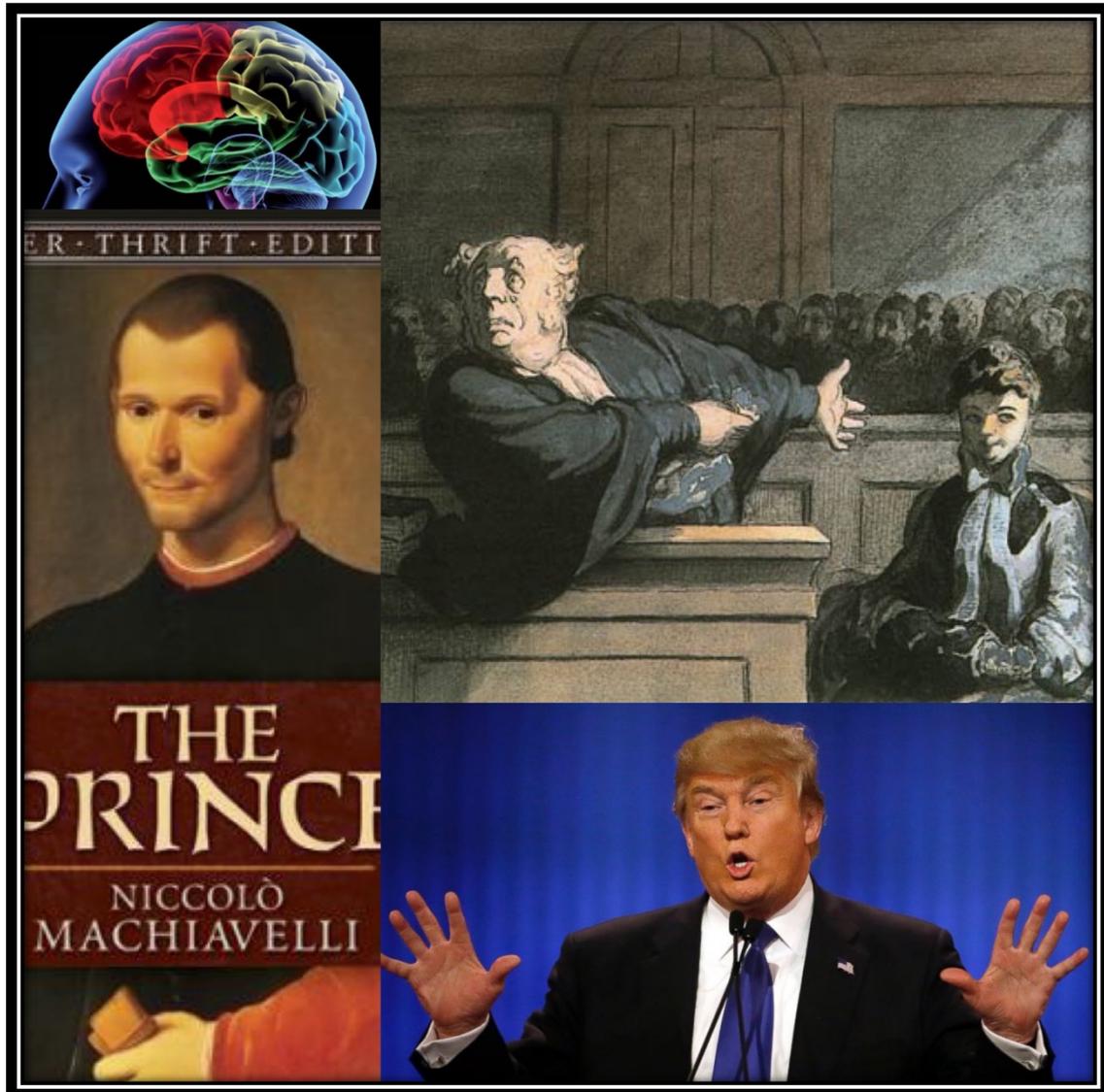


PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

September 17, 2021, University of Neuchâtel
Institut de langue et civilisation française (ILCF), room S1.



