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The psychiatrization of the opponent in polemical context

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ABSTRACT: This paper deals with a variant of the *ad hominem* argument that challenges the opponent's mental health. Semi-technical terms borrowed from psychiatric paradigms (such as *autistic*, *paranoiac*, *hysterical*) are thus appealed to in order to disqualify the opponent. Based on three examples from polemical discussions on political issues, we investigate what kind of behavior triggers such accusations, how they are justified, and how they are handled by the speaker to whom they are addressed.

KEYWORDS: *ad hominem* argument, disqualifying strategies, mental pathologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper proposes an exploratory introduction to a research program aiming at contributing to highlight how mental illness is perceived in our modern societies – and specifically, in France. In order to answer this question, some studies have been conducted, based on surveys and questionnaires on the perception of mental health¹. The way we chose to proceed is different. We focused on the use of various terms originating in esoteric bodies of knowledge pertaining to psychiatry, and that have been disseminated beyond their technical use in expert fields to ordinary discourses, in the political domain as well as in everyday conversations. Examples of such terms are “paranoid”, “schizophrenic”, “autistic”, “hysterical”, “psychotic” or “mythomaniac”. In their technical use, these terms designate specific mental pathologies. As such, they do not convey any negative judgment². When used in ordinary interactions, they

¹ See e.g. Lobban, F., Barrowclough, C. & Jones, S. (2005), Witteman, C., Bolks, L., & Hutschemeakers, G. (2011); also see the 2009 survey achieved by the polling organization IPSOS on the perceptions and representations of mental illness, <http://www.ipsos.fr/ipsos-public-affairs/actualites/2009-06-12-maladies-mentales-vues-par-grand-public-part-belle-aux-representations>.

² At least no more than terms referring to non-mental pathologies, such as cancer, pharyngitis or diabetes: such words clearly point to physiological dysfunctions, but they do not convey any disqualifying assessment of the person who suffers these pathologies.

nevertheless often serve as pejorative attributes aiming at disqualifying a person. This paper focuses on three of these items: “hysterical”, “paranoid”, “autistic”³. We will first briefly evoke their possible use as insults in French, owing to their insertion in discursive patterns such as “*espèce de...*” or “*sale...*”. Beyond the use of these terms as mere insults, we will examine examples in which they fulfill an argumentative function, as part of *ad hominem* arguments. We will indicate what we mean by “*ad hominem* argument”, and justify our categorizing the examples we will account for as pertaining to this argument scheme. We will then identify the specific argumentative functions that may be achieved by the adjectives “hysterical”, “paranoid” and “autistic” in polemical contexts. We will correlate these specific argumentative functions with the technical definitions of “hysteria”, “paranoid disorder” and “autism”. We will conclude on what such argumentative uses of terms labelling mental pathologies tell us about the perception of mental disease in our society, and on how they contribute to stigmatizing persons suffering from mental troubles.

2. FRENCH “PARANO” OR “AUTISTE” AS INSULTS

We have just stated that the sort of items that are examined here often serve as pejorative means aiming at disqualifying a person, and even as insults. Some linguistic devices are characteristic of this insulting use. French offers specific discursive patterns which may change almost any item into an insult. Thus, in “*espèce de X*” and “*sale X*”⁴, X has an offending dimension because of its insertion within such phrases, whatever its initial meaning may be. Even a neutral, descriptive word may work as an insult when obeying such a pattern. However, although any word may be turned into an insult owing to such discursive patterns, the words that are intrinsically marked as pejorative are much more likely to be used in that way.

Searching Google in order to investigate the frequency of phrases like “*espèce de parano*” or “*sale autiste*”, shows that they are quite common. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate such offensive uses of these terms. In example 1, the administrator of a blog reacts to a participant accusing him of committing censorship unduly by calling him “*espèce de parano*”:

(1)
*On se calme le Bauju, pas la peine de monter sur tes grands chevaux, il n'y a pas de censure [...] Ton commentaire n'avait plus lieu d'être, espèce de parano, alors je l'ai scratché. Tu ne l'avais pas vu?*⁵

Let's calm down Bauju, there is no use getting mad, there was no censorship [...] Your commentary was pointless, **you paranoid**, so I erased it. Didn't you see it?

In example 2, a teenager expresses his hatred for one of his teachers, calling her autistic:

³ Due to the exploratory dimension of the research presented in this paper, we will confine ourselves to these three words, which we deemed representative of this psychiatric lexicon that spread out of its original specialized field throughout political discussions or everyday conversations.

