
THE ROLE OF IMPLICITNESS IN PERSUASIVE ARGUMENTATION: LOOKING AT DIFFERENT TEXT GENRES¹

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Abstract

This paper argues for the manipulative potential of linguistic implicit strategies in a variety of text genres, including spoken political discourse, political tweets, spoken and written advertising, and a collection of journalistic texts. Building on the acknowledgment that linguistic implicit communication is an effective means of persuasion, the research relies on the theoretical

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distinction between implicature of content and implicature of responsibility (Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Such taxonomy is presented and used to show that the text genres' features (in terms of compositional structure, thematic content and style) have an impact on the quantity and quality of implicit manipulative strategies used.

1 Introduction

Argumentation often occurs at the implicit level. When tendentious or questionable contents are conveyed through implicit linguistic strategies, manipulation can take place. This can happen not only in prototypically argumentative genres (such as political speeches or advertisements), but also in less prototypically argumentatively loaded ones (such as newspaper articles). In this paper we propose a preliminary step for the analysis of argumentation through implicit linguistic categories (presuppositions, implicatures, vagueness and topicalizations) by investigating how these are used in different text genres in the Italian context.

The paper is structured as follows: we provide a brief literature review on manipulative implicit strategies (§2) and on the relationship between argumentation and different text genres (§3); in §4 the research questions are defined and the methodology is illustrated; in §5 the corpora are described; §§6-7 include the analysis and §8 some concluding remarks.

2 Implicit communication and its manipulative uses

Many studies suggest that conveying some information through implicit linguistic strategies allows persuading the audience more effectively than expressing it on the text surface (Givón 1982; Rigotti 1988; Sbisà 2007; Lombardi Vallauri 2016a, b, 2019a; Mercier 2009; Reboul 2011; Saussure 2013; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia 2014, 2016a,b). Implicit communication rests on manifold linguistic devices, including presuppositions, implicatures, vague expressions, topicalizations. Drawing on the mainstream literature, we take presupposition to refer to any content that is presented as to be taken for granted in the conversation (Stalnaker 2002). Following Grice (1975), implicatures represent speakers' intentional meanings conveyed implicitly through the flouting or mere observance of conversational maxims. Vagueness is a property of expressions which are semantically imprecise and whose semantic boundaries are fuzzy (Russell 1923; Channell 1994; Cutting 2007). Topicalizations refer to those strategies of utterances' informational structuring which allow presenting some content as already active in the receiver's mind (Lombardi Vallauri 2009). Examples are provided below:

(1) *The Prime Minister has to **stop** making false promises* (PRESUPPOSITION = They have been making false promises)

(2) *Our country cannot grow **without keeping electoral promises*** (CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE = The government does not keep its promises).

(3) *The Minister is young **but** expert.* (CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE = young people are usually inexperienced).

(4) ***Some politicians** bribe people in exchange of votes* (VAGUE CONTENT = which politicians?)

(5) ***If politicians bribe citizens in exchange of votes, democracy will fail*** (TOPICALIZED CONTENT = politicians bribe citizens in exchange of votes)

The change of state verb *stop* in (1) presents as to be taken for granted that someone used to make false promises. Other presupposition triggers are definite descriptions, iterative adverbs like *again*, focus-sensitive operators like *also*, adverbial clauses, factives a.o. (Levinson 1983 a.o.). The utterance in (2) contains a conversational implicature, arising from the exploitation of a conversational maxim, as opposed to conventional implicatures, typically associated with the conventional meaning of a linguistic expression (e.g. *but* in (3)). In (4), it is not specified which politicians bribe people in exchange of votes. In (5) the hypothetical clause presents as already introduced in prior discourse that politicians bribe people in exchange of votes.

Implicating strategies are very effective persuasion devices. Specifically, they divert receivers' attention and critical vigilance away from some information, as they present it either as shared (presupposition and topicalization) or as something that is constructed directly by the addressee (implicature and vagueness) (Sbisà 2007; Reboul 2011; Lombardi Vallauri 2019a a.o.).

However, not all uses of implicit communication should be seen as manipulative. Indeed, in everyday interactions some contents can be left implicit because they are actually part of an authentically shared common ground. But, when some contents are not yet known by the addressee and concern critical issues which the receiver should be aware of (as in 1-5), their conveyance by means of implicit discourse devices can prove manipulative.