WORKSHOP ORGANIZED BY THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE CENTER,
UNIVERSITY OF NEUCHÂTEL

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WORKSHOP PROGRAM¹

8 :30–9 :15	Registrations
9 :15–9 :45	<p>Welcome and Introduction (Louis de Saussure, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Letters, University of Neuchâtel)</p> <p>Plausible deniability: from pragmatics to cognitive psychology (Misha-Laura Müller, University of Neuchâtel)</p>
9 :45–10 :30	<p>'I didn't mean that!': Plausible deniability and context re-construction (Diana Mazzarella, University of Neuchâtel)</p>
10 :30–11 :00	Coffee Break
11 :00–11 :45	<p>Retractability of implicit messages, offense and face saving in political communication today (Edoardo Lombardi Vallauri, Università Roma Tre)</p>
11 :45–12 :30	<p>Does plausible deniability prevent the attribution of commitment? The case of insinuation (Steve Oswald, University of Fribourg)</p>
12 :30–13 :45	Lunch break
13 :45–14 :30	<p>Linguistic relevance and the evidential perspective on the retractability of implicit information (Viviana Masia, Università Roma Tre)</p>
14 :30–15 :15	<p><i>Denying with or without advantage: consequences on audience's reaction</i> Francesca Bonalumi (CEU, Budapest) & Christophe Heintz (CEU, Budapest)</p>
15 :15–15 :45	Coffee Break
15 :45–16 :30	<p>Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era (Stephan Lewandowsky, University of Bristol)</p>
16 :30–17 :30	Round Table Discussion and Closing remarks

¹ Registration instructions, cf. page 3.

WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

In a seminal article, Pinker et al. (2008) use a Game theoretic model to shed light on the strategic utility of implicit meanings, i.e., the classical Gricean implicatures (Grice, 1975). According to their view, implicit meanings are best fitted for manipulative purposes rather than for communication proper. The reason is that implicit meanings have the formal property of being cancellable without generating logical inconsistencies, thus making them plausibly deniable whenever a manipulative intention is suspected.

This paper gave rise to abundant research on implicit communication. For instance, Reboul (2011, 2017) adopts the perspective of evolutionary psychology and argues that both Gricean implicatures and presuppositions emerged in the human species to allow for the denial of manipulative intentions in argumentative contexts (as per Mercier & Sperber, 2011). In line with this account, experimental approaches have tested whether a speaker who communicates a falsehood will be 'punished' or suffer 'reputational costs' (cf. Vulliouud et al., 2017) depending on whether the falsehood was explicit, presupposed or conversationally implicated (Mazzarella et al., 2018). The results suggest that conversationally implicated contents are relatively poor commitment cues, seeming to confirm the manipulative accounts of implicit communication. However, some scholars draw a sharp distinction between the "cancellability" of implicit contents and their "retractability". According to de Saussure & Oswald (2009), the retractability (or deniability) of an implicit meaning depends on its relevance in a given context (Sperber & Wilson 1987 /95). That is to say, despite the formal properties which make implicit contents cancellable, their retractability can be "more or less plausible" (de Saussure 2018:179). Furthermore, the deniability of implicit meanings can also be affected by the epistemic vigilance of the listener (Sperber et al., 2010; Oswald and Lewinsky, 2011). In other words, the more vigilant the listener is towards the speaker, the less likely the speaker will be able to retract an implicit meaning. Finally, experiments in the field of economics suggest other variables that are likely to affect the acceptability of a communicated falsehood. According to Effron (2018), counterfactual thoughts play a significant role in the assessment of a falsehood: if a listener can imagine that a falsehood "could have been true", she is less likely to punish the speaker for having said it, regardless of whether it was explicitly or implicitly conveyed.

The purpose of this workshop is to present the most up to date takes on "plausible deniability", from pragmatic-linguistic perspectives (related to verbal comprehension) as well as from social and psychological ones (related to reputational costs), seeking to account for the specificities of the post-truth era. That is to say, how can the deniability of implicit contents constitute a benefit in a context where the pursuit of truth no longer seems to matter?

When: 17 September 2021.

Where: University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, room S1, [Institut de langue et civilisation française](#) (ILCF), possibility to follow us on Zoom (more information after registration).

Contact person : Misha Müller (misha-laura.muller@unine.ch)

Apply by Email: misha-laura.muller@unine.ch

Registration instructions:

- Send a short **message by September 1st**, 2021 to the email address provided. Applicants will be notified of acceptance by September 7. **Attendance is free-of-charge.**
- You are kindly welcome to join us to our lebanese lunch buffet, with a participation of CHF 20.- (registration until September 1st, to be paid on site).