⁴ English “you X you” or “you fucking / dirty / lousy X” may be considered as rough equivalents for “*espèce de X*” or “*sale X*”.

⁵ <http://parapentesaintevictoire.blogspot.fr/2014/05/panneau-retour.html>

(2)

*Il etait une fois , dans ce qu'on ose appeler un lycee , une prof de sciences economiques et sociales [...] qui etait bizarre....cette chos.. heu , femme (on va dire ca comme ca..) avait des petites manies: se mettre les doigts dans le nez , se les lecher , puis elle s'habille bizarement avec un petit bonnet bleu en laine [...]pi lorsqu'elle parle , elle doit reformuler sa phrase au moins 10 fois avant d'en sortir le bon exemplaire: **C EST UNE PUTAIN D AUTISTE DE MERDE !!! [...]: SALE AUTISTE DE MES DEUX T'AS INTERET A ME METTRE 12 A MON DST SINON JE TE VOLE TON SAC A ROULETTE DE MERDE**⁶*

Once upon a time, in what they dare call a high-school, an economics teacher [...] who was bizarre... this thing- ous, woman (let's call her that way) had little manias: [she would] put her finger into her nose, lick them, she also gets dressed in a strange way with a small blue woolly hat [...] and when she speaks she has to rephrase her sentence at least ten times before getting the right version: **she's a fucking shitty autistic!** [...] **you autistic you**, you'd better give me 12 for my exam otherwise I will steal your shitty trolley..

In both cases, the use of the qualifications “paranoid” or “autistic” is supported by the mention of types of behavior (hastily interpreting an action as censorship, wearing a blue woolly hat) presented as characteristic of the corresponding pathologies⁷. In these sequences “paranoid” and “autistic” obey an offensive objective. They aim at hurting, humiliating, devastating the person they aim to disqualify. We will now turn to examples where the target of the attack, beyond the person, is the claim he or she advances: we will then consider that “hysterical”, “paranoid” or “autistic” are part of an *ad hominem* argument.

3. AD HOMINEM ARGUMENT

Ad hominem arguments are generally defined as attempts at disqualifying a claim by attacking the person who advances it, or some circumstance attached to this person.⁸ Scholars distinguish between two (Govier, 1987, Walton 1987, Woods & Walton 1989, Krabbe & Walton 1993), three (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992), four (Walton 1992, Macagno 2013), up to seven (Rolf 1991) subtypes of *ad hominem* arguments. Whatever the sub-classification may be, there seems to be a consensus on the abusive *ad hominem* type, which consists in attacking a claim by denigrating “the other party’s expertise, intelligence or good faith” (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992: 153): this is the *ad hominem* subtype we are interested in here.

We shall retain that first and foremost, an *ad hominem* argument is... an argument. In the examples that we will analyse, calling the opponent “hysterical”, “paranoid” or “autistic” does not necessarily support any explicit conclusion. But even when no reasoning of the type:

⁶ <http://www.tromal.net/conte/view.php?urlHistoCount=3623>

⁷ Technical definitions of “hysteria”, “paranoid disorder” and “autism” are proposed respectively in section 4, 5, 6 below.

⁸ See for instance Walton (1987), “the *ad hominem* argument [...] criticizes another argument by questioning the personal circumstances or personal trustworthiness of the arguer who advanced it.” (p.317)

X claims that *p*.
X is schizophrenic / autistic / hysterical
Hence, *p* should not be accepted.

is made explicit, we consider that the disqualification of the opponent that these adjectives achieve has an argumentative function for contextual reasons.

The three examples we will examine pertain to political discourse. They appear within what Christian Plantin (2010) would call an “argumentative situation”. According to Plantin, an argumentative situation is governed by an argumentative question (“should the government implement Measure M?”, for instance) which may receive opposing answers, each of them being supported by arguments (“I’m for M because arg.1, arg.2...”), or (“I’m against M because arg.3, arg.4...”). In an argumentative situation, any statement should be understood as part of an answer to the argumentative question which structures the discussion, whether it is presented as such or not. The question, writes Plantin, should be seen as an interpretative magnet which polarizes all the contributions that fall into its attraction field (2010: 33; translation is ours). In this perspective, the three adjectives which appear in the examples we will focus on are to be interpreted as personal attacks aiming at disqualifying, beyond the person of the opponent, the thesis that he supports. Hence they embody abusive *ad hominem* arguments.

