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# **Is Group-Directed Praise Always Welcome?**

## **Reactions to Ingroup and Outgroup Praise**

### **Depend on Linguistic Abstraction**

**Silvia Moscatelli<sup>1</sup> and Monica Rubini<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

This research examined how recipients reacted to group-directed praise formulated by ingroup or outgroup members and varying in linguistic abstraction. Study 1 ( $N = 81$ ) showed that ingroup praise was perceived as more sincere when formulated in abstract (vs. concrete) terms, whereas outgroup praise formulated in abstract terms was seen as less sincere than concrete praise. In Study 2 ( $N = 89$ ), recipients of outgroup praise formulated in abstract vs. concrete terms attributed more hidden agenda and prejudice to the speaker, and perceived lower congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs; the opposite pattern occurred for ingroup praise. Perceptions of congruency and hidden agenda mediated the effects of speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction on recipients' perception of the praising message. This research points out that linguistic abstraction influences the appraisal of group-directed praise as it works as a cue of speakers' motives. It also suggests important implications for developing successful communications between groups.

#### **Keywords**

Praise, Intergroup communication, LCM, Speaker evaluation, Intergroup biases

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<sup>1</sup> University of Bologna, Italy

**Corresponding author:**

Silvia Moscatelli, Department of Psychology, University of Bologna, viale Berti Pichat, 5, 40126, Bologna, Italy.

Email: [silvia.moscatelli@unibo.it](mailto:silvia.moscatelli@unibo.it)

**Is Group Praise Always Welcome? Reactions to Ingroup and Outgroup Praise Depend on Linguistic Abstraction**

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised Italy, among other nations that were severely hit in the first stage, for the efforts and sacrifices to stop the epidemic (ANSA, 2020). The German Chancellor Angela Merkel, too, lauded Italians for mastering “these difficult weeks with admirable discipline and patience” (von der Burchand & Tamma, 2020). Such words had great resonance in the Italian media and were mentioned by the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to motivate Italians to hold on (ANSA, 2020). Praising messages like these are important to encourage the targets to keep the desired behaviors. However, one might wonder whether they are appreciated and accepted in all circumstances. Are they always appraised favorably, even when coming from representatives of external groups?

To date, research on group-based feedback has paid little attention to praise and has pointed out that recipients seem to respond favorably to praising messages regardless of their source (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004; for a review, see Rabinovich & Morton, 2015).

However, there is evidence that reactions to outgroup praise depend on its attributional focus (Rabinovich et al., 2012) and that individuals often infer negative beliefs and prejudice even from positive feedbacks (Fiske et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2006; Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Given the potential that praise has to promote desired social change (e.g., Haimovitz

& Dweck, 2017), it is important to examine more in depth the conditions under which positive feedbacks addressed to a group are likely to be accepted or to be regarded with suspicion.

To this aim, the present research investigated whether recipients' reactions to praise moved by ingroup or outgroup representatives depend on the linguistic formulation of the message. Given that using different linguistic categories along a continuum of concreteness–abstractness gives rise to quite different representations of the information conveyed (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), in Study 1 we examined whether varying the level of linguistic abstraction of a praising message affects how the message is appraised. Study 2 analyzed how recipients of praise formulated at different levels of abstraction perceive the speakers and their motives, and whether such perceptions account for variations in the message's appraisal.

### **Reactions to Group-Directed Feedbacks**

Most studies on group-based feedbacks have focused on criticism, showing that negative feedbacks by outsiders provoke harsher reactions and less favorable perception of the speaker than negative feedbacks by insiders (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004). In contrast, ingroup criticisms elicit less negative responses, are considered correct to a greater extent and agreed more. This phenomenon, named intergroup sensitivity effect, is hard to reduce (e.g., Esposito et al., 2013; Moscatelli et al., 2019) and has been explained in terms of an attributional mechanism: Individuals accept ingroup criticisms more easily since they attribute more constructive motives to ingroup critics, whereas they are more suspicious about the motives of outgroup critics (Hornsey et al., 2008).