Within the purview of argumentation studies, attention was devoted to disentangling the cognitive mechanisms behind implicit processing and how implicature affects the mental representation of the meanings conveyed in a text (Maillat & Oswald 2009, Masia et al. 2017; Domaneschi et al. 2018). In this paper we are showing that a non-negligible use of implicit contents can be recognized in text genres having prototypically different degrees of argumentative features. This finding is in line with the most recent studies on text genres, as we show in the next section.

3 Argumentation in different text genres

Over the last years argumentation has been studied, within different frameworks (linguistic pragmatics, Lombardi Vallauri et al. 2018; Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough 1989; Pragma-dialectics, Van Eemeren 2018), in a wide spectrum of genres, ranging between more and less “prototypically argumentative” ones. Among the former, political discourse genres (e.g. meetings, Wodak 2013; interviews, Fetzer & Bull 2013; speeches, Forchtner 2013) and advertising (e.g. commercial advertisements, Kjeldsen 2012; print advertisements, Pollaroli 2015) have received considerable attention. Among allegedly less argumentatively loaded genres, media discourse has recently sparked scholars’ interest (e.g. magazines’ covers, Tseronis 2017; newspaper articles, Greco Morasso 2012; newspaper front page, Serafis 2022). Recent research is also showing that in some genres argumentation can be achieved multimodally (Lombardi Vallauri 2019b and Mackay 2013 for political genres; Pollaroli & Rocci 2015 for advertising; Serafis et al. 2020 for news).

The above-cited literature seems to corroborate the now well-established assumption in text genre studies that genres should be seen as social practices, i.e. as goal-oriented activities – or *activity types*, in Levinson’s (1979) terms – that arise in response to recurrent situations within specific speech communities (e.g. a research article, a report)². Moreover, as cognitive approaches have also recently shown³, text genres emerge from concrete usage and gradually become recognizable on the societal level, which in turn constrain future instantiations. As Rocci (2008: 15) puts it: “genre conventions are often the main criteria that allow the reader or viewer to properly locate the communicative interaction proposed by the text in the proper spot of the relevant interaction field”.

Within this framework, genres are thus to be seen as profoundly contextually and culturally situated. In this sense, they differ from the notion of text types (e.g. narrative, procedural, argumentative, etc.), where the latter refer to “designations of (macro)speech acts” (Mortara Garavelli 1988: 159, our translation). Text types are categories of analysis defined on the basis of pragmatic abstract features, theoretically applicable to any empirical instantiation of discourse, i.e. to any genre. Based on this crucial distinction, argumentation should thus be intended as belonging to the text type dimension and, as such, as “cut[ting] across genres” (Labinaz & Sbisà 2018: 605). As already pointed out, there might be a prototypical correlation between a high presence of argumentative features and specific discourse genres, to be ascribed to the genre’s communicative goal and social function. However, it would be inaccurate to think that “the (more or less explicit) presence of argumentation, or even the dominance of the argumentative text type, can by themselves determine which genre a certain instance of discourse belongs to” (ibid: 603).

In the light of all that, in the next sections we will analyse manipulative implicit linguistic strategies in text genres having prototypically different degrees of argumentative features.

² See a.o. the New Rhetoric school (Miller 1984), the “Sydney School” (Halliday 1985) and Swales’ (1993) school of English for Specific Purposes.

³ A more thorough review in Vergaro (2018) and Nikiforidou (2018).

4 Research questions and methodology

We have considered five corpora, four of which built specifically for this research. Two corpora represent political discourse, two commercial advertising (radio and visual ads), and the last one news articles. The selected genres, characterized by great impact on the public sphere, can be functionally characterized as predominantly persuasive and predominantly non-persuasive. These two groups of texts are characterized by significantly different macro-functions or macro speech acts. Indeed, while political and advertising discourse are meant to call the addressees to some action (conative function, e.g., voting or supporting a party, buying a product) news articles mostly perform an informative function, i.e., they supposedly report facts. From the argumentative point of view, they can be characterized in terms of “prototypically argumentative” text types vs. “non-prototypically argumentative”⁴.

