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Implicitation and power of choice

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Abstract In democracy (and free market) the actual power of choice enjoyed by individuals is reduced by persuasive practices. The paper focuses on one of them: *linguistic implicits* when used as a strategy *to reduce epistemic vigilance* on conveyed information, ensuring acceptance of questionable or even false contents by addressees. The *evolutionary and cognitive bases* for this are briefly explored. Examples of *implicits of content* (implicatures and vague expressions) and *implicits of responsibility* (presuppositions) when exploited for persuasion in political speeches, social network posts by politicians and printed propaganda are given. The article proposes that widespread awareness of this phenomenon should be one of the indispensable ingredients for authentically democratic cohabitation.

Keywords: Persuasion through implicits, Implicatures, Vagueness, Presuppositions, Political propaganda

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0. Introduction

Democracy is a political system where people are supposed to possess a *power to choose* whom they will delegate to manage the public good. Free market is an economic system where the people are supposed to have the power to choose what they will buy. Actually, political and economical competition tries to limit this power of choice. Advertising and propaganda tend to *condition* addressees. Manipulation is as old as civilization, and happens at least at three levels: the *relation* between the people involved (Simon 1996, Braiker 2004), the communicated *contents* (Lakoff 1990, 1996, 2000), and the *language* as such, i.e. the way it is used to convey information. Here we will deal with this third aspect, and more specifically with the prominent role played by implicits in persuading of questionable contents.

1. Implicits as a persuasion device: a cognitive/evolutionary account

In advertising and propaganda, images are known to be more important than textual headlines. This is due to vision enjoying greater brain resources as compared to language, but we will work on the idea that the effectiveness of images also depends on their being *not explicit* in conveying their content. That is to say, they are effective because *they do not make statements*.

Fig. 1: Glen Grant Commercial 1995-1996

When, as in a famous commercial (displayed here in two of its many versions across time: Figs. 1 and 2), you see a group of young, handsome, rich and happy people drinking Glen Grant whisky in a wonderful house, to a certain extent you will be influenced by the following idea: "If you drink that whisky, you will be similar to young, handsome, rich and happy people who live in a wonderful house".

Fig. 2: Glen Grant Commercial 2007

If stated explicitly, the same content would probably trigger hostile reactions; but in its visual, "implicit", not-asserted version it can make its way into the addressee's set of beliefs. The same is true for some music inducing happiness, solemnity or the like: it is

more effective than any explicit statement about the capacity of the advertised product to make you important in the opinion of others, very happy, etc. This demands explanation, which we will try to briefly sketch here.

In a 1984 paper dealing with animal signals, Krebs and Dawkins maintained that communication evolved to ensure manipulation, i.e. to actively change the other individuals' behaviours (Krebs, Dawkins 1984: 383). They added that the ability to manipulate others cannot have evolved separately from the specular ability to resist it, i.e. to detect attempts at manipulating us and to consequently avoid the behaviours aimed at by the manipulator (*ivi*: 390-392). Becoming aware of the manipulator's *intentions* is crucial in this respect.

Krebs and Dawkins describe the specifical forms taken in several animal species by reactions to manipulative attempts, all accounted for by the general statement that «interactions are likely to be characterized by coevolution between persuasion and sales-resistance» (*ivi*: 394). We try to persuade others and when, in turn, they try to persuade us, if we become aware of that, we resist by critically challenging their arguments and – in case they are not completely convincing – possibly rejecting them.

As a consequence of this, also the particular kind of animal interaction represented by human linguistic communication should obey the following rule:

Awareness that the source is trying to modify our beliefs raises critical reaction.

Now, the very essence of assertion is to propose its content as something by which one *wants* to modify the addressees' beliefs. Statements overtly show that their source wants to convince us about their content. On the contrary, images and non-linguistic sounds give us the impression that we are free to give them any value we want. At the same time, the feeling that someone is trying to modify our set of beliefs is what typically triggers our critical reaction, while the feeling that we are free to form our opinion autonomously reasonably reduces our tendency to challenge the information we are presented with.

The specific role played by the non-discursive nature of images has been signaled since the first analyses of advertising samples, such as for instance by Roland Barthes (1964)[1] when he wrote the following:

> Bien que l'affiche *Panzani* soit pleine de «symboles», il reste cependant dans la photographie une sorte d'*être-là* naturel des objets, dans la mesure où le message littéral est suffisant: la nature semble produire spontanément la scène représentée; à la simple validité des systèmes ouvertement sémantiques, se substitue subrepticement une pseudo-vérité; l'absence de code désintellectualise le message parce qu'il parait fonder en nature les signes de la culture. C'est là sans doute un paradoxe historique important: plus la technique développe la diffusion des informations (et notamment des images), plus elle fournit les moyens de masquer le sens construit sous l'apparence du sens donné (Barthes 1964: 47).