Such higher sensitivity to outgroup feedbacks does not occur when speakers positively comment about the group. People generally relish being commended, and accompanying criticism with praise (“sweetening”; Hornsey et al., 2008) is a strategy to mitigate negative perceptions. Moreover, Hornsey and Imani (2004) found that recipients of

ingroup and outgroup praise did not differ in terms of the perceived constructiveness of the message or sensitivity towards the message (i.e., the extent to which receivers found the comments were threatening, irritating, or offensive). However, measures of perceived constructiveness or sensitivity might not be very appropriate to capture recipients' reactions to ingroup and outgroup praise: Recipients might plausibly appreciate praise regardless of the source but at the same time attribute different motives to ingroup and outgroup speakers.

Some evidence that individuals are actually sensitive to the source of praise comes from studies of Rabinovich et al. (2012), who found that responses to praising messages by ingroup and outgroup members can vary depending on the implied cause of praiseworthy behavior. The authors manipulated the content of praise in order to attribute the excellent academic skills and performance of students of a given university to internal (i.e., intellectual abilities or efforts) or external (i.e., circumstances) causes. Recipients of outgroup praise referred to external causes were more likely to behave in line with the feedback – performing better on a task related to the content of praise – compared to recipients of outgroup praise referred to internal causes. This effect was due to the recipients' desire to protect and uphold the ingroup's image. Even though task performance was not affected by the attributional content of ingroup praise, ingroup praise focusing on internal causes resulted in greater concerns for the ingroup image than ingroup praise focusing on external causes (Rabinovich et al., 2012). In a complementary vein, Rabinovich et al. (2014) found that receivers were more likely to infer that the speaker was an ingroup rather than an outgroup member when the speaker attributed the group success to internal rather than external causes.

Thus, the studies of Rabinovich et al. (2012; 2014) suggest that individuals perceive positive feedbacks coming from insiders and outsiders differently, possibly because they attribute different motives to speakers. In this respect, some cues derive from studies conducted in different domains. For instance, research on negativity omission (e.g., Fiske et

al., 2015) has revealed that communicators tend to focus on positive characteristics in individuals and groups' descriptions. However, doing this creates innuendo and activates complementary negative stereotypes, so that recipients infer negativity from its omission in the description. Moreover, recipients react with anger to group-directed compliments and attribute more prejudice to the speaker when the compliments are given on stereotypical dimensions, and group membership is salient (Garcia et al., 2006). However, praise that is inconsistent with the group's central characteristics can have negative repercussions, too: As shown by Rabinovich et al. (2017), recipients of inconsistent praise reported lower group-based esteem, a weaker ingroup identification and stronger ingroup stereotypes compared to recipients of consistent praise.

Whereas in the mentioned studies the speaker's group membership was not manipulated, it is interesting to note that, even when faced with compliments, individuals might infer that speakers are hiding their unfavorable and prejudiced views of the described group. This assumption is also supported by research on subtle forms of racism (e.g., Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Shelton et al., 2005). For instance, Kunstman and Fitzpatrick (2018) highlighted that members of racial minorities who receive favorable treatment by Whites are often suspicious of Whites' motives and attribute their kindness to racial bias or covert prejudice rather than to recipients' merit, ability, and deservingness. Thus, we might expect recipients to draw different explanations of group-directed praise moved by insiders or outsiders.

A further dimension that might affect reactions to praise is the wording of the message. Research on individual-level praise in an educational context (e.g., Gunderson et al., 2018; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017) has shown that positive feedbacks to children have more positive repercussions if they focus on the process through which someone achieved the desired outcome rather than on the person's traits or the person as a whole. In particular,

matching trait- and process-related messages, Cimpian et al. (2007) found that praise worded in person-terms (e.g., “You are a good drawer”) led children to feel less happy, denigrate their skills, and deal more poorly with later failures compared to praise worded in process-terms (“You did a good job drawing”). Even though these studies concern individual-level praise, they suggest that people might react differently to group-directed praise formulated with different abstraction levels due to abstraction’s capacity to shift recipients’ attention from the behaviors (concrete terms) to the more general features of a group (abstract terms).

### **Linguistic Abstraction in Group Communication**

According to the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), concrete terms – such as descriptive action verbs (“talk”) and interpretive action verbs (“help”) – are more descriptive and give more contextual information whilst giving less information about the protagonist of the event itself compared to abstract terms. Abstract terms, on the other hand, convey more information about the cognitive and emotional states (state verbs; “love”) and the traits and disposition (adjectives; “altruist”) of the protagonist of the described actions. For these reasons, abstract terms elicit inferences of greater enduringness, higher temporal durability, and a greater likelihood of repetition of the information conveyed compared to more concrete terms (Semin & de Poot, 1997). On its part, linguistic concreteness enhances the imaginability of the event described: Asking participants to rate the truth of ambiguous statements, Hansen and Wänke (2010) found that concrete statements were perceived as more vivid and therefore more probably true.

