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# Implicit Manipulation in Brexit “Vote Leave” Campaign Leaflets

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**Implicit Manipulation in Brexit “Vote Leave” Campaign Leaflets**  
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### **Introduction**

I’m going to give a qualitative study of the Vote Leave campaign leaflets in the 2016 UK European Union membership referendum which brought a majority of British people to go and vote to end all ties with the EU. The Vote Leave group was designated as the lead campaigner for the ‘Leave’ side by the British electoral commission for the 10-week official campaign period that led up to polling day on June 23 2016.

The other overall campaign group (on whom I won’t be focusing) was ‘Britain Stronger In Europe’ in favour of Remain.

All the Vote Leave leaflets have been retrieved from the Brexit collection of the LSE digital library.<sup>1</sup> My main focus will be on the manipulation of implicitness.

**Manipulation** could be said to be characterised by two features:

(1) its **covertness** – the manipulator dissimulates their intentions. I cannot performatively tell you ‘I hereby manipulate you’ without engaging in a “performative contradiction” (Cholbi 2014: 202).  
(2) the **constraint** exerted on the audience’ freedom of thought, whether the choice is more or less made for you rather than leaving you entire freedom of thought (Nettel and Roque 2012: 18). That’s a major difference with persuasion: usually you have the freedom to counter-argue in persuasion whereas in manipulation some things are hidden from you so that you don’t get the full picture. Pragma-cognitivists (Maillat & Oswald 2009, Maillat 2013, 2014) have studied the phenomenon:

=> interpretative effects are cognitively controlled by manipulators by playing on selective mechanisms, imposing ‘constraints’ on interpretation. The manipulator tends to render more accessible some contextual assumptions so that they become more easily selectable by the addressee than others. Manipulation thus consists in limiting a context, that is to say, blocking access to certain contextual assumptions

I indeed perceive manipulation as sharing one external border with persuasion and another with coercion, on a continuum (Sorlin 2016: 18, Sorlin 2017, Sorlin forthcoming). With (verbal, moral, physical) there are higher limits on freedom. Choices are made for you to a greater extent.

### **Implicit messages:**

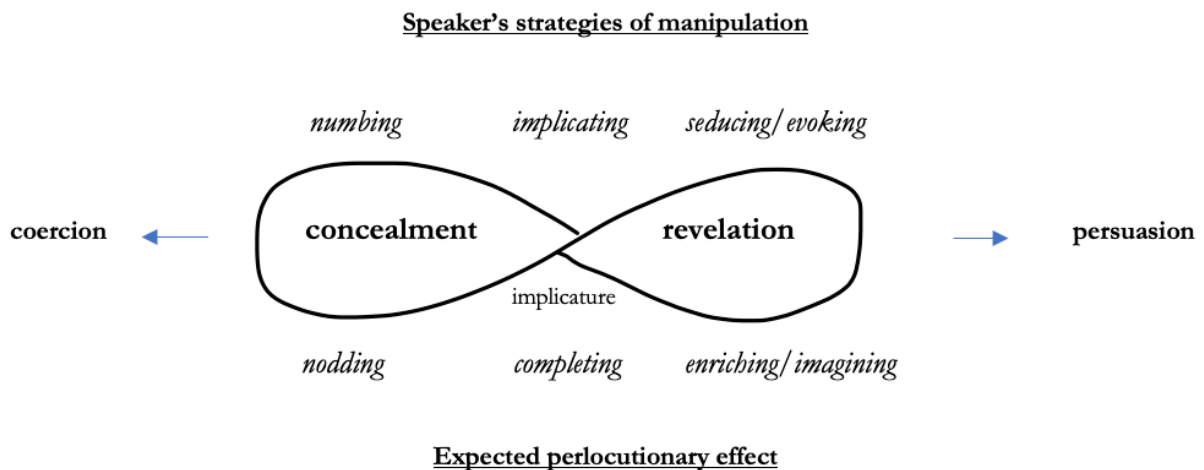
Being implicit is a means to convey information in a way that is not self-obvious, either because information needs to be inferred entirely or because it is only partly revealed or partly veiled

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<sup>1</sup> <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/collections/brexit/organisation>. I want to thank my colleague Niaz Pernon at EMMA (Etudes Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone) for bringing my attention to these leaflets.

Implicitness can be construed as hinging on a dialectics of revelation and concealment, where the reader's attention is more or less guided in perceiving either the concealed or the revealed elements.