But Barthes is not interested in the persuasive consequences of the presence/absence of a human source behind the message. He does not compare images and linguistic messages as regards the different degrees to which they reveal the *intentionality* of the source: he actually never mentions the relation between the message and its source. And he even stresses the idea that images are particularly *explicit*:

[1] I wish to thank an anonymous referee of this journal for suggesting to include reference to Barthes and Eco on the matter.

> si l'image contient des signes, on est donc certain qu'en publicité ces signes sont pleins, formés en vue de la meilleure lecture: l'image publicitaire est *franche*, ou du moins emphatique (*ivi*: 40, italics as in the original).

Now, after some decades and a deepening in our understanding of cognitive and evolutionary processes, we can affirm that images are effective in advertising also because they are *implicit* and *unclear* with respect to who is responsible for introducing certain contents into the ongoing communication process. From the point of view we are proposing, images work well exactly because they are not explicit, i.e. not *franches*, but give the impression (more than linguistic utterances) that they are not messages directed to addressees by a human source.

To cite another important early account of the working of advertising, Umberto Eco (1968), analyzing the ad of a swimsuit, already remarks that images can trigger almost unconscious knowledge:

> Il messaggio contemplava automaticamente una informazione ulteriore, non immediatamente verbalizzabile, da cogliersi a livello quasi inconscio, ma non per questo meno individuabile; il manifesto diceva implicitamente: "Indossando il costume X voi avrete la stessa carica di seduzione che di solito attribuiamo alla donna nuda che – come diceva Hugo – è la donna armata", ed evocava quindi campi entimematici e tropici di vario tipo (Eco 1968: 265).

But at the time it was not possible to develop the aspect we are studying here. Eco's analysis gives evidence of virtually all semiotic aspects of the ads he comments on, including very fine-grained structural and functional differences between images and texts[2], but cannot mention that an important difference in effectiveness between them is precisely the degree to which *the source of the message* reveals that *they are trying to modify the addressee's beliefs*, because this determines different levels in the addressees' critical vigilance.

Their explicitness makes utterances, and especially assertive utterances, particularly unsuitable for persuasion through questionable contents, i.e., contents that will prove weak or false if thoroughly evaluated. So, when trying to persuade of some doubtful content, if that information cannot be conveyed by non-linguistic means and really needs to be encoded in a *text*, that text should better convey it in a different, non-assertive form. Languages provide users with a partial solution to this problem. As a matter of fact, implicit constructions such as implicatures and presuppositions can reduce addressees' critical attention on the encoded content, as has been noticed by several scholars (cf. e.g. Ducrot 1972, Givón 1982, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1986, Rigotti 1988, Lombardi Vallauri 1993, 1995, Sbisà 2007; and specifically for texts with persuasive aims Lombardi Vallauri 1995, 2009b, 2016, 2019, Sbisà 2007, Reboul 2011, Saussure 2013, Lombardi Vallauri, Masia 2014).

As suggested by Reboul, «implicit communication evolved to facilitate manipulation by allowing communicators to hide their (manipulative) intentions» (Reboul 2011: 10). By partly concealing the communicator's intention in producing a speech act, implicits weaken – or even circumvent – critical judgment on relevant contents. In particular, when someone tells us something, when we accept it and make inferences based on this information, the resulting conclusions are considered as ours, and will be more easily accepted than if explicitly communicated. In other words, «the less important the communicator's role in the formation of the conclusion by the addressee, the more the

[2] Eco's main focus in that section is the relation between rhetorical procedures and ideological contents. The quotation is from part B, chapter 5, section IV.2.

addressee will accept the conclusion» (Mercier 2009: 118, translated). This has been called the "egocentric bias":

> The egocentric bias leads to a preference for one's own beliefs and will induce a preference for beliefs which one has reached by oneself; this explains why it may be advantageous for the communicator to use implicit communication: it allows him to induce in his addressee beliefs (i.e., reasons and conclusions) which the addressee having reached them by himself will be more prone to accept and to hide his ultimate intentions regarding the conclusion he wants the addressee to reach as to the future course of her action (Reboul 2011: 17).

This seems related to what we know about the general cognitive processes by which humans reach their judgments on surrounding reality. In particular, to the fact that:

> people are nearly-incorrigible "cognitive optimists". They take for granted that their spontaneous cognitive processes are highly reliable, and that the output of these processes does not need re-checking (Sperber *et al.* 1995: 90).

Importantly,

> this should not be regarded as a defect in the system though, as Tversky & Kahneman (1974), or more recently Gigerenzer (2008) have shown: heuristics are the results of an evolutionary drive in optimising cognitive efficiency as they offer the best balance between speedy derivation of new knowledge and costly inferential thorough evaluation processes. As such they offer fast and reasonably robust means of acquiring new knowledge at a fraction of the cognitive cost. [...] our cognitive system tends to privilege fast and economical processes over reflective ones, thereby giving prevalence to cognitive illusions. (Oswald, Maillat, Saussure 2016: 524-525).