We consider the use of terms issued from psychiatry, like “hysterical”, “schizophrenic”, “autistic”, as a subtype of a more general type of abusive *ad hominem* arguments, aiming at presenting the opponent as belonging to a debased fraction of humanity. Of course we do not assume that this fraction really is debased, but rather that the use of such qualifications as personal attacks suggests that for the arguer, in some way, it is. Other variants of this general scheme consist in some cases in designating the adversary as an animal⁹, as a female (when addressing a man¹⁰), as or a child or a teenager (when addressing an adult¹¹).

Example 3 simultaneously displays some of these disqualifying strategies. It is drawn from a French political newsgroup, and it combines the psychiatric and the animalistic variants of the *ad hominem* disqualifying strategy:

(3)
*Ce forum est essentiellement un exutoire pour une poignée d'autistes qui y déversent leurs délires d'illuminés, leurs élucubrations psychotiques ou leurs éructations de primates.*¹²

This newsgroup is mainly an outlet for a handful of autistic individuals who pour in their cranks’ deliriums, their psychotic pipe dreams or their primates’ eructations.

4. HYSTERICAL

⁹ As when Anne-Sophie Leclère, a National Front candidate for the 2014 local elections, compared French Attorney General, Christiane Taubira, to a baboon.

¹⁰ Contesting the manliness of the opponent is a very common disqualifying strategy. It transpires from the revolting but nonetheless frequent injunction addressed to a boy in tears: “Don’t cry, you look like a girl!”

¹¹ As when, during the “Gayet Gate”, Manuel Valls suggested that “François Hollande behaved like a retarded teenager”; <https://fr.news.yahoo.com/closer-fran%C3%A7ois-hollande-agi-quot-ado-attard%C3%A9-quot-103503108.html>

¹² fr.soc.politique

The first term originating in psychiatry we will examine in this paper is the adjective “hysterical”. “Hysterical” is frequently used in polemical contexts in order to qualify a whole debate, the communicative behavior of one participant in the discussion, or the discussant himself. In context, “hysterical” refers to heated exchanges, characterized by a highly emotional tone.

In the context of a political discussion, pointing to the emotional dimension of one’s contribution amounts to disqualifying it as irrational and potentially biased.

Even if the originally Freudian meaning of “hysterical” seems to be somewhat remote from its present uses in political discussions, accusing the opponent of being hysterical still suggests that he has lost control over his own communicative behavior. Hence the conditions for a rational discussion are not fulfilled, and the opponent’s argument does not deserve any serious examination.

Furthermore, the accusation of loss of control is not the only vector of disqualification of the opponent. The adjective “hysterical” is deeply marked by the specific historical situations in which it was used, as the analysis of example 4 will show.

Example 4 is drawn from the French debate that preceded the adoption of the so-called “mariage pour tous” law, opening the marital institution to same-sex persons. During a particularly heated parliamentary session, Christian Jacob, who opposes the law, accuses Sergio Coronado, who supports it, of being hysterical¹³:

(4)

M. Christian Jacob. J pense qu'on pourrait profiter/ euh je le: dis à mes (.) mes collègues de la majorité/ qui pourraient profiter (.) agréablement de la: coupure du dîner/(.) pour reprendre/ (.) un peu leurs le leurs esprits/ (.) [protestations dans l'Assemblée] 'ttendez\ (.) les les les attaques (.) qui ont été les vôtres/ vous savez/ (.) on peut avoir de vrais di- différences/ (.) et: et d'ailleurs j'ai apprécié le ton/ avec lequel Patrick Bloche (.) s'est exprimé tout à l'heure/ (.) nous sommes en désaccord/ (.) Total\ XX (.) MAIS/ (.) il l'a fait avec euh beaucoup de dignité/ avec des CONvictions qui sont les siennes/ (.) et qu'on accepte que l'on puisse s'exprimer d'la même façon/ (.) sans êt' soumis (.) à des invectives voire à de l'HYStérie/ (.) à de l'HYStérie/ (.) de par certains collègues/ je pense à vous [montrant SC de la main] (.) mon cher collègue (.) mais si/ (.) ces propos (.) vous n'apportez (.) RIEN au débat/ (.) vous n'avez pas/ d'argument/ (.) vous z'hurlez/ vous êtes dans l'hystérie totale/ (.) et je pen/se qu'il faut profiter du moment du déjeuner/ pour se calmer\ (.) je- du dîner\ (.) [puis s'adresse à Mme la Ministre]