We will inquire: whether manipulative implicit strategies vary across different text genres (political speeches, tweets, advertisements, news articles) and types (prototypically argumentative vs non-prototypically argumentative); if yes, which quali-quantitative patterns can be recognized; and how implicit strategies interact with and enact the different features that characterize each genre (in terms of compositional structure, thematic content and style, following Bakhtin, 1986).

Each corpus has been tagged with respect to the implicit categories presented in §1, and quantitative comparative analyses have been carried out.

5 The corpora

5.1 The IMPAQTS corpus

Many of the research questions tackled in this paper spark from a large research project currently in progress at Università Roma Tre: the IMPAQTS project. One of the objectives of the project is the building and pragmatic annotation of the IMPAQTS corpus of Italian political discourse. When completed, the corpus will include around 1500 speeches held by Italian politicians since 1946 to present (around 250 hours of transcribed spoken language, more than 4 million words).

The corpus is balanced according to sociolinguistic parameters, including the different communicative events in which the political speech takes place (cf. Table I):

Table I. Communicative events in the IMPAQTS corpus

⁴ It is worth pointing out that, given the considered corpora’s sizes (apart from the political speeches’ one) the present analysis does not intend to be representative of these text genres, but rather explorative of the cross-genre and cross-type variation.

Communicative event	Code	Number of speeches in the corpus
Official Assembly	A	600
Meeting, rally	C	300
Party Assembly	P	150
Declaration (broadcast)	T	450
Declaration (in presence)	D	
Declaration (new media)	N	

5.2 The ad hoc corpora

5.2.1 The political tweets corpus

The corpus contains 100 texts for a total amount of 2661 words, collected in two different spans of time: 2015-2016 and 2021-2022. They were partly automatically retrieved (Garassino et al. 2019: 196) and partly manually selected, considering both the influence of the politicians on Twitter (active presence) and the necessity for an overall balance among political colours (left, right and centrist). A gender-based balance was not contemplated.

5.2.2 The visual-ads corpus

The corpus collects 23 texts, counting 466 words in total, ranging from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 82 words. Texts are taken from advertising billboards, broadcasted spots, and press. All texts were manually transcribed, if broadcasted, deriving punctuation from prosody, or simply reproducing the slogan written in the ad.

All ads were retrieved from a large collection of manipulative examples of advertising analysed for the OPPP! website. Therefore, all contain at least one implicit strategy exploited for manipulative purposes and the corpus cannot be considered representative of the use of implicit strategies in advertising.

5.2.3 The radio-ads corpus

This corpus gathers 49 short radio-ads (2-10 sentences each). It counts 2044 words. The ads were broadcasted by Radio Globo, a Roman radio station, in 2020-2021. The audio files of the recordings were provided by the radio broadcasting station and were then transcribed and proofread.

The ads represent different merchandise categories: food, beauty products, cars, pharmaceutical products, services.

5.2.4 The news corpus

The news corpus contains four news articles, totalling 2247 words, extracted from *Oggi*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Tempo*, and *La Repubblica*, papers characterized by high circulation. The selected articles all deal with sensitive topics: a femicide, a case of child neglect, a case of young immigrant workers charged with sexual assault, and the case of a famous influencer charged with exploitation by his employees. All these topics can be expected to involve the presence of argumentative features, despite the text is supposed to be of a descriptive/informative type.

6 Quantitative analysis

As for the IMPAQTS corpus, we have analysed its currently available section (846 speeches uttered by 138 speakers, 3,203,643 tokens). In this section, numerous implicit contents were retrieved. In Table II we present the frequency of each implicit macro-category in the sections of the corpus corresponding to the different communicative events and in the entire corpus:

Table II. Implicit strategies/100k tokens per communicative event in IMPAQTS

	Implicatures	Presuppositions	Topics	Vagueness
A	438.57	431.49	94.16	202.68
C	421.03	358.61	73.82	261.33
P	290.45	321.76	62.05	238.16
D	249.53	274.81	65.34	133.40
Corpus	382.03	365.86	78.91	209.07

All the implicit macro-categories appear to be more frequent in the sub-corpus “A” (official assemblies), with the exception of vagueness, which is more frequent in speeches of kind “C” (meetings and rallies) and “P” (party assemblies). Accordingly, we can suppose that the communicative event in which a political speech takes place has a role in the kind and frequency of implicit strategies used in that speech. We can also suppose that such differences are related to the textual features typical of each communicative event or, more generally, of each text genre.