As far as language is concerned, it must be considered that its progression in communicative situations is fast and creates the situation which Christiansen & Chater (2016) have called a *Now-or-Never Bottleneck*: resources in language processing are so constrained that «if the input is not processed immediately, new information will quickly overwrite it» (Christiansen, Chater 2016: 5). In other words, processing must be done quickly, and attention cannot be full on *all* contents. As a consequence, we usually lend thorough critical attention to contents asserted by others, and we are more "optimistic", i.e. we process with lesser epistemic vigilance (Sperber *et al.* 2010) those arguments which we have at least in part built by ourselves or which we think we already know about. We tend not to double-check what comes from us. Experimental evidence for this is abundant, and we cannot resume it here for space reasons, but we refer to Lombardi Vallauri (2019: §4) for a review.
This means that linguistic implicits are the best approximation offered by language to visual and musical contents, in that they reduce the addressees' awareness that they are being convinced of some content. For example, implicatures can entrust to addressees themselves the building of part of the content to be conveyed. Presuppositions can overtly formulate their content, but they present it as something which already belongs to the shared knowledge or common ground (Strawson 1964, Stalnaker 2002), i.e. something the addressee already knows or agrees upon. Addressees may feel implicated and presupposed arguments more as something they have arrived at by themselves than as something the speaker alone is conveying to them (Lombardi Vallauri 2009a, 2016).

This makes implicatures and presuppositions less prone to be cognitively challenged than assertions.
It has been proposed (Lombardi Vallauri, Masia 2014, Lombardi Vallauri 2016) to divide linguistic implicits into two main categories: *implicits of content*, mainly represented by implicatures and vague expressions, and *implicits of responsibility*, mainly represented by presuppositions and topics. Sections 2 and 3 present a theoretical overview of these rhetorical strategies, together with their persuasive functions in political propaganda.

2. Implicits of content

Part of the *content* of a linguistic message can remain implicit. This happens typically for *implied* content, and for those contents that are expressed in a *vague* manner.

2.1. Implicatures are accepted as content introduced by the source

Implicatures (Grice 1975, Sperber, Wilson 1986) are content which is not overtly expressed, but inferable. Let us consider this Facebook post by Matteo Renzi, published January 8, 2018:

> Nel frattempo a Roma i cassonetti sono pieni. Secondo me adesso diranno che la colpa è del PD. Perché la colpa è del fatto che Bonaccini e D'Alfonso sono iscritti al PD. Se solo si fossero iscritti al Blog, anziché al PD, oggi Roma sarebbe linda e pulita. Scherzi a parte: per favore, (1) *sui rifiuti non si scherza*. (2) *I nostri amministratori non fanno polemiche di parte*. Siamo pronti a dare una mano alla Città di Roma. Perché (3) *per noi i cittadini vengono prima dei compagni di partito*. E allora fatela finita con queste polemiche e ripulite la Capitale.

The numbered utterances in italics raise implicatures. Explicitly, (1) asserts that you do not mess on urban waste: but in order for the utterance to make sense, addressees have to implicate that, unlike the Democratic Party, members of Movimento 5 Stelle do mess on waste. As we have seen in the previous section, the listener's participation in the construal of certain content allows for it to fall under the protection of the egocentric bias, thus undergoing lesser epistemic vigilance. The same content, if asserted, would sound exaggerate and ultimately false. If Renzi had written "5 Stelle mess on waste", undecided voters (who are the main target of political propaganda) would have disliked him for clearly lying with offensive intentions.
The other utterances are similar. (2) raises the implicature that 5 Stelle administrators dwell in partisan disputes, and (3) implicates that for them the interest of the people comes after the interest of their party members. Explicit assertions of the same contents would have been significantly less convincing.
Matteo Salvini used the same strategy in the speech he gave in Cuneo, November 26, 2016:

> mi è rimasto l'incubo di questo che ormai ce lo troviamo in bagno quando torniamo a casa, Renzi che dice vota sì, fa le previsioni del tempo, va alla Domenica Sportiva, questi stanno occupando tutto. (1) *Una cosa non possono comprare: voi. Non possono comprare le vostre teste, il vostro orgoglio, la vostra dignità. Questo non è in vendita*. [...]. Siete in tanti, mi riprometto di tornare a Cuneo per vincere le elezioni comunali e (2) *dare finalmente un'identità a questa splendida, a questa splendida città*. E…e adesso tocca a voi.

Utterances (1) say that politicians cannot buy the people from Cuneo, their heads, their pride, their dignity, because such things are not for sale. Now, since just saying the

obvious cannot count as the aim of the message, Salvini is exploiting the Cooperation Principle to have addressees draw the implicature that someone is trying to buy them; namely, Renzi and his associates. If asserted, this content would be too bold to be accepted, but listeners who "autonomously" drew the implicature probably developed some similar belief.