Individuals are implicitly able to vary linguistic abstraction to reach their communicative goals (Rubini et al., 2014). For instance, they generally describe behaviors performed by ingroup members using more abstract positive terms, and more concrete negative terms, than those performed by outgroup members (Moscatelli et al., 2014; Prati et al., 2020), thus conveying more favorable representations of the ingroup compared to the

outgroup. Moreover, individuals vary the linguistic abstraction of their messages depending on the audience (Menegatti & Rubini, 2013). Menegatti and Rubini (2013) found that political leaders and activists tended to use more abstract language— thus communicating a generalized view of information— to convince an audience with a similar political position. On their part, recipients who shared the speaker's political attitudes considered abstract messages more effective than concrete ones. Conversely, politicians turned to concrete language with recipients with mixed or opposite political attitudes, who in turn considered concrete messages more convincing (Menegatti & Rubini, 2013).

Variations in linguistic abstraction also elicit different inferences about describers' motivations and attitudes (Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010). Recipients of abstract vs. concrete positive descriptions deduced that the describer had positive attitudes towards the protagonist (Douglas & Sutton, 2006) and liked the describer more (Douglas & Sutton, 2010). Assilaméhou and Testé (2013) found that speakers who described groups in abstract vs. concrete terms were attributed more preconceptions about and more extreme attitudes towards the group described. Moreover, recipients inferred that the speaker had stronger intentions to favor (when the description was positive) or denigrate (when the description was negative) the group when messages were formulated in abstract rather than concrete terms. However, Assilaméhou and Testé (2013) did not examine the impact of recipient and speaker group membership.

Interestingly for our purposes, Moscatelli et al. (2019) showed that linguistic abstraction moderates the effects of group-directed criticism moved by outgroup members. Recipients of concrete (vs. abstract) criticism by outgroup members reported less negativity towards the message and more positive attitudes towards the outgroup. Recipients of concrete criticism also attributed less hostile intention and prejudice to outgroup speakers than recipients of abstract criticism, and such attributions accounted for the reduced negativity



towards concrete criticism moved by outgroup members. This evidence suggests that even in responding to positive feedbacks, individuals might use abstraction as a cue to infer speakers' "real" thoughts and motives.

## **Overview**

The present research examined whether linguistic abstraction influences recipients' appraisal of group-directed praise moved by ingroup or outgroup representatives and the perceptions of the speakers and their motives. To this aim, we conducted two experiments where Italian respondents were exposed to praising messages concerning their national ingroup. The messages were formulated either in concrete or abstract terms and attributed to either an Italian or an outgroup member. The outgroup speaker was from Germany (Study 1) or United Kingdom (Study 2), two countries that can be considered similar to Italy for wealth and economy and are both well known among young Italians (ISTAT, 2016).

In Study 1, participants rated the pleasantness and sincerity of the praise and reported their agreement. Study 2 focused on recipients' perceptions of the speaker. To this aim, recipients indicated their perception that the speaker's words corresponded to his/her inner beliefs (perceived congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs). Recipients also rated the extent to which they saw the speaker as prejudiced against the target of praise and having a hidden agenda.

Since abstract language leads to infer that the information described is more stable, durable, and generalizable than concrete language, in general terms one could expect that recipients of abstract praise would consider it more pleasant, and would be less suspicious about the speaker's motives, compared to recipients of concrete praise (Douglas & Sutton, 2006; Semin & DePoot, 1997). However, based on previous research on group members' expectations and behaviors in intergroup contexts, we argued that reactions to praise are likely to depend on the speaker group membership in addition to the abstraction of language.

There is robust evidence that group members trust the ingroup more, cooperate more with it, and show ingroup favoritism and ethnocentrism whenever they have the chance (Everett et al., 2015; Moscatelli & Rubini, 2017; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Conversely, individuals tend to compete with outgroup members and, under specific conditions, even show outgroup derogation (Moscatelli et al., 2017; Riek et al., 2006; Weisel & Böhm, 2015). Moreover, individuals expect others to do the same: Namely, they expect fellow ingroup members to favor the ingroup over the outgroup, and outgroup members to favor their own group (Gaertner & Insko, 2000; Masuda & Fu, 2015; Moscatelli et al., 2014).