Figure 1 proposes a representation of different strategies of implicit manipulation under the shape of a moebius strip representing the dialectics, with at its centre prototypical implication technique under the pragmatic form of implicature. Implicature is indeed at the knot of concealment and revelation as the information to be inferred is not to be retrieved based on words present on the surface of the text.



**Figure 1. Manipulative implicitation**

**On the left hand-side** of Figure 1, information is packaged in such a way as to lead readers down one single interpretative path. The controlled cognitive framing brings readers to think less rather than more, in the attempt to place them in the passive position of those who can only nod to what is asserted as a likely perlocutionary effect.

The strategic constraint exercised on the reader's mind can be labeled 'numbing' as the aim is either to block critical counter-arguments or to force them down one salient cognitive road, thereby numbing what in relevance theory is called their "epistemic vigilance" (Sperber et al., 2014). We'll see several linguistic and pragmatic strategies that perform such numbing in the leaflets.

**On the right-hand side** of the figure, reversing the dialectics of concealment and revelation, the reader is also guided towards one interpretation but this is done more overtly through visible linguistic triggers. Furthermore, instead of bringing the reader to 'think less' by reducing access to certain contextual assumptions, the point is here to bring her mind to actively imagine the situation that is only evoked. Linguistic and pragmatic markers are used to let the reader believe that there is more to the message that meets the eye. I refer to this technique of pretending there is more by saying so as 'the iceberg rhetoric'.

This strategy aims at leading the reader's mind to imagine the hidden part of the iceberg, with the effect of reinforcing the argument put forward of which the author is only revealing a part. The reader is indeed brought not merely to complete the information (as in typical implicature) but to enrich it by imagining what else lies below the tip of the iceberg.

=> This is a common strategy used by Trump when he wanted his followers to believe that he had a lot of evidence of voter fraud after his defeat in 2020, only presenting 'some' evidence but implying that there was a much greater quantity of evidence (see Sorlin 2021).

### Let's first focus on the middle of the figure

The Vote Leave campaigners' big winning card was about immigration.

But their “strategic racism” could not be openly formulated. It had to be conveyed without the authors being held accountable for it. This ‘undercover’ racism that consists in attracting racists without condoning racism is performed through the use of juxtaposition and paratactic style. Inference of racist implicits occurs in the gaps left between juxtaposed sentences that leave it to the reader to connect the dots.

(1) “Your postal vote should arrive by Friday 3 June” (Vote Leave leaflet 2016)

#### Five new countries are about to join

Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia are the next countries the EU wants to let in. Together they have a population of 88.7 million.

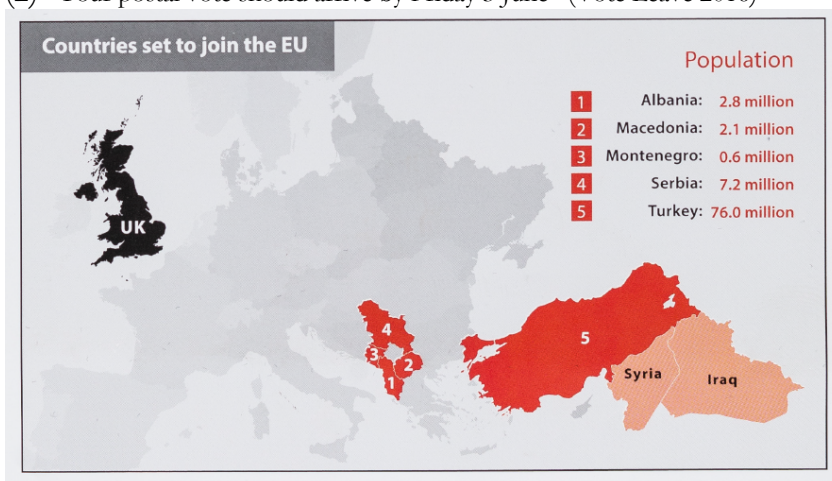
Example (1) is a case in point. Via the paratactic style not marking the logical pragmatic links between the two utterances – there are no connectives between the two sentences in black, the reader is left to connect the imminent entry of foreign countries and the population they represent in millions without further guidance. The scaring effect of this numerical precision is pragmatically performed but is not linguistically articulated.

A similar ‘connect-the-dot’ strategy is used on the same leaflet in the visual representation of the alarmist number (see (2)), highlighting in a red menacing colour the potential additions to the EU, with Turkey’s overwhelming surface area clearly showing.

More than that, while Europe is greyed out, two proximal countries to Turkey are made visible without any explanatory links or caption added to the map.