The same happens with (2), which raises the implicature that Cuneo presently has no identity. If stated directly, such a content would have signaled Mr. Salvini as a liar; but since it results as an implicature "spontaneously" drawn by his addressees, the idea that under a PD guide the town had lost its identity could convince many.

Not only Facebook posts and public speeches, but also written campaign announcements exploit the persuasive effect of implicatures. Figs. 3 to 8 show messages diffused by the Right coalition before the 2006 Italian general election:

Fig. 3: The "no globals" in the government? No, thanks

Fig. 4: Inheritance tax again? No, thanks

Fig. 5: Are we to stop great public works? No, thanks

Fig. 6: More taxes on your savings? No, thanks

Fig. 7: More taxes on your house? No, thanks

Fig. 8: Illegal immigrants at will? No thanks

As it can be seen, announcements systematically exploited the same strategy (Figs. 3 to 8 represent all the posters diffused by the Right coalition in 2006): by explicitly refusing a possible political action, they trigger a typical Gricean path. Namely, each public refusal of a given unwelcome measure would violate the Maxim of Relation in case there is no threat that the rejected thing may become real. As a consequence, the uttering of the refusal (following obvious stereotypes, cf. Lombardi Vallauri 2019) raises the implicature that the Left will actually do that threatening thing if they win the election:

Statement (by the Right)	**Gricean path**	**Implicature (drawn by the target)**
We are against the inheritance tax.	It makes no sense to mention this threat, if there is no danger that it comes true. Consequently,	The Left will introduce the inheritance tax.
We are against the "no globals" in the government.		The Left will put the "no globals" in the government.
We are against illegal immigrants without regulation.		The Left will accept illegal immigrants without regulation.
We are against more taxes on your savings.		The Left will put more taxes on my savings.
We are against more taxes on your house.		The Left will put more taxes on my house.
We are against halting major works.		The Left will halt major works.

Since the implicature is drawn by every person in the target audience "autonomously", the Right does not count (in the target's mind) as responsible for throwing unpleasant and largely false accusations at the Left. And, moreover, the very contents of such accusations are not evaluated under the full light of a critical attitude, as they would if, instead of being constructed by addressees themselves, they were presented to them as direct assertions on the part of the Right. Imagine the most probable reactions of undecided, equidistant voters to posters boldly saying: *The Left will re-introduce the inheritance tax!,* or *The Left will/wants to let immigrants in without any regulation!*, etc. The consequence of implicit encoding is that such far-from-true contents were more likely to be believed.
Interestingly, on the same days the Left also used implicatures to denigrate the Right:

Fig. 9: Temporary employment oppresses hope

Fig. 10: A functioning healthcare makes everybody freer

Fig. 11: Without kindergartens families do not grow

Posters in Figs. 9-11 elegantly assert truisms, namely that nursery schools are an important help to families, that a good public health service frees the people from having to worry about what will happen if they get sick, and that the constant threat of remaining without a job is more or less the opposite of having good hopes for the future. The aim of the campaign was more than that. For such statements to be understood as cooperative (in the Gricean sense), if uttered during an electoral campaign, they need to raise the implicatures that nursery schools are likely to be reduced, that the public health service may be cut, and that firms may be allowed to increase forms of temporary work, thus damaging young workers. Following obvious stereotypes, all this will be attributed to the Right:

Statement (by the Left)	**Gricean path**	**Implicature (drawn by the target)**
Without nursery schools, families can't grow.	It makes no sense to mention this truism, if there is no danger about it. Consequently,	The Right will cut on nursery schools.
A public health service that works means freedom.		The Right will cut on the public health service.
Temporary work clamps down your hopes		The Right will favour forms of temporary work.

This strategy persists in time. In the 2018 general election campaign, for example, the Lega party used exactly the same formula as Berlusconi in 2006, to *implicitly* accuse political opponents of wanting to enslave the country under the European Union:

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Fig. 12: Slaves of Europe? No, thanks!

2.2. Vagueness conveys connotation more than denotation

Vagueness is usually referred to as a semantic feature of underspecified, imprecise expressions, which can potentially refer to more entities or states of affairs (Machetti, 2006, 2011, Voghera, 2012). As Peirce (1901) put it:

> A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate (Peirce 1901: 2748).

The rhetoric-argumentative choice to utter vague contents corresponds to uttering less. This represents a twofold advantage in the speakers' communicative strategy: firstly, they see themselves deresponsabilised towards the contents that they may have suggested but not explicitly uttered (Caffi 2012, 2013); secondly, for the same reason, probability to be contradicted or proved wrong considerably decreases (Lombardi Vallauri 2016, 2019). For these reasons vagueness is widely employed in persuasive texts, typically political and commercial advertising. Here are some utterances containing extremely vague expressions by Matteo Renzi:

> noi dobbiamo dire qui che *il passato non ci basta e il futuro è casa nostra* (Matteo Renzi, Firenze, May 23, 2014).
>
> *questo Paese è in grado di fare tutto* (*ibidem*).
>
> È una sfida difficile, *l'Italia c'è. Siamo un Paese solido, un Paese forte, un Paese che fa i controlli*, un Paese che ha una grande qualità delle proprie forze di Polizia… (Matteo Renzi, Antalya, November 16, 2015).