A different frequency of the implicit strategies – possibly revealing of some specific textual features – is in fact also observed in the *ad hoc* corpora. Of course, such small corpora cannot but suggest explorative tendencies. Nonetheless, the data

presented in the following tables open some possibly fruitful lines of inquiry, discussed in the next section:

Table III. Frequency of occurrence of implicit strategies in the four *ad hoc* corpora

	I_con	I_cvr	P_tot	P_cs	P_def	P_adv	P_fact	Top	V_sem	V_syn
Tweet	0	66	57	12	34	2	9	16	21	10
Ad(V)	0	17	19	8	6	4	1	3	14	1
Ad(R)	0	16	13	2	8	0	0	7	3	3
News	4	8	20	0	11	2	0	1	0	0

Table IV. Implicit strategies/100k tokens in the four *ad hoc* corpora

	I_con	I_cvr	P_tot	P_cs	P_def	P_adv	P_fact	Top	V_sem	V_syn
Tweet	0.0	2450.5	2142.1	451.0	1277.7	75.2	338.2	601.3	789.2	375.8
Ad(V)	0.0	3648.1	4077.3	1716.7	1287.6	858.4	214.6	643.8	3004.3	214.6
Ad(R)	0.0	782.8	636.0	97.8	391.4	0.0	0.0	342.5	146.8	146.8
News	178.0	356.0	890.1	0.0	489.5	89.0	0.0	44.5	0.0	0.0

7 Qualitative analysis

The quantitative analysis seems to confirm the hypothesis that implicit strategies vary across different communicative settings and text genres, and that text genre-related features and text types-macro functions have an impact on the use of implicit strategies (§4).

A general tentative explanation that accounts for the variations lies in the predominant macro-function of the text genre or communicative setting considered. In particular, we observed that texts mainly performing a conative macro-function (more prototypically argumentative) exploit implicit manipulative strategies more often than less prototypically argumentative ones. In political tweets and advertising, the use of implicit strategies is higher than in news articles. This tendency does not exclude the use of implicit strategies in texts where informative type features are prevalent. In fact, overall, our data confirms that argumentation cuts across genres (see §3).

In what follows, we provide further details for each text genre considered in the four *ad hoc* corpora showing the relevance of the text's macro-function (i.e., text type) and textual features (i.e., text genre) in the variation of implicit strategies.

7.1 Tweets

The brevity of tweets makes the use of implicit strategies particularly convenient. As mentioned in §2, implicit strategies are indeed means where the economic transmission of linguistic content can overlap with a manipulative purpose. Consider example (6):

(6) Italia Viva non solo ha salvato il Paese dall'esperienza tragicomica e populista del governo Conte, ma ha creduto in un gruppo di ragazze e ragazzi. Questa è la cosa più bella.

'Not only has Italia Viva saved the Country from the tragicomic and populist experience of the Conte Government, but it [also] believed in a team of girls and boys. This is the most wonderful thing.'

(Tweet, Italia Viva, November 9 2022)

With a *not only...but [also]* correlative coordinate structure, this tweet takes for granted that Italia Viva saved the country, and, at the same time, they believed in the young forces of their party. The tweet also contains an attack on the past government, implicitly described as tragicomic and populist by means of a definite description. In this tweet, as in many other examples, the brevity typical of the genre often results in questionable contents conveyed as presuppositions.

7.2 Advertising

In advertising as well, implicitness is often employed to smuggle manipulative contents while granting brevity. Let us consider (7), where the brand's competitors are negatively connotated through a brief and semantically vague slogan:

(7) Arriviamo dove gli altri non arrivano.

'We arrive where others don't.'

(visual advertising, BCC Bank)

Leaving the profile of commercial competitors vague (they do not arrive to what?) spares critiques or legal actions to the company, while making the vague statement unfalsifiable, and argumentatively unchallengeable⁵. Despite denotatively poor, the slogan's connotation is clearly positive, presenting the advertised company as more desirable than its competition - although the reason for this supremacy remains unspecified.

A similar mechanism can be observed in radio advertising. Buyers are not persuaded through substantiated arguments or reliable proofs, but through implicit strategies. In (8), the paratactic construction, typical of this text genre, leads the

⁵ See Russell (1923:90).

listener to imply that the advertised product is what they need. Moreover, it is presupposed that they wish they had been born with another hair colour.