I think we could take advantage of... – I’m addressing my colleagues in the majority who could pleasantly take advantage of the dinner break to come to their senses [protests in the Assembly]. Wait, you were the ones who made these attacks, you know, people may have important differences of opinion, and by the way, I appreciated the way Patrick Bloche expressed his position a few minutes ago, we deeply disagree but he expressed his convictions with much dignity, and people should accept that we express ourselves in the same way, without suffering abuses or even hysteria, hysteria from some colleagues, I’m thinking of you [pointing to Sergio Coronado] my dear colleague, yes yes, these words, you make no valuable contribution to the discussion, you have no argument, you’re just yelling, you’re totally hysterical, and I think one should take advantage of the dinner break to calm down.

Nothing, in Sergio Coronado’s offensive turn accounts for such an attack, either in what is said, or in the tone in which it is said: it is by no way more emotional or heated than the contributions of the other participants, Yet Jacob accuses his of being hysterical.

¹³ Christian Jacob, president of the UMP Group at the French National Assembly, February 1st, 2013.

Regardless of its factual adequacy, Christian Jacob's attack may be understood, as suggested before, as a strategy aiming at shifting the discussion from the criticism of the opponent's arguments to his very person. Such a strategy may prove useful when no simple refutation is available. It may also be seen as obeying another logic, in connection with the history of the usage of the terms "hysteria" and "hysterical" in various contexts in France. This is indeed what Sergio Coronado suggests, when reacting to Jacob's charge with hysteria as follows:

(5)

Sergio Coronado: en fin d'séance tout à l'heure/ (-) euh le président euh Jacob/ m'a::: (.) se dirigeant vers moi/ m'a qualifié/ d'hystérique\ [...] mais j'me suis interrogé\ pourquoi m'a-t-il qualifié d'hystérique puisque: (.) j'fais un peu d'histoire (.) et j'me suis rapp'lé/ en effet/ que (.) le mot hystéri/que servait à qualifier/ euh (.) notamment en période de trouble pour les dénigrer/ (.) euh par exemple: les suffragettes/ (.) par celles et ceux qui étaient opposés euh (.) au droit d'vote des femmes/ (.) ça a servi à qualifier euh Simone de Beauvoir/ au moment d'la publication du deuxième sexe/ (.) ou enco/re les trois cent quarante trois/ (.) lors euh de la publication du manifeste pour le droit à l'avortement\ (.) j'me suis dit pourquoi être qualifié par ce terme/ (.) alors que je n'suis NI une suffragette/ ni Simone de Beauvoir/ (.) ni encore/ une femme demandant le droit/ à l'avortement\ (.) alors je (.) je suis rev'nu/ euh (.) euh au dix-neuvième siècle [...] notamment aux travaux cliniques (.) dans la foulée d'Charcot/ et je me suis rapp'lé en effet (.) et je pense que (.) c'est à ça que faisait référence sans doute le président Jacob/ (.) qu'à l'époque/ (.) à l'époque le mot d'hystérique servait (.) servait évidemment de (.) à qualifier TOUtes les femmes/ (.) toutes les femmes sont potentiellement hystéri/ques vous l'savez (.) cher collègue (.) hein/ (.) et une catégorie très particulière d'hommes\ (.) [...] (.) les invertis\ (.) alors (.) cher/ président Jacob\ (.) vous auriez pu être plus franc/ (.) et faire comme dans les cours d'école me traiter d'pédé\ (.) voilà/ (.) cette injure (.) qui fait tant de mal notamment aux jeunes qui découvrent leur sexualité/ (.) je tiens à vous rassurer\ (.) cher président Jacob (.) j'assume (.) j'en suis fier/ (.) et je n'ai pas (.) du tout (.) envie d'raser les murs/ (.) malgré/ (.) vos/ (.) injures\ (.) j'aimerais simplement dire (.) au président Jacob/ (.) que ce type d'invectives (.) au sein d'cette assemblée/ (.) n'honore (.) ni vot' groupe (.) ni les travaux (.) aujourd'hui (.) de l'Assemblée Nationale/ (.) j'ai honte (.) pour ceux/ (.) qui profèrent ce type (.) de propos (.) c'est vrai que l'heure est un peu tardive et j'ai l'impression/ (.) que vos nerfs commencent à lâcher\ (.) merci