A reader seeing the map in (2) will probably be led to complete what is insinuating here: the mention of the two countries activates the racial fear of Muslim masses at the door of Europe. As the insinuation is conveyed under the form of an implicature, the responsibility of the unpacking of the implicit message is placed on the reader, thereby ensuring that the authors “cannot be held accountable for meaning such a thing” (Culpeper and Haugh 2014: 149). Since the intention of the speaker is nonovert, it can always be denied.

(2) “Your postal vote should arrive by Friday 3 June” (Vote Leave 2016)



The syntactic choice of juxtaposition/parataxis calls for pragmatic inferences that have two advantages: in veiling racist cues giving statements the appearance of mere “facts” (what could be more factual than a map?), the leaflets does not run the risk of antagonizing potential non-racist voters. Furthermore, in pragmatically reconstructing the semantic logical links between the sentences, and connecting the dots by themselves, the readers are more likely to accept the conclusions they have reached by themselves (Reboul 2011, Mercier 2009, Lombardi Vallauri 2021: 16).

### **Let’s now focus on the left-hand side of my figure**

We’re going to see how the reader is strongly but invisibly led down one simple cognitive road, leaving them little leeway to think outside the mental frame that is constructed for them. I’m completing this pragma-cognitive perspective with tools taken from cognitive linguistics<sup>2</sup> (Langacker 2008, Talmy 2000) in order to show that the text producers limit access to certain contexts by narrowing the reader’s attention to specific image schemas.<sup>3</sup>

We will first concentrate on the cognitive schemas that underlie statements in the leaflets before studying the use of presupposition.

#### **• Cognitive schemas**

(3) “Help protect your local hospital ... invest in the NHS not the EU”

### **Every week politicians send £350 millions of our money to the EU**

The image schema that underpins such a sentence is that of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema in which what Langacker calls the trajectory (the money) is being taken from a starting point “politicians” in the UK along a path towards an intended destination or goal (the EU as “landmark”). The directional preposition ‘to’ expresses the path.

This mental construal is sustained by a certain point view (what Langacker calls “perspective”), which is encoded by deixis: the verb ‘send’ describes a movement from the deictic centre (the UK) towards a destination where neither text producers nor readers are located, reinforcing the impression of money being thrown away to an abstract entity far away from here. The sentence of the leaflet is built in this inherent image schema with a strong visual effect. With such a cognitive construal, it’s almost as if one could see the money going along the UK path, moving every week in front of their very eyes all the way to its goal without meeting any obstacles or detour along the way. It implicitly creates an image of powerlessness on the part of the British people as the UK merely serves as background to this inexorable journey of money along an unvarying path in the weekly repeated event.

Many leaflets are built on the contrast between concrete UK issues and far-away abstract entities. Contrasting concrete UK needs and the pouring of money down the drain in faraway countries where the sun shines, example (4) provides a visual reinforcement of the same cognitive template:

(4) “There are 35 million potholes in Britain but your money is being spent on bridges like this in Greece”

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<sup>2</sup> In cognitive linguistics, language is conceptualisation. Meaning is treated as imagistic or conceptual in nature and linguistic units serve as prompts for the activation of conceptual structures and processes that are meaningful. These structures/processes are grounded in prior embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Langacker 2008).

<sup>3</sup> An image schema is an abstract knowledge structure we acquire in our early observations of or interactions with our environment. Different clause types can evoke the conceptual meaning contained in these archetypal conventions (Langacker 2008: 355).



The direct address through the use of the second-person pronoun ‘your money’ accentuates the belief they try to rub into readers’ minds that they are personally being robbed. No mention is made of the projects the EU makes possible in their own country, the light being merely put on the deals Britons are deprived of.

In line with typical populist arguments based on the “simple causes, simple cures” rhetoric (Müller 2018: 65) or the classic KISS strategy (“Keep it Simple, Stupid”) (Zečić-Durmišević 2020: 191), in other words the reduction of a complex reality into manageable facts, the leaflets suggest a simple replacement of this money. The adverb that keeps signaling the simplicity of the replacement is the adverb ‘instead’ as in (5) and (6):

(5) “Your postal vote should arrive by Friday 3 June”  
We send the EU £350 million a week – let’s fund our NHS **instead**.

(6) “Let’s give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week”  
Vote Leave we will be able to stop handing over £350 million a week to Brussels and we will be able to **instead** spend our money on our priorities like the NHS.