INVITED SPEAKERS (BY ORDER OF APPEARANCE)



DIANA MAZZARELLA is an Assistant Professor at the University of Neuchâtel. She obtained a PhD in linguistics at University College London in 2015. She then won a post-doctoral study grant at the Marc Jeannerod Institute of Cognitive Sciences in Lyon (France, 2015-2017), and then at the Leibniz-ZAS (Berlin, 2017-2018).

Her current work lies in the interdisciplinary field of pragmatics, which explores language and communication from a cognitive perspective. Her research interests include : lying and figurative uses of language, the role of face-management in pragmatic inference, the strategic advantages of implicit communication, the cognitive underpinnings of ostensive communication.

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Edoardo Lombardi Vallauri is a Professor at the University of Roma Tre. He obtained a PhD in linguistics at the University of Rome La Sapienza (1992). He then earned a series of scholarships in Italy and Japan. His current research aims at building scientific tools to describe and weigh manipulative arguments in advertisement and political discourse. He is the director of the project *IMPAQTS (Implicit Manipulation in Politics – Quantitatively Assessing the Tendentiousness of Speeches)*, and *OPPP!* (Osservatorio Permanente sulla Pubblicità e la

Propaganda).

His areas of research and expertise include information structure, implicit and persuasive communication, experimental pragmatics, relations between language and the brain, Italian and Japanese linguistics.

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https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Edoardo_Lombardi_Vallauri/contributions

<https://edoardolombardivallauri.com/>



STEVE OSWALD is a Senior Lecturer in English Linguistics at the University of Fribourg. He obtained a PhD in linguistics in 2010 at the University of Neuchatel. He is the vice-chair of APPLY, COST Action 17132 (European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis), founding member of the steering board of ECA (European Conference on Argumentation), and founding member of the CoRReA (Collectif Romand de Recherches sur l'Argumentation).

His research interests lie at the interface between discourse, language and cognition and he has worked extensively on the role of influence in communication (e.g. when communication is non-cooperative, deceptive, persuasive or argumentative). His current research and publications are devoted to the role of pragmatic meaning in the processes of argumentation, which he approaches from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Website : www.steveoswald.ch



Viviana Masia is a Professor of English language and linguistics at the University of Rome La Sapienza and teaching assistant at the Roma Tre University. She obtained a PhD in linguistics in 2015, at the University of Roma Tre. She then carried her post-doctoral research in several projects in Italy (University of Genoa, University Roma Tre).

Her main research interests revolve around the neurophysiology of information structure and presupposition processing. She has also worked on the manipulative effects of implicit communication in political discourse as well as on the relation between information structure and evidentiality.

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FRANCESCA BONALUMI has a background in moral philosophy and is currently a PhD candidate in cognitive science at the Central European University (CEU). Her research interests include social cognition, developmental psychology and experimental pragmatics.

Her PhD project focuses on implicit cues which signal and influence commitment and prosocial behaviour, such as partner's reliance on one's action, the amount of invested costs or the history of interaction with a partner. She is also interested in implicit communication and which factors affect speaker's accountability and plausible deniability in such cases.

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CHRISTOPHE HEINTZ is an Associate Professor in the Department of Cognitive Science at the CEU (Budapest). He obtained a PhD in Cognitive Science in 2007, at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (Paris). Christophe Heintz is currently leading the research group ACE (Adaptive Cognition and Economics).

His research focuses on the role of adaptive cognition in shaping economic behavior, cultural evolution, and the history of science. He attempts to describe scientific practices and economic choices as resulting from both environmental/contextual and psychological causal factors, with a focus on evolved cognition.

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STEPHAN LEWANDOWSKY is a Professor of Cognitive Science at the University of Bristol. He obtained a PhD in psychology in 1985, at the University of Toronto.

His research explores people's responses to misinformation and propaganda. More specifically, he studies the persistence of misinformation and the spread of "fake news" in society, including conspiracy theories. His research seeks to underpin the variables that determine whether or not people accept scientific evidence, for example surrounding vaccinations or climate science. His research also emphasizes the existence of a potential conflict between the architecture of our online information ecosystem and democracy.

Website : <https://www.cogsciwa.com/>



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