Sergio Coronado: earlier at the end of the session, President Jacob, addressing me, called me hysterical. [...] I wondered, "why did he call me hysterical?", and as I am fond of history, I remembered that the word "hysterical" was used to disqualify people in troubled circumstances, for instance it was used to denigrate suffragettes by those who opposed women's right to vote; it was used to denigrate Simone de Beauvoir when she published *Le deuxième sexe*; or it was used to denigrate the three hundred and forty three bitches when they published the manifesto for the right to abortion. And I wonder, why did Jacob call me hysterical, since I am neither a suffragette, nor Simone de Beauvoir or a woman claiming the right to abortion. So I went back to nineteenth century [...] and I remembered the clinical works in the tradition of Charcot, and in fact I remembered – and I think that's what Jacob was referring to – that at that time, the word "hysterical" was addressed to all women – as you know, all women are potentially hysterical, you know that, dear colleague – and "hysterical" was also applied to a certain category of men, namely, homosexuals; yes, homosexuals. So, dear President Jacob, you could have been more frank, and, as children do in the schoolyard, you could have called me a fag. Here it comes, this insult that causes so much pain to young people who discover their sexual orientation. I want to reassure you, dear President Jacob, I assume my sexual orientation, I am proud of it, and I don't feel like hugging the walls despite your insults. I just want to tell President Jacob that such invectives, within this Assembly, do not honor either your group, or the work that the National Assembly has been doing today. I feel ashamed for those who utter such words. True, it is late, and I feel you're losing your nerves.

Puzzled by the adjective “hysterical”, the use of which he deems unfounded, Coronado connects it with former uses: it was used against the “suffragettes”, that is, the feminist supporters of women’s right to vote, to disqualify them; it was used against Simone de Beauvoir as she published her book *Le deuxième sexe*, which was considered a feminist manifesto; it was used against the feminine activists who claimed the right to abortion. Sergio Coronado finally mentions that the diagnosis of hysteria was made for a specific category of male individuals, namely, homosexuals. On that ground, he suggests that Jacob’s accusation of hysteria amounts to calling him a fag: “vous auriez pu être plus franc/ (.) et faire comme dans les cours d’école me traiter d’pédé”.

The accusation by Christian Jacob of being hysterical, as well as its analysis by Sergio Coronado, can be further analysed by examining some features of the technical definition of hysteria. Although hysteria (meaning *matrix* in Greek) has been described at length by Hippocrates, two main medical figures are more commonly associated with the trouble, both in the nineteenth century: Charcot who became famous for his public presentations of women in « full hysterical crisis », and Freud for whom hysteria was the turning point for the modern psychiatry and the psychoanalysis theory. After numerous controversies on hysteria in the 1960s, the term has now disappeared in the latest versions of both ICD¹⁴ and DSM¹⁵, to be replaced by the concepts of *conversion* or *dissociative disorders*.

The main symptoms that define hysteria (or conversion disorders) are the following:

- The patients are prone to exaggeration and the need to be heard and believed, including for their physical symptoms which become obsessive;
- The mental trouble is often associated with physical and not feigning symptoms for which no physical illness cannot be found;
- Because of their physical impairment and the inability for doctors to explain them, the patients become extremely preoccupied by their ill-health and very often accuse the medical professionals of lying on purpose.
- The patients truly and greatly suffer from their troubles which cannot be treated or attenuated by prescription medicine.

It seems that the *ad hominem* use of the “hysteria” charge relies on a single semantic feature issued from the technical definition: the tendency to “exaggerate”. The emotional tone of a person, which seems to trigger the charge of being hysterical in ordinary contexts, is not part of the psychiatric meaning of the term. Accusing the opponent of being hysterical is a way of disqualifying his contribution to the discussion as not fitting reality (as it is “exaggerate”) and as irrational (as it is highly emotional). In addition, the fact that Charcot’s study on hysteria was focused on women’s accounts for the fact that later uses of the adjective “hysterical” address women (“suffragettes” or feminine activists), and, in the present case, supports Coronado’s suspicion that Christian Jacob is homophobic (he accuses Coronado of being hysterical because, as a homosexual, Jacob equates him with a woman). In the context of a discussion on a law that opens

¹⁴ ICD stands for International Classification of Diseases, a diagnostic tool for epidemiology, health management and clinical purposes established by the World Health Organization.