#### • Presupposition

This implicit technique consists in presenting some information as already shared or not at issue, with the textual effect of getting into the reader’s mind through what could be construed as forced access. Presuppositions can take different forms in the leaflets but they all aim at presenting the unsuccessfulness/the failure of the EU as old/given news. Nominalization in (7) or the premodifications in (8-10) package information in the form of taken for granted assertions:

(7) “The European Union and your family: the facts”  
**The need to prop up the EU** means that more and more powers will be taken by the EU

(8) “5 positive reasons to vote leave and take back control: Europe yes, EU no”  
Imagine if Turkey joins this **broken** system

(9) “From Farmers will be better off if we vote to leave the EU”  
Reduce regulations on farmers and abolish the **hated** ‘basic payment system’

(10) “Let’s give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week”  
the **secret** TTIP trade deal will let big US companies buy up parts of our NHS

That the EU needs propping up is presented as not at issue (7). The system is described as always already ‘broken’ (8) and ‘hated’ (9). Example (10) reveals the secret of the TTIP, focusing the attention on the secrecy while backgrounding what the acronym stands for (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). What is presented as not at issue is likely to be shallow processed by readers.

Leaflets rely heavily on prototypical presuppositions with linguistic triggers with the following factive verbs (11-13). They indicate that the decaying process has been going on for a long time, which makes leaving the EU the only option possible, for in case of ‘remain’:

(11) “5 positive reasons to vote leave and take back control: Europe yes, EU no”  
We’ll **keep** having the same old rows

(12) “Farmers will be better off if we vote to leave the EU”  
Immigration will **continue** to be out of control

(13) “Farmers will be better off if we vote to leave the EU”  
We’ll have to **keep** bailing out the Euro.

### **Let’s now turn to the right-hand side: Controlled polarities and scalarities**

The underlying coercive force of manipulative discourse can take more overt means in the form of linguistic triggers that are left for the reader to activate. This strategy of influence is meant to open the reader’s mind to more elements (of the same kind) through implicit manipulation of quantity.

#### **• Vagueness**

Vague expressions are part of what Lombardi Vallauri and Masia (2014) call “implicitness of content” as vagueness provides the reader with “freedom of interpretation” (Lombardi Vallauri 2017: 729) and the speaker with the possibility to be not entirely precise or truthful. Indeed the level of generality licensed by the small amount of text one can write on the leaflet makes it possible to remain vague on the quantities, the important point being to give the impression of an overwhelming quantity of something, as in (14).

(14) “Vote Leave”  
**The vast majority of** the laws that affects our lives are now made in the EU and not the UK.

Vagueness takes the form of incremental elements in a process that can only get worse. Examples (15-17) are vague in the increasing amount of areas over which we will have no control in the coming years:

(15) “The UK and the European Union: the facts”  
The EU has taken control over **more and more areas** which don’t have anything to do with trade.

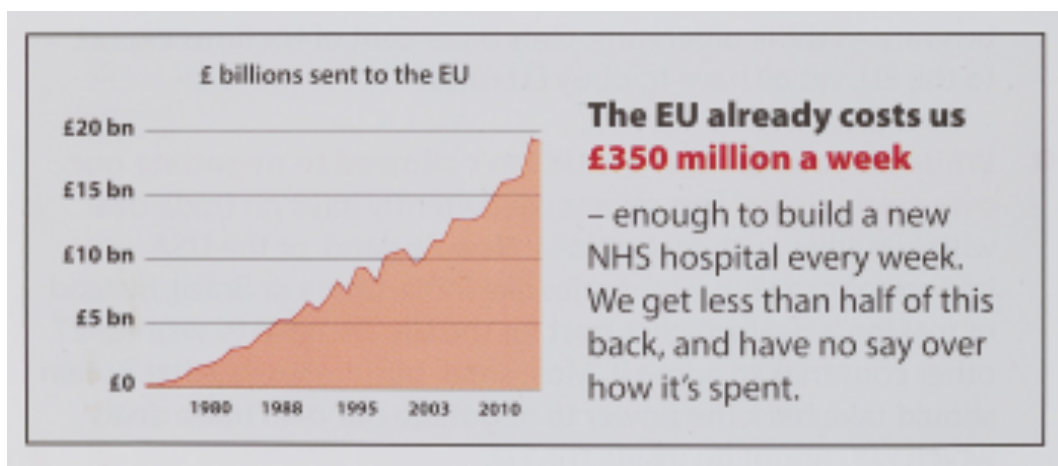
(16) “The European Union and your family: the facts”  
The need to prop up the Euro means that **more and more powers** will be taken by the EU.