Here are some by Matteo Salvini:

> *riprendiamoci il passato per riprenderci il futuro* (Matteo Salvini, Raduno della Lega Nord, Pontida, May 4, 2014).
>
> Tutti gli altri sono *il vecchio*, noi abbiamo *il nuovo*! (*ibidem*).
>
> Anche se *qualcuno a Sinistra* ha detto: "Che ci fa Salvini in Sicilia?". Eh, Salvini in Sicilia avrebbe anche potuto non venire *se qualcuno avesse fatto il suo mestiere, se non ci fossero stati siciliani che hanno tradito altri siciliani* (*ibidem*).
>
> ed è un'impostazione culturale diversa perché purtroppo in Italia c'è ancora *qualcuno che pensa che chi fa libera impresa, chi ha il negozio, chi ha la partita IVA sia un colpevole a prescindere, un truffatore a prescindere, un evasore a prescindere*, mentre il lavoro lo crea il privato (Matteo Salvini, discorso al Congresso della Confcommercio, November 21, 2018).

Notice the repeated use of the indefinite *qualcuno* (*someone*) in the last two examples, which allows the speaker not to specify an actual responsible for his accusations: crucially, with specific referents the accusations would have proven doubtful or false. Here are some exploitations of vagueness by Luigi Di Maio:

> In questi giorni sono *tutti concentrati sulla manovra del popolo, ma ne parlano tutti, quasi sempre, a sproposito*. Anche oggi si parla di allarme rating, di conti che non tornano, di errori nel Def, di stop di Mattarella, di patrimoniali, di crepe nel governo. Tutte balle. *Si inventano di tutto ma non raccontano cosa c'è veramente dentro e chi beneficia di quello che sarà stabilito nella legge di bilancio* (Luigi Di Maio, discorso sulla Legge di Bilancio, October 11, 2018).
>
> Questa è una narrazione che hanno voluto raccontare *le persone, membri di partiti europei, che oggi siedono dentro le istituzioni* (*ibidem*).
>
> E abbiamo una forza politica che rappresenta il Movimento Cinque Stelle, che rappresenta l'intera nazione. Non posso dire lo stesso di *altri, che invece sono delle forze politiche territoriali* (Luigi Di Maio, discorso dopo il voto, March 6, 2018).

In all these cases, more precise assertions would take the risk of being recognized false or exaggerate. On the contrary, vague expressions allow each addressee to see in them what he wants, and consequently approve the speaker. They work mainly through their connotation, rather than denotation. In other words, they convince addressees that the speaker is saying things they like to hear, precisely because what he is uttering is only designed to be welcome, not to really *say* something.
The same can be seen about the samples of propaganda shown in Figs. 5, 7 and 8 above. The referents of "great public works", "your house" or "immigrants at will" remain underspecified, so that it is very difficult to detect their being at least in part unrealistic. In fact, what could "at will" mean, regarding the entrance of illegal immigrants? At *whose* will? And what should "your house" mean? Some real estate investment, which leftist policies usually tax as much as possible, or the first home, which leftist policies protect from taxing? Then, what were the "major works"? The high-speed train net? The bridge between continental Italy and Sicily in Messina? Others? Leftist opinions and programs might differ on each of these, but vagueness allowed for the readers to imply that they were all to be stopped in case the Left

happened to win. Implicatures and vagueness made it possible to convey the unassertable, and possibly to convince millions of people about it.
Persistence of this strategy is shown by this 2019 ad by Giorgia Meloni:

Fig. 13: In Europe to change everything

If we really began to change *all the things* that depend on Europe, even the most convinced followers of Fratelli d'Italia would be unhappy. So what could it possibly mean to change "everything"? The reference remains vague, but *the connotation is energetically positive*. So much is enough to sympathize, for a shallow voter who likes to think he wants to "change everything", and who does not care to reflect on what this would mean. As long as there are a lot of voters like that, this strategy will pay off.

3. Implicits of responsibility

The source of a message can avoid committing himself to its truth, thus skipping what De Saussure & Oswald (2009) describe as *prise en charge*, or *engagement* about the conveyed content. In other words, the message can encode its content explicitly, but leave the *assumption of responsibility* for that content on the part of the speaker at least in part implicit. This is what happens when some content is *presupposed*, and when it is presented as a *topic*[3].

3.1. Presupposed content counts as not introduced by the source

In Stalnaker's words:

> to presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information – as *common ground* among the participants in the conversation (Stalnaker 2002: 701).