¹⁵ DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) is a manual for diagnosing mental disorders published by the American society of psychiatry.

marriage to same-sex persons, charging someone with homophobia is a way of bluntly disqualifying his contribution to the debate as irretrievably biased.

Example 4 is interesting in that it illustrates how the “hysterical” qualification, when applied to an opponent in a polemical discussion, may be a means of disqualifying this opponent’s position as emotional and biased. Example 5 shows how a specific context (here, the discussion of the law opening marriage to same-sex persons) may activate some semantic features associated to “hysterical” in what Sophie Moirand (2007) would call a collective discursive memory (the reference to “suffragettes”, to feminist activism).

5. PARANOID

French “*paranoïaque*” (and its shorter version “*parano*”), or English “paranoid”, is another term issued from psychiatry, and entering some *ad hominem* attacks.

Example 6 is part of an interview of Marine Le Pen, an extreme-right politician, by the left-wing journalist Pascale Clark on France-Inter radio station. At the end of the interview, by way of closing, Pascale Clark always broadcasts a musical piece chosen by her guest. Marine Le Pen chose a song by Laurent Voulzy, the lyrics of which were written by Alain Souchon, entitled “Jeanne”. This song is about a contemporary man who claims his love for a medieval woman named “Jeanne”. The song does not explicitly refer to Jeanne d’Arc, but irresistibly evokes her. Whereas the interview should end with the song, Pascale Clark takes the floor and cites the lyrics of “Belle-Ile en mer”, another song by Voulzy/Souchon, and specifically, a brief sequence which evokes Voulzy’s feeling of rejection as a mixed-race child grown up in France¹⁶. Though Pascale Clark does not explicitly charge Marine Le Pen with racism, it clearly is the way the latter interprets the quotation by Pascale Clark of “Belle-Ile-en-mer”’s lyrics. She then strives to force the journalist into avowing what she intended by quoting this song. Pascale Clark resists, calling Marine Le Pen paranoid¹⁷:

(6)

MLP: *ouais (.) non non mais attendez madame (.) moi/ (.) très objectiv’ment\ (.) euh euh que
votre: (.) la manière dont vous balancez vot’ petite vanne à la fin/*

PC: *c’est pas une [va:/nne (.) je rappelle les paroles d’une belle chanson*

MLP: *[ça veut dire quoi\ ça veut dire que vous m’accusez (.) ben oui/ madame mais
qu’est-ce ça veut dire quoi quelque part vous m’accusez d’quoi*

PC: *mais de rien/*

MLP: *mais si/ si\ j’ai bien vu votre petit air pincé genre [j’suis contente de moi/ (.) j’ai balancé*

PC: *[mais arrêtez mais vous êtes parano/ mais*

MLP: *[une p’tite vanne*

PC: *[vous êtes parano/ le monde entier est contre vous:/ c’est juste les paroles que j’appelle/
c’est tout/*

MLP: yes, no but wait Ms., the way you hurl your little dig at me in the end

PC: that is no dig, I’m just evoking the lyrics of a beautiful song

MLP: what does it mean? It means that you are accusing me, yes Ma'am, but what does it

¹⁶ «*Moi des souvenirs d'enfance / En France / Violence / Manque d'indulgence / Par les différences que j'ai*»

¹⁷ Marine Le Pen interviewed by Pascale Clark, Le 7/9, France Inter, 19 April 2012.

mean, you are accusing me of what?
PC: I'm not accusing you of anything.
MLP: oh yes you are, I saw your stiff face, meaning "I feel pleased with myself, I had a little dig at her"
PC: stop that, you paranoid! You paranoid, the whole world is against you... I'm just evoking some lyrics, that's all

Example 6 is typical of the use of the adjective "paranoid" as a disqualifying means. It enables Pascale Clark to suggest that Marine Le Pen is wrong in suspecting that the quotation of "Belle-Ile-En-mer"'s lyrics was an indirect way of accusing her of being a racist. Beyond that, "parano" suggests that this faulty interpretation of Pascale Clark's intention by Marine Le Pen is due to a mental pathology ("you are parano"), which leads her into interpreting innocent words as personal attacks ("the whole world is against you").

