speeches which may be attributed to a Nation, a political group, a lobby, but the letter of which has been lost.

6. The accusation of amalgame's "semantic emptying"

Besides, even when the analyst has at his disposal the whole relevant discursive context, he may be unable to identify a speech event which would elicit the accusation of amalgame and which would correspond to one of the categories mentioned before. In such cases, the accusation of amalgame seems to mean nothing but "I do not accept your argument", whatever the argument is.

Example 24 comes under such a case. It is taken from the same TV debate as example 19. According to ET, during a luncheon, the astrophysicist Hubert Reeves had admitted he did not exclude the astrology hypothesis. The astronomer DB challenges her claim.

24.

DB: Il n'a jamais dit ça

ET: Mais vous étiez là? vous étiez dans ce déjeuner?

DB: Mais lui il me l'a dit, il me l'a confirmé; voilà le genre d'amalgame que je dénonce. C'est scandaleux de dire des choses comme ça.

DB: He never said that.

ET: But were you there? Were you at that luncheon?

DB: But he himself told me, he confirmed it; that's the sort of amalgame I condemn. Saying such things is absolutely scandalous.

Here, there is no doubt as to what the accusation of amalgame is about: it concerns the negotiation on Hubert Reeves's position on astrology. On the other hand, the meaning of "amalgame" in such a case is pretty obscure - other than a moral evaluation along the lines of "what you are saying is scandalous".

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of various instances of the accusation of amalgame shows that it can be seen as a polyvalent (wide spectrum) meta-argumentative refutation device, of which the widest definition would be as follows:

- A claims that B unduly connected x and y.
- He did so on the basis of a similarity, or of a causal relation, or of a generalization, which the accusation of amalgame rejects as unacceptable, erroneous or fallacious.
- The opponent's argument is rejected on behalf of a norm which is left implicit, but which we suppose not to be proper to A - that is, to be widely admitted - hence the possibility of using elliptical accusations of amalgame, without any justification, as if everybody knew what is at stake.

The accusation of amalgame's refutative function may even override its denotative meaning (which is yet quite fuzzy); the accusation of amalgame is then used almost independently from the argument which has been advanced by the opponent: its only purpose is to disqualify the opponent's discourse as infringing on the widely admitted rules of an argumentative discussion.

Such a case study aimed at showing the interest of adopting a descriptive approach of the critical dimension of ordinary argumentative competence. Many questions arise, among which:

- What is the status of such meta-argumentative comments? how much do speakers stick to the argumentative norms they refer to? Are they mere strategic devices meant to achieve specific argumentative goals? Or do they reflect a consistent ethical perspective on argumentation?
- What is the connection between the argumentative and the linguistic component

of the communicative competence? The assumption we make that the existence in French of the word “amalgame” is significant suggests that such a connection does exist, but it has to be further investigated.

Finally, the analyst must face the question of the use of ordinary categories like “amalgame” in the academic analysis of argumentation. Is it possible to use such a category without first understanding the way it really works in everyday arguments? And even though, is it possible to re-define it in a way that would be explicit and systematic enough to make it a reliable tool for argumentation analysis? The positive answer to this question must not be excluded a priori, but it certainly is not the choice we make as an argumentation analyst.

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