Since people trust ingroup members more than outgroup members and expect to be favored by the ingroup (Moscatelli et al., 2014; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000), recipients of ingroup praise should evaluate praise formulated in abstract terms – which imply higher generalizability of the positive information conveyed – more favorably than praise formulated in concrete terms. Concrete praise, which provides a more contextualized description of the group, is instead less likely to fulfill recipients' expectations of ingroup favoritism than abstract praise. Thus, we expected that abstract praise from ingroup members would be perceived as more pleasant (*hypothesis 1a*), more sincere (*hypothesis 1b*), and would be agreed with more (*hypothesis 1c*) than concrete praise.

As mentioned, outgroup members are commonly trusted less and expected to discriminate in favor of their group if they have the chance (Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Insko et al., 1990; Moscatelli et al., 2014; Shelton et al., 2005). Accordingly, outgroup praise formulated in abstract, generalizing terms should be perceived as in contrast with recipients' expectations regarding the outgroup. Thus, we expected that abstract praise would be perceived as less pleasant (*hypothesis 2a*) and less sincere (*hypothesis 2b*) and would be agreed with less (*hypothesis 2c*) compared to outgroup praise formulated in concrete terms (Study 1).

The perception of the speaker should parallel that of praise. Recipients should perceive in a favorable fashion ingroup speakers who showed favoritism for the ingroup by formulating praise in abstract terms. Conversely, recipients might infer that an ingroup speaker who used concrete terms was not really certain about the ingroup qualities, was extolling, or was not transparent about his/her real beliefs. Thus, we expected that recipients of ingroup praise formulated in abstract terms would report higher perceived congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs (*hypothesis 3a*) and lower attribution of hidden agenda (*hypothesis 3b*) compared to recipients of ingroup concrete praise. Because of expectations of ingroup favoritism (Moscatelli et al., 2014), ingroup praise – whether abstract or concrete – should be unlikely to raise suspicion of prejudice.

Since people anticipate a more negative treatment by outgroup members (Insko et al., 1990; Moscatelli et al., 2014), recipients of outgroup praise should perceive lower congruency between speaker beliefs and speech (*hypothesis 4a*) and should perceive the speaker as having a hidden agenda (*hypothesis 4b*) and prejudice (*hypothesis 4c*) to a greater extent when the praise was formulated in abstract vs. concrete terms. We expected that such attributions would account for the effects of linguistic abstraction on the perception of ingroup and outgroup praise (*hypotheses 5a-5c*).

### **Pilot Study**

In order to identify credible praising messages addressed to the ingroup, twenty-nine university Italian students (19 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.90$ ,  $SD = 2.50$ , range = 19-30 years old) were exposed to a list of statements about Italians. Statements were generated drawing from previous literature on the characteristics and habits usually associated with Italians (e.g., Giannini et al., 2010; Sciolla, 1997). Six statements were formulated in abstract language (i.e., with adjectives). Six corresponding statements, matched in meaning, were formulated in concrete terms using descriptive action verbs (DAVs) and interpretative action verbs (IAVs).

Abstract/concrete statements were: “Italians are sociable”/“Italians socialize easily” (IAV); “Italians are food lovers”/“Italians have long lunches and dinners” (IAV); “Italians are creative”/ “Italians build architectural works” (IAV); “Italians are friendly”/“Italians hang out with friends” (IAV); “Italians are elegant”; “Italians wear stylish clothes” (DAV); “Italians are cheerful”/ “Italians make jokes” (IAV); “Italians are hospitable”/ “Italians host visitors in their house” (IAV)<sup>1</sup>. Participants rated the extent to which each statement was descriptive of Italians and their comprehensibility. The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) in both cases.

The statements that were rated as more characteristic of Italians were “sociable” ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), “friendly” ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ), “creative” ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) and “food lovers” ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). All these statements were considered more descriptive of Italians than “cheerful” ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), “hospitable” ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) “elegant” ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $t_s > 2.53$ ,  $p_s < .017$ . A similar pattern was found for the correspondent concrete forms: The statements “Italians socialize easily” ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), “hang out with friends” ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ), “build architectural works” ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), “have long lunches and dinners” ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) were judged as more characteristic of Italians than the statements “make jokes” ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), “host visitors in their house” ( $M = 3.69$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ), and “wear stylish clothes” ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ),  $t_s > 2.19$ ,  $p_s < .037$ .