Presuppositions conceal the very act of proposing some content as true, as if the speaker has no commitment to transferring that content. Instead of a world where the speaker wants the addressee to believe something, presuppositions build a world where the speaker believes that the addressee already knows and agrees upon that something: as a consequence, in that world, there is no need to assert that content, but just *to resume it for the sake of understanding the rest*. When presupposing some content, the speaker suggests that *some other situation causing previous knowledge* in the addressee is responsible for that content, and not the speaker himself. In such a condition, due to the egocentric bias, the addressee's critical reaction towards the communicated argument has less reason to rise, and may be weaker, or null: there is little need to double check the truth

[3] Due to space limits, we will not treat the persuasive working of topics here.

of something we already agree about. This effect of what is taken for granted is included by Givón (e.g. Givón 1982) among the phenomena that he calls "unchallengeability" of presuppositions.
There are also further reasons why one is strongly led to treat presupposed content as not subject to possible discussion. Macagno explains them as follows:

> Often, definitions and facts are presupposed even though not shared; however, the presumptive reasoning presents them as accepted by everybody, and the possibility of challenging them is hindered by the shame of being unaware of what everyone knows (Macagno 2015: 481).

As it has been noticed many times, this effect is present not only when the presupposition is *satisfied* (i.e., when the addressee already knows about its content), but also when it has to be *accommodated* (Lewis 1979). Ducrot argues in the same vein:

> Présupposer un certain contenu, c'est placer l'acceptation de ce contenu comme la condition du dialogue ultérieur. […]: en accomplissant, on transforme du même coup les possibilités de parole de l'interlocuteur. […] Lorsqu'on introduit des présupposés dans un énoncé, on fixe, pour ainsi dire, le prix à payer pour que la conversation puisse continuer (Ducrot 1972: 91).

Persuasive texts make intense use of this rhetorical device (Lombardi Vallauri 1995). For example, the 2019 Trenitalia advertisement in Fig. 14, while apparently asserting that Frecciarossa trains represent high speed in Italy, more usefully exploits the existence-and-uniqueness presupposition associated to the definite description «la firma dell'alta velocità italiana» to convey that Trenitalia is *the only representative* of high-speed trains; which implicitly obscures the existence of Trenitalia's recent antagonist Italo-NTV. "Italo doesn't count as high-speed trains": although this would be recognized as false by any Italian if directly asserted, the presupposition can do something to create this very impression in the target's minds. That the ad is aimed against Italo at least as much as it is in favour of Trenitalia is confirmed by the subsequent specification about «who moves Italy ever since», which actually underlines the only element of undisputable superiority of Trenitalia compared to its competitor.

Fig. 14: *Frecciarossa*. The Signature of Italian High Speed

Presuppositions "silently" drive us to reconstruct (as existent) situations which are actually not in our knowledge of the world. Hence, they are effective strategies to «introduce information without calling attention to it» (Loftus 1975: 572). This happens with the presuppositions triggered by the adjective *first*, as shown in Figs. 15 and 16 (separated by 30 years), where the (very selling) argument that "who buys an Alfa

Romeo or an Audi car will (be so satisfied as to) go on buying cars of the same brand" is presupposed. If directly stated, its falsity would be noticed more easily.

Fig. 15: "...and I felt grown up with my first Alfa"

Fig. 16: It's time for your first Audi

Not by chance, political communication makes great use of presuppositions. For example, complex definite descriptions are used to presuppose states of affairs (i.e. to hint at a preexisting agreement thereabout on the part of listeners) which most addressees would hardly agree upon if they were proposed in assertive form, because this would raise their epistemic vigilance:

> C'è qualcuno qua dentro che dopo aver avuto in tasca per qualche anno *quella moneta criminale chiamata "euro"* pensa di averci guadagnato qualcosa? (Matteo Salvini, Milano, January 28, 2016).

Even using such strong terms, which can hardly pass unnoticed, «that criminal currency called Euro» enjoys some sense of unquestionability which it would not exploit if it was proposed via assertion: "Euro is a criminal currency".
Beyond the persuasive power of each example, this seems to be a process dear to the head of the League: when he wants to denigrate something he prefers to present its alleged negative characteristics as part of a (complex) already shared assumption, rather than assert it overtly as a personal opinion:

> *quei venti euro di schifo che l'Italia regala a chi sbarca* (Matteo Salvini, Pontida, May 4, 2014).

Other politicians do the same:

> Se diciamo ricostruzione, allora diciamo alleanza dei progressisti e dei moderati, diciamo patto di governo per una legislatura di ricostruzione, per sostenere la riscossa del Paese, per sconfiggere il rischio che viene dal*la peggiore destra d'Europa* (Pierluigi Bersani, Roma, November 5, 2011).

> Su questa storia delle banche ci sarebbe da dire tanto. Eh, all'inizio di questa legislatura, quando il Governo Letta avviò *questa serie di regali alle banche*, chiaramente intuimmo che c'era una certa connivenza del Partito Democratico con il sistema. Poi si è scritto invece moltissimo sul*l'incapacità di questo Governo* […] (Barbara Lezzi, Senato, July 27, 2017).