The use of the adjective "paranoid" in *ad hominem* arguments such as exemplified above seems to match some aspects of the technical definition of paranoid disorders. DSM 5 considers the paranoid disorder as a subtype within "personality disorders"¹⁸:

The Paranoid Personality Disorder is characterized by a pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of other people. People with this disorder assume that others are out to harm them, take advantage of them, or humiliate them in some way. They put a lot of effort into protecting themselves and keeping their distance from others. They are known to preemptively attack others whom they feel threatened by. They tend to hold grudges, are litigious, and display pathological jealousy. Distorted thinking is evident. Their perception of the environment includes reading malevolent intentions into genuinely harmless, innocuous comments or behavior, and dwelling on past slights. For these reasons, they do not confide in others and do not allow themselves to develop close relationships. Their emotional life tends to be dominated by distrust and hostility (DSM 5)

When accusing Marine Le Pen of being paranoid, Pascale Clark suggests that she is over-suspicious, that Marine Le Pen reads "malevolent intentions" into her "genuinely harmless, innocuous comments or behavior" and that she suffers "distorted thinking" – which obviously is a way of discarding Pascale Clark's accusation that she is a racist as a symptom of mental illness.

More generally, the diagnosis of paranoia applied to the opponent gives clearance to the speaker of the personal attacks he may make: he does not have to answer for them while taking advantage of their devastating potential.

However in this specific case, the strategy fails. If you want to rebut your opponent's accusation of your having committed a personal attack by suggesting that he is paranoid, you should be able to propose an alternative credible interpretation for what you said. Here, there is no doubt that Pascale Clark's alternative interpretation of what she did (I'm just evoking the lyrics of a beautiful song) is a poor one, and cannot support Marine Le Pen being charged with paranoia (the host of the radio broadcast is not supposed to express his / her aesthetic preferences).

¹⁸ Which include Paranoid, Schizoid, and Schizotypal Personality Disorders.

6. AUTISTIC

The last case we will handle briefly here is the use of “autistic” and more specifically, its use to qualify the government. In such cases, “autistic” often works as a quasi-synonym for “deaf”. Example 7 is from Thierry Lepaon, the General Secretary of a left-wing trade-union (the CGT). Lepaon criticizes Hollande’s government for not defending the interests of the working classes¹⁹.

(7)

Les patrons ont pris l'offensive, ils ont l'oreille de ce gouvernement. Plus il cède aux patrons, moins les salariés sont audibles. Ce gouvernement est autiste de son oreille gauche, il entend bien à droite.

Bosses have taken the offensive, they caught the government’s ear. The more the government lets them have what they ask, the less audible the workers are. This government is autistic on the left ear, it hears perfectly well on the right side.

On the same day Lepaon made this statement, a commentator criticized the French government in similar terms in a French magazine's blog²⁰:

(8)

Le gouvernement du Parti Schizophrène est devenu autiste de l'oreille gauche et n'écoute qu'avec celle de droite le Medef, le Cac 40, et les agences de notations Standard & Poor's et Cie...

The Schizophrenic Party Government became autistic in its left ear and listens only with its right ear to Medef [right-wing union], to the CAC 40 [Paris Stock Exchange], to rating agencies Standard & Poor’s and Co...

More generally, the adjective “autistic” is applied to any opponent that you fail to win over to your cause and who resists the arguments you have addressed. This strategy also appears in example 9 by Jean-Claude Gaudin, Marseille City’s Mayor, who deems the government to be autistic because it does not satisfy his claims on the reform of school timetables²¹:

(9)

Le gouvernement est autiste. La Ville de Marseille a demandé un moratoire sur les rythmes scolaires. Il a été refusé. Elle a proposé un plan de développement du soutien scolaire. Il a été refusé.

The government is autistic. Marseille city asked for a moratorium on the reform of school timetables. Its demand was rejected. It proposed a plan for developing support classes. Its demand was rejected.

Gaudin’s declaration elicited reactions on Twitter pointing to the adjective “autistic”, the pejorative use of which is considered inelegant in the following tweets:

(10)

¹⁹ Thierry Lepaon, General Secretary of the CGT, on RMC radio station, 29th October 2013.

²⁰ Dingo 117, 29th October 2013, www.marianne.net

²¹ *La Provence*, 12th June 2014.

Tweet 1: mère d'enfant autiste et entendre le mot autiste à tout va au gouvernement et ds les cours d'école: STOP!

Tweet 2: autiste n'est peut être pas le mot le plus délicat

Tweet 3: On pourrait dire... sourd, mais c'est aussi un handicap.

