

DEALING WITH BIASES IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

University of Pavia, 1–3 September 2026

BIASES, PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION: IMPLICIT STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

EDOARDO LOMBARDI VALLAURI | Roma Tre University

In an era in which information is easily accessible and widely shared, people are constantly exposed to attempts to influence their behavior. Crucially, this affects individually and socially important choices, including what to buy and whom to vote for. These choices are often perceived as free, yet many actors, such as commercial advertising and political propaganda, do everything they can to influence them effectively. This often involves exploiting biases that make people more prone to persuasion and, not infrequently, to manipulation.

The talk will consider some of these biases, namely those affecting levels of epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010), i.e. critical attention and the propensity to check the truthfulness of incoming messages (Lombardi Vallauri 2016, 2019, 2021).

Biases will be described from a multi-layered perspective, taking into account evolutionary (Tversky & Kahneman 1974; Krebs & Dawkins 1984; Gigerenzer 2008), cognitive (Christiansen & Chater 2016), and pragmatic factors (Mercier 2009; Reboul 2011; Lombardi Vallauri 2016). It will be shown how these three levels of bias work together to produce effort-economy drives that underlie the possibility, available in all languages, of conveying content implicitly. Among the linguistic devices used to package information in ways that leave it partly implicit are implicatures, vague expressions, and presuppositions. It will be shown how, as a consequence of the mentioned biases, the use of these linguistic devices leads to reduced critical attention, which in turn enables significant persuasive and manipulative effects of implicit communication.

A fourth type of bias factor—the cultural one, represented by widespread stereotypes—will also be taken into account, showing how implicatures, presuppositions, and vague expressions interact with it to foster persuasion and, potentially, manipulation.

These assumptions will be illustrated primarily through actual examples drawn from commercial advertising and political propaganda, along with a brief discussion of an experiment designed to test the epistemic vigilance of major AI systems with respect to implicit contradictions, comparing their performance with that of human subjects (Lombardi Vallauri 2026).

It will be suggested which forms the ability (in humans, but also in AI systems) to critically assess information and to counteract potential biases must take in order to ensure individual freedom of choice and a genuinely democratic coexistence.

References

- Christiansen, Morten and Nick Chater. 2016. The Now-or-Never bottleneck: A fundamental constraint on language. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39: 1–19.
- Gigerenzer, Gerd (2008). Why heuristics work. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3(1), 20–29.
- Krebs, John R., & Richard Dawkins (1984). Animal Signals: Mind-reading and Manipulation. In John R. Krebs, & Nicholas B. Davies (eds.), *Behavioral Ecology: An Evolutionary Approach*, Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 380–402.
- Lombardi Vallauri, Edoardo (2016). The “exaptation” of linguistic implicit strategies. *SpringerPlus* 5(1), 1–24. Lombardi Vallauri, Edoardo (2019). *La lingua disonesta*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Lombardi Vallauri, Edoardo (2021). Manipulative Shallow Processing Induced by Presuppositions and Topics: Theoretical Perspectives and Experimental Evidence. *Frontiers in Communication* 2021/6, 610807.
- Lombardi Vallauri, Edoardo (2026). Is a contradiction between arguments less likely to be noticed when they are implicit? An experimental case study. *Argumentation*, 07 January 2026.
- Mercier, Hugo (2009). *La Théorie Argumentative du Raisonnement*. Ph.D. Thesis in Social Sciences, Mention Cognitive Sciences, E.H.E.S.S., Paris.
- Reboul, Anne (2011). A relevance-theoretic account of the evolution of implicit communication. *Studies in Pragmatics* 13, 1–19.
- Sperber, Dan, Fabrice Clément, Christophe Heintz, Olivier Mascaro, Hugo Mercier, Gloria Origgi & Deirdre Wilson (2010). Epistemic Vigilance. *Mind & Language* 25–4, 359–393.
- Tversky, Amos & Daniel Kahneman (1974). Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. *Science* 185(4157), 1124–1131.

DEALING WITH BIASES IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

University of Pavia, 1–3 September 2026

FROM LINGUISTIC BIAS TO COLONIAL DIFFERENCE: RE-READING ONE MIGRATION NARRATIVE THROUGH RACIALIZED AND GENDERED LISTENING

CLARA KEATING | Coimbra University

In Research on linguistic bias has traditionally focused on prejudice, stereotypes, communicative misunderstanding, and, more recently, algorithmic discrimination. While these approaches have been very important in identifying inequality, they often fail to account for the ways language is entangled with race, gender, and colonial histories. In this paper, I argue that the angle of bias seems to reach some of its analytical limits in multilingual migration contexts, where linguistic evaluation is inseparable from broader processes of racialization and gendering.

In this paper, I revisit earlier work on biographizing migration (Keating, 2019) by expanding the critical sociolinguistic, linguistic anthropological angle, and bringing a more explicit articulation with raciolinguistics, and decolonial feminist theory to the analysis of the data. Rather than treating migration narratives as mere representations of mobility or identity, I examine them as interactional sites where speakers and listeners co-produce social difference across contexts (Kell, 2009). Drawing on one particular narrative of sexual harassment produced by one Brazilian migrant woman in one of the rounds of stories included in a broader project about the lived experience of migrants in Portugal (Keating, 2019, Lechner, 2012), I will pay particular attention here to the phenomena of stylization and uptake (Woolard, K., & Schieffelin, B., 1994, Irvine, J., & Gal, S., 2000): migrants narrate their trajectories by mobilizing recognizable voices and identities—such as being workers, mothers, professionals, or cosmopolitan subjects—through available linguistic and semiotic resources. However, these performances acquire meaning only through uptake: the interpretive processes through which listeners, institutions, and audiences ratify, transform, or reject them, usually across contexts.

Uptake reveals how multilingual speakers are heard through historically sedimented ideologies of language, race, nation, and gender. What is often described as linguistic bias emerges instead as racialized and gendered listening. Revisiting migration narrative data from this perspective shows how the same linguistic resources can receive different evaluations depending on the social positioning of speakers, shaping assumptions about competence, credibility, morality, integration, belonging.

I conclude this paper by arguing how these micro-interactional processes are embedded within enduring language regimes (colonial and national) that continue to structure migration governance, education, bureaucratic assessment, academic recognition, eventually contemporary forms of AI-mediated textual processing. This explicit focus allows one to shift from studying linguistic bias as an individual or text-based phenomenon toward understanding how social difference – in this case, racialized and gendered difference – is interactionally and institutionally accomplished in contemporary societies.

References

- Agha, A. (2007). *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). "Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education." *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171
- Hill, J. H. (2008). *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Wiley-Blackwell
- Irvine, J., & Gal, S. (2000). "Language ideology and linguistic differentiation." In Kroskrity, P. (ed.) *Regimes of Language*: OUP, 35–83
- Keating, C. 2019. Biographizing migrant experience. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (257), 18: 49–75
- Kell, Catherine. 2009. "Placing Practices: Literacy and Meaning Making Across Space and Time." In *The Future of Literacy Studies*, edited by M. Baynham and M. Prinsloo, 75–99. London: Palgrave.
- Woolard, K., & Schieffelin, B. (1994). "Language ideology." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 55–82.