To assert directly that the Italian Right was «the worst Right in Europe» would have triggered more the addressees' epistemic vigilance. The impression that «this series of

gifts to the banks» or «the inability of this government» were matters of established truth was better obtained by using definite descriptions, than by asserting that "the Letta government has made a series of gifts to the banks", or that "this is a government of incompetents".
Not only definite descriptions, but also other presupposition triggers are used in political communication. Here Matteo Renzi, referring to the possible outcome of the constitutional referendum, by using a change-of-state verb presupposes that Italy was no longer a reference point for anyone:

> L'Italia *torna ad essere un Paese che può essere punto di riferimento*, per la cultura e per i valori nel mondo (Matteo Renzi, Firenze, December 2, 2016).

When Donald Trump (and Ronald Reagan before) said that they would *make America great again*, they were using the same linguistic strategy, though on a larger scale, implying that under their predecessors America had lost its greatness.
The verb of transformation *cominciare* (to begin) allows Giancarlo Cancellieri to presuppose with considerable exaggeration that those who governed Sicily up to the moment of his speech did not undertake any "path" and have never sought "solutions" for the problems of the region:

> Allora noi dobbiamo *cominciare a metterci in cammino come popolo*, dobbiamo *cominciare a parlare di soluzioni* (Giancarlo Cancellieri, Catania, October 28, 2017).

Through a temporal subordinate clause (also containing a definite description), Luigi Di Maio presents as belonging to the common ground that his opponents are «enemies of the Republic» and that they are «stealing us democracy»:

> La seconda cosa che voglio dirvi è che il motivo per cui vi abbiamo convocato qui è perché poteste dire ai vostri figli e ai vostri nipoti che *quando i nemici della Repubblica vi stavano rubando la democrazia* voi eravate in piazza a difenderla. Noi c'eravamo, noi ci siamo, qui. Non la sottovalutate, questa cosa. Non la sottovalutate (Luigi Di Maio, Camera dei Deputati, October 12, 2017).

Matteo Salvini (in a passage we have already cited above) relies on counterfactual conditionals (which are "factives" in the sense of Kiparsky, Kiparsky 1971) to presuppose that some unspecified people in Sicily did not do their duty and even «betrayed» other Sicilians:

> Anche se qualcuno a Sinistra ha detto: "Che ci fa Salvini in Sicilia?". Eh, Salvini in Sicilia avrebbe anche potuto non venire *se qualcuno avesse fatto il suo mestiere, se non ci fossero stati siciliani che hanno tradito altri siciliani* (Matteo Salvini, Catania, November 2, 2017).

This little sample of presuppositions in politicians' speeches has also shown that one type of content that is typically protected from the recipients' epistemic vigilance by presenting it as presupposed, is denigration, i.e. the attack on the opponent (Brocca *et al.* 2010). This introduces the topic of differences between politicians, which we have treated elsewhere and we cannot account for extensively here[4]. Just to hint at some examples, Matteo Salvini uses mainly implicatures to convey derogatory contents about

[4] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for allowing me to add to this paper some words on the matter.

his opponents, and presuppositions to express his general opinions. Beppe Grillo's behaviour is similar, while Matteo Renzi, on the contrary, prefers presuppositions to attack his adversaries and implicatures to express political opinions. All in all, differences among (not only Italian) politicians are rather quantitative than qualitative in nature. That is to say: (1) all politicians have recourse to the implicitation of doubtful contents, though some of them more frequently and some others less; and (2) different politicians use the different kinds of implicits respectively to different extents to pursue different aims (cf. Lombardi Vallauri 2019: §5 for more details).

That political propaganda may be particularly rich in persuasive strategies (as compared to other kinds of texts) can be an *a priori* assumption in our civilization. But the kind of analysis we have sketched above provides us with the means to build more solid evidence in favour of this common sense intuition. In other words, it can be shown that in political communication contents are more significantly conveyed by means of implicit strategies, as compared to other kinds of texts. Lombardi Vallauri, Masia (2014, forthcoming), to which we refer for details, show data on the matter, which we will briefly recall.

Different speeches by different politicians encode different amounts of doubtful contents by means of linguistic implicit strategies, and other kinds of texts use this strategy with even more different frequencies. As an example, we summarize here the results of a comparison between some Italian, American and French political speeches (all given in 2012) and texts of other kinds (from Lombardi Vallauri, Masia 2014 and Lombardi Vallauri 2019)[5]. The numerical scale adopted to express implicitness impact is explained in those works, but what counts here are the relative values, i.e. the *differences* between the listed texts.