Thus, sociable, friendly, creative and food lovers (and the corresponding concrete forms) were selected as stimulus materials for praise in the main studies. For the selected statements, abstract and concrete forms did not differ in the extent to which they were judged descriptive of Italians ( $M_{\text{abstract}} = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ;  $M_{\text{concrete}} = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),  $t_s < 0.84$ ,  $p_s > .408$ . Moreover, abstract and concrete statements were equally comprehensible ( $M_{\text{abstract}} = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ;  $M_{\text{concrete}} = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ),  $t_s < 1.49$ ,  $p_s > .147$ .

## Study 1

Study 1 examined the impact of speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction on the perception of praises. Italian participants were exposed to concrete or abstract praising messages concerning Italians, which have apparently been formulated by either an Italian or a German speaker. Participants rated the message in terms of pleasantness and sincerity and indicated their agreement with it. We expected more favorable evaluations of ingroup praise formulated in abstract vs. concrete terms, whereas the opposite was expected for outgroup praise.

### *Method*

*Participants and Experimental Design.* Eighty-one undergraduate students of Psychology (60.5% women;  $M$  age = 25.09, range 19-45 years old;  $SD$  = 5.32) from a north-Italian large university, all of Italian nationality, volunteered to take part in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions of a 2 (speaker group membership: ingroup, outgroup)  $\times$  2 (linguistic abstraction: low, high) between-participants design. A sensitivity analysis conducted with G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed that our sample was sufficient to detect medium-to-large effects of  $f = 0.32$  (equivalent to  $\eta_{\text{part}}^2 = .09$ ), assuming an  $\alpha$  of 0.05, and power of 0.80 for a between-participants ANOVA.

*Procedure.* Participants were asked to participate in a study concerning how people evaluate others based on little information. They were presented with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, which allegedly reported two extracts from an interview (see Hornsey et al., 2008, and Moscatelli et al., 2019, for similar procedures). The interview started with the question “Tell us a little bit about yourself”. In the ingroup speaker condition, the interviewee presented himself as Paolo Fabbri, born in Italy and currently living in Rome. In the outgroup speaker condition, the interviewee presented himself as Paulo Schmidt, born in Germany and living in Berlin. In both cases, the interviewee added that he was a Psychology student and

wished to work as a psychologist in the future. The interviewee also reported keeping informed about news from all over the world.

Participants were then presented with the second extract from the interview, introduced by the question “What is your idea of Italians?”. Praise linguistic abstraction was manipulated by varying the interviewee’s answer. In the abstract condition, the interviewee replied: “Generally speaking, Italians are friendly and sociable. Moreover, they are food lovers and creative”. In the concrete condition, he replied, “Generally speaking, Italians spend much time with friends and socialize easily. Moreover, they have long lunches and dinners and build architectural works”.

Afterward, participants rated the pleasantness and sincerity of the praise and reported their agreement with it. As a manipulation check, they were asked to indicate the interviewee's nationality. All participants indicated the correct nationality. Finally, they were presented with the demographics and debriefed.

*Dependent Variables.* The pleasantness of the praise was measured by asking participants the extent to which the message was “pleasant” and “positive” ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Participants then rated the extent to which they thought the praise was “honest”, “insincere” (reversed), and “credible” (sincerity;  $\alpha = .84$ ). Finally, they indicated the extent to which they “agreed with the message” and “thought the speaker had a point” (agreement;  $\alpha = .71$ ).

## ***Results***

A series of 2 (speaker group membership)  $\times$  2 (linguistic abstraction) between-groups ANOVAs were conducted on the measures of pleasantness, sincerity, and agreement with the praise. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

*Pleasantness.* The ANOVA on pleasantness of the praise revealed a main effect of abstraction,  $F(1, 77) = 5.33, p = 0.024, \eta^2 = .065$ . Participants found abstract praise to be more pleasant ( $M = 6.64, SD = 0.73$ ) than concrete praise ( $M = 6.22, SD = 0.91$ ). There was no

main effect of speaker group membership,  $F(1, 77) = 0.18, p = .672$ . The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 77) = 1.92, p = .170$ . However, simple pair comparisons run to further test hypothesis 1a and 1b revealed that abstract praise by the ingroup was actually considered more pleasant than concrete praise,  $t(38) = -2.38, p = .023$ , whereas there was no difference between abstract and concrete outgroup praise,  $t(39) = -0.73, p = .470$ .