(8) Nuovo prodigy di L'Oréal Paris con tecnologia microoil. Il colore prodigioso con cui vorresti essere nata. Perché tu vali.

'New Prodigy by L'Oréal Paris with microoil technology. The prodigious color with which you wish you were born. Because you are worth it.'

(L'Oréal, radio advertising)

In conclusion, it is worth noting that both visual and audio advertising are characterized by multimodality. Images and sounds paired with the ad texts can implicitly and immediately convey information about the brand or positively connotate it. The slogan in (9) is associated with the background sounds of an award ceremony.

(9) Per la capacità di emozionare ad ogni apparizione, Peugeot 207 Coupé Cabriolet! 'For its ability to thrill you at every appearance, Peugeot 207 Coupé Cabriolet!'

(Peugeot, radio advertising)

The topicalized and presupposed argument "For its ability to thrill you at every appearance" presents the information as if it were the label of an award category, already active in the discourse and part of the knowledge of the buyers, requiring no further critical evaluation. At the same time, the background music implies that Peugeot has already beaten its competitors.

7.3 News

As anticipated, our analyses confirm that argumentation cuts across genres. We retrieved manipulative implicit strategies also in news articles, when they deal with particularly sensitive topics. Overall, the nature of the implicit strategies found in news articles differs from those in tweets and advertising, consistently with their specific textual features. For example, we did not retrieve any occurrence of vagueness used manipulatively, since vagueness would probably contrast too dramatically with the informative function of the text. On the contrary, conventional implicatures triggered by conjunctions are comparatively very frequent, probably because they are less common in short and paratactic texts such as tweets and visual and radio advertising.

Interestingly, the headlines show aspects of continuity with tweets and advertising. In (10), two presuppositions and an implicature convey disputable content.

(10) Il gigante buono e quell'amore non corrisposto.

'The good giant and that unreturned love'.

(Il Giornale, news)

In the headline, the murderer protagonist of the news is introduced as 'the good giant'. The definite description presupposes that he was good, somehow smoothing his responsibility in the killing. Moreover, mentioning 'that unreturned love' in a paratactic construction, the journalist conversationally implies that love was the reason of killing. The content implicitly conveyed is the result of an interpretation of the facts by the journalist, which makes the headline catchier for the potential reader. The fictionalization of the news, typical of the headlines (and of some articles) is thus reminiscent of the conative function predominant in tweets and advertising. This is exploited to convey an emotionally engaging opinion, likely to increase the newspaper's sales.

8 Conclusion and future perspectives

In this work we have inquired on the use of potentially manipulative implicit strategies (i.e., implicitly conveying questionable contents) across different text types and genres. In order to do so, we have analysed five original Italian corpora: monological political discourse; political discourse via tweets; visual-ads; radio-ads; (sensitive) news articles.

As for the different text types, our analysis has shown a greater use of potentially manipulative implicit strategies in prototypically argumentative texts. As for genres, the corpora in which most implicit strategies are used to convey questionable contents are the visual advertising and the tweet corpus. The use of implicit strategies reflects both the constraints characterizing the texts - e.g., the channel imposing a limited space, in the case of tweets - and the genre's typical thematic content and macro-function - e.g., attacking and discrediting adversaries in the case of political discourse.

Across the different corpora, while presuppositions are often arguably employed in the interests of brevity, it is often the case that questionable information is concealed behind implicatures or vague expressions, whose contents are for the recipients to infer. This rhetorical move is often employed in discrediting opponents and competitors - a traditionally face-threatening act, which is better performed indirectly. Interestingly, several occurrences of non-bona fide true implicit contents, notably implicatures and presuppositions, were also found in news articles concerned with particularly sensitive topics. Conversely, vagueness and topicalizations are less plausible for this text genre: given their function of providing new information, it would be semantically and pragmatically awkward to present it in vaguely, or as if it is already active in the receivers' mind.

In order to provide a representative analysis, in future work larger corpora of each text genre should be considered. Furthermore, the analysis should be extended to other text genres and types. Once this task is completed, our findings will allow a more fine-grained analysis of the role played by manipulative implicit contents in argumentation across different genres, possibly by crossing the methodology with other analytic tools offered by argumentation theory (e.g. Argumentum Model of Topics, Rigotti & Greco, 2019).

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