Impact of implicits encoding doubtful contents in different kinds of texts:

Erbolario promotional brochure: 23
Speech by Marine Le Pen: 22
Speech by Mitt Romney: 16
Speech by Rick Santorum: 10
Speech by Matteo Renzi: 10
Speech by Ségolène Royal: 6
Speech by Enrico Letta: 6
Touristic description brochure - *Scottish Castles*: 5
Package leaflet of a medicament: 1,7
Introduction to Cambridge Examination Papers: 0,6

[5] These are the whereabouts of all texts mentioned in the following analysis:
Enrico Letta: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuQ3QaB8rII
Matteo Renzi: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAM4rYp1o6w
Marine Le Pen: http://www.frontnational.com/videos/udt-2012-la-baule-intervention-de-marine-le-pen/
Ségolène Royal: http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/jean-marie-padovani/040412/discours-de-segolene-royal-rennes
Rick Santorum: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/election-2012/post/rick-santorums-michigan-primary-speech-full-text-and-video/2012/02/28/gIQAtFsJhR_blog.html
Mitt Romney: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/post/mitt-romneys florida-republican-primary-speech-full-text/2012/01/31/gIQA8tYKgQ_blog.html
Erbolario: http://www.erbolario.com/filemanager/img/pdf/frutto-della-passione.pdf
Scottish Castles: http://www.visitscotland.com/about/history/castles/
Cambridge First Certificate in English 7: Examination Papers from University of Cambridge - ESOL Examinations, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

As it can be seen, the difference in the impact of implicit strategies between two speeches of two different Italian politicians (in this case, Matteo Renzi and Enrico Letta) can reach 40% (the numerical value is 10 for Renzi, vs. 6 for Letta). But they are both located near the middle of a scale where they are preceded (in decreasing order) by a promotional brochure of *Erbolario* and other political speeches by Marine Le Pen, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum. A speech by Ségolène Royal falls close to Letta's, and all politicians are followed by a touristic informative brochure about the Castles of Scotland, the package leaflet for a medicament and the *Introduction* to the Cambridge Examination Papers, where the implicitation of doubtful contents falls almost to zero. It must be stressed that – consistently with common sense expectations – the most dramatic reduction (considered in percentage) in the frequency of implicit strategies happens from persuasive texts (promotion/advertising and political propaganda) to texts with merely informative aims.
Such data are confirmed by a more extensive analysis done on a corpus of about 1 million characters, equally distributed among 8 kinds of texts (Lombardi Vallauri, Masia forthcoming). Fig. 17 shows the extension of linguistic material implicitly encoding doubtful contents in different portions of the corpus. For example, persuasive implicit constructions occupy 21% of the extension of political speeches in the corpus, and only 0,08% of university lessons.

	Type of text	Impl. Ext.
1	Political speeches	21%
2	Touristic catalogues	15%
3	Political programs	14%
4	Political journalism	2%
5	TV Journalism	0,4%
6	Reportage journalism	0,2%
7	University lessons	0,08%
8	Instruction manuals	0%

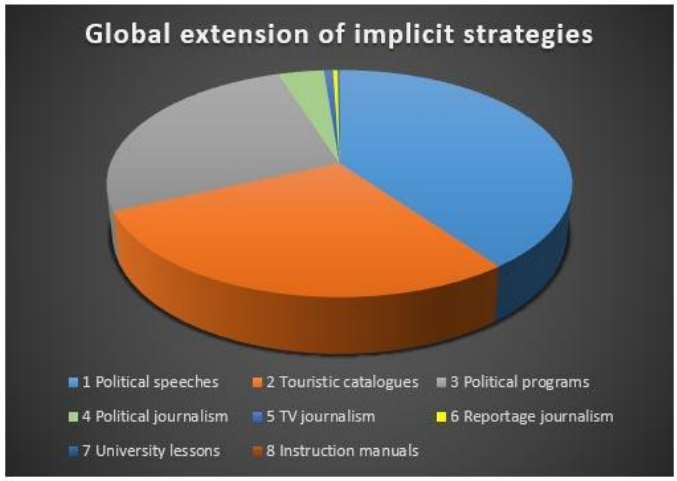

Fig. 17: Extension of implicits in a corpus (from Lombardi Vallauri, Masia *forthcoming*)

4. Conclusions

We have tried to briefly describe one significant feature of political language, namely its resorting to implicits (both of content and responsibility) to encode questionable contents which, if asserted, would probably be recognized more often and more clearly as not true, and rejected. Implicits have a capacity (evolutionarily grounded) to reduce epistemic vigilance on contents that recipients are led to perceive as partly constructed by themselves (for implicatures and vague expressions), or as part of a knowledge they already agree upon (for presuppositions). This allows persuasors to convince most people of things that are not in the interest of the people themselves, reducing their power of choice, and ultimately conditioning civil cohabitation in an undesirable way[6].

[6] At least, a way which is undesirable for the community of voters, which ends up being made of people who are not completely aware of something that is happening to them.

As a consequence, diffused awareness thereof should be regarded as an important requirement for authentically democratic cohabitation.

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