(17) “5 positive reasons to vote leave and take back control: Europe yes, EU no”  
We’ll keep subsidising other EU countries and **losing more control every year.**



This inevitability of the increase materialized by the comparative phrases (“more and more”) or determiner (“more”) is accompanied with graphs showing the constantly growing cost of the EU. The graph for instance in (18) is likely to invite the reader to continue to draw the line in her mind in the same upward direction.

(18) “The European Union and your family: the facts”



#### • The Iceberg rhetoric

When concrete examples are given, it is always under the form ‘I’m giving you a few examples but that could be extended to many others’. Extract (19) is representative of this technique. The exemplifier “such as” implies that there are others that could have been quoted but were not.

(19) “Vote Leave”, already quoted in  
 EU laws prevent us from giving proper support for our industries **such as** steel.

I’ve called this strategy of giving a few examples where many are available the “iceberg rhetoric”. It aims at evoking a large quantity. Through only one instance given to exemplify the argument, the reader is led to imagine the possibility of many other such examples.

Expressions like “and many more” also economically attest to the existence of the bottom of the iceberg. On example (20), some firms are shown but many more are suggested. As the last line in blue testifies, many more will stay after Brexit because the leaflet says so:

(20) “Not sure which way to vote on 23<sup>rd</sup> June?”





The mention of the existence of ‘many more’ suggests that the support is massive, probably more than it actually is, evoking the bottom of the iceberg without revealing it.

### • Storytelling

As opposed to the ‘Remain’ advocates that warn against the inevitable economical doomsday for the United Kingdom, the Leave campaigners manage to turn this negative scenario into an opportunity. They offer the British people a renewed narrative.

We know the power of narratives lies in the fact that they tend to organize events into intelligible units as they provide graspable ‘scripts’ (Schank and Abelson 1977) with some comprehensible plot that has a clear emotional closure. What the Leavers offer as a counter-scenario to EU imprisonment is no less than... “independence”:

(21) “Independence Day”



The hot air balloon has a narrow escape from a stormy Europe in a ‘run for your life’ type of imaginary script that signals the last call for independence.

In focusing on the economic downfall that will follow the referendum if the UK got out of the EU, the Remain side bet on the reasonableness of people who wouldn’t want to take any risks by jumping in the unknown. And indeed, as Müller (2018: 61) puts it, usually human beings strive to avoid risks and uncertainty. The following adverb from the Remain campaign was supposed to deter people from taking the plunge:

(22) From ‘Britain Stronger In Europe’, Leaflet Referendum Communication “If Britain were to leave Europe our Economics would go into recession. That would inevitably put people's pensions at risk”



Yet The VOTE LEAVE campaigners have managed to put into perspective the risk that the Remain advocates were using as argument in the negative form ('Don't risk it'), paradoxically inciting people to risk it. The risk becomes a positive challenge when presented as a patriot call for liberty on 'Independence Day' (see (21)).

## Conclusion

The "Vote Leave" leaflets corpus has shown that the authors use the whole scope of strategies of influence from the most "silent" ones working on the mind unawares to the most "visible" ones bringing the mind to activate specific scenarios. Figure 2 shows a few of the many linguistic devices and pragmatic strategies that are the preserve of each side of the graph, focusing either on concealment or revelation. This model depicts manipulative strategies that go from covertly deceitful to overtly suggestive. The various linguistic tools conceal and reveal elements the text producers want readers to access (or not), to complete or to enrich.

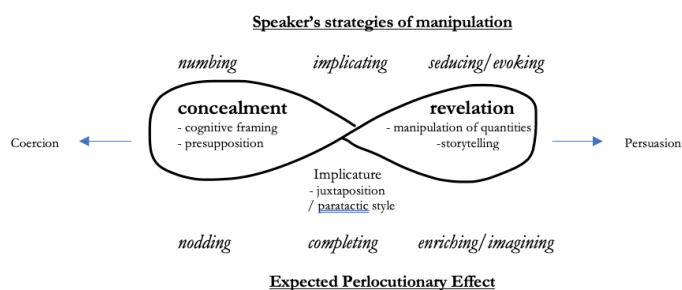


Figure 2. The linguistic tools of manipulative implicature

As a final word, I don't resist playing Nigel Farage's backtracking in an interview the day after the results saying he could not guarantee the 350 million pounds they give to the EU will go to the NHS instead, claiming that Vote Leave should never have said that!

<https://www.Independent.Co.Uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-resultnigel-farage-nhspledge-disowns-350-million-pounds-a7099906.Html>. Nigel Farage backtracks on leave campaign's '£350m for the NHS' pledge hours after result

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