Tweet 4: L'utilisation du handicap comme une injure. Classe.

Tweet 1: mother of an autistic child and hearing the word autistic all day long used by politicians and in schoolyards: STOP!

Tweet 2: perhaps autistic is not the most delicate word...

Tweet 3: You could say...deaf, but it's also a handicap.

Tweet 4: Using the handicap as an insult. Elegant.

Compared with “hysterical” and “paranoid”, the *ad hominem* use of “autistic” departs even more spectacularly from the technical definition of the corresponding mental disease. Criteria for diagnosing autism are:

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts [...]: (1) Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions; (2) Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication; (3) Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities [...]: Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech [...]; Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior [...]; Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus [...]; Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement). [...]

From above, one can see that the second order criterion (the existence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior makes no sense with regard to the *ad hominem* accusation of autism; and the “deficits in social communication and social interaction” are reduced to a unilateral incapacity to hear, equated with a mere physical handicap (in the phrase “autistic from the left ear”, “autistic” stands for “deaf”).

7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, in polemical contexts, integrating adjectives issued from psychiatry into *ad hominem* attacks may be shown to fulfill specific argumentative functions. These functions are partly determined by the semantic features issued from the technical

definition of these adjectives that may be activated in their *ad hominem* use. Accusing the opponent of being hysterical is a way of disqualifying his position as emotionally biased, and enables one to dismiss a conflicting view without having to discuss it. Accusing the opponent of being paranoid enables one to make a personal attack without assuming the responsibility for such a disputable argumentative move, while taking advantage of the devastating effect it may have. Finally, calling the opponent autistic when he does not come to meet your point is a way of dismissing his resistance to your arguments as being a mere symptom of a mental pathology, which enables you not to acknowledge your argumentative failure.

Whereas such qualifications undoubtedly serve disqualifying strategies, they are somehow toned down by the fact that they do not claim that the opponent is motivated by malevolent intentions: if he is wrong, it is not his fault, because he is mentally disabled, in one way or another.

This preliminary study also opens some lines of reflexion on the perception of mental illness. Our post-modern society is considered to be biologically and genetically-oriented. In parallel, one's mental health is often questioned and analyzed. For some authors, policy-makers lean heavily and wrongly upon psychiatry to define norms and pseudo-relevant behavior (Gori and Del Vogo 2008). For others, emotions are being used for economical purposes by pharmaceutical firms (Lane 2009). Whatever the reasons, the number of mental disorders medically recognized has been steadily increasing over the years²². Mental illness terms - outside the medical field- are not only applied to individuals but are also used to characterize concepts or theories: for example, it was said that economy was autistic²³ or that the French society was schizophrenic²⁴.

Such uses outside the medical field are paradoxical, because of the many public campaigns aiming at de-stigmatizing persons suffering from mental disorders. For the past twenty years, most Western countries, including France, have launched media campaigns to emphasize that people suffering from mental disorders are "normal" persons. To name a few of these de-stigmatization campaigns, the World Psychiatric Association has launched "Open the doors" about schizophrenia²⁵ worldwide; "Time to change" claims to be "England's biggest programme to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination"²⁶; in France, the FondaMental association aims at explaining mental illnesses to the lay man²⁷. However, all these initiatives have not prevented the use of psychiatric terms to depreciate one's opponents.

²² The American society of psychiatry has published several manuals for diagnosing mental disorders. The last one (DSM 5), published in May 2013, lists over 600 hundred different disorders (<http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx>).

²³ « L'économie autiste », *Le Monde*, 25 June 2012. The author, Marco Morosini, claims that "what could appear to be a courageous voluntarism is actually nothing more than the confirmation of sixty years of autistic economy." (« *Ce qui pourrait paraître un volontarisme courageux n'est que la confirmation de soixante ans d'économie autiste* ») http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/06/25/l-economie-autiste_1723092_3232.html

²⁴ Ezra Suleiman, *Schizophrénies françaises*, 2008, Paris: Grasset.

²⁵ <http://www.openthedoors.com/english/index.html>; "The WPA International Programme is designed to dispel the myths and misunderstandings surrounding schizophrenia."

²⁶ <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

²⁷ http://www.fondation-fondamental.org/page_dyn.php?mytabsmenu=1&lang=FR&page_id=MDAwMDAwMDAwOA==

Therefore our study provides a key for understanding how French society is mentally-oriented, specifically in political interactions.

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