*Sincerity.* The analysis of perceived sincerity revealed no significant main effects,  $F_s < 0.013, p_s > .908$ . The interaction between speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction was significant,  $F(1, 77) = 10.23, p = .002, \eta^2 = .117$ . Post-hoc comparisons based on Bonferroni test revealed that, as expected, ingroup praise was considered less sincere when formulated in concrete than in abstract terms,  $p = .033$  (hypothesis 1b). Conversely, outgroup praise was perceived as less sincere when it was formulated in abstract rather than concrete terms,  $p = .021$  (hypothesis 2b).

*Agreement.* The analysis showed no significant main or interaction effect on the level of agreement with the message,  $F_s < 1.27, p_s > .264$ . Hypotheses 1c and 2c were not supported.

## ***Discussion***

The findings of Study 1 provided the first evidence that linguistic abstraction might influence recipients' reactions to ingroup and outgroup praise. Abstract vs. concrete terms led to the perception of lower sincerity when the praise came from the outgroup, whereas abstract praise was perceived as more sincere than concrete praise when it came from the ingroup. As for ratings of pleasantness, abstract praise was overall considered more pleasant, in line with previous evidence that abstract positive terms lead to inferences of higher stability and generalizability of the information conveyed (Semin & DePoot, 1997). This effect appeared to be driven by ratings of ingroup praise.

Neither linguistic abstraction nor speaker group membership affected recipients' agreement with the praise. Recipients might have found it hard to disagree with a favorable

representation of their own country, especially because praising messages referred to positive characteristics that are commonly attributed to it. Overall, these findings support that individuals apparently appreciate positive praise regardless of the source, but at the same time use linguistic abstraction as a cue to establish the sincerity of the praise.

## **Study 2**

Study 2 extended Study 1 by examining whether the effects of linguistic abstraction on the appraisal of ingroup and outgroup praising messages, in terms of perceived sincerity, were explained by variations in the perceptions of the speaker. To this aim, Study 2 analyzed the extent to which recipients perceived congruency between speaker's words and beliefs, and made attributions of hidden agenda and prejudice against the target group to the speaker.

We expected recipients of ingroup praise to report higher perception of congruency and lower attribution of hidden agenda when the praise was abstract. Recipients of outgroup praise formulated in abstract vs. concrete terms should instead perceive lower congruency and attribute more negative motives to the outgroup speaker.

## **Method**

*Participants and Experimental Design.* Eighty-nine undergraduate Italian students of Psychology (65.2% women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.43$ , range 18-55 years old;  $SD = 6.33$ ), enrolled in a large north-Italian university, volunteered to the (speaker group membership)  $\times$  2 (linguistic abstraction) study. According to a sensitivity analysis run with G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007), our sample was sufficient to detect medium-to-large effects of  $f = 0.30$  (equivalent to  $\eta_{\text{part}}^2 = .08$ ), assuming an  $\alpha$  of 0.05, and power of 0.80.

*Procedure.* The procedure was very similar to Study 1, except that the interviewee presented himself as either Stefano Rossi/Steve Smith, born in Italy/United Kingdom, currently living in Florence/Liverpool. The praising message was the same as Study 1. After reading the interview extracts, participants rated the perceived sincerity of the praise and completed the



measures of perceived congruency, attribution of hidden agenda, and attribution of prejudice.

All the participants correctly answered the manipulation check on the interviewee's nationality.

*Dependent Variables.* The perception of praise's sincerity was measured as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Participants rated the perceived congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs through two items: "The speaker is sure of what he said"; "The speaker does not believe in what he said" (reversed;  $\alpha = .75$ ). They also rated the extent to which the speaker had a hidden agenda ("The speaker has a hidden motive", "The speaker praised Italians since he expected to obtain a benefit", "The speaker wants to flatter Italians";  $\alpha = .70$ ) and was prejudiced against Italians ("The speaker holds a prejudice against Italians"; "The speaker generalizes too much"; "The speaker sees Italians in a stereotyped fashion";  $\alpha = .76$ )<sup>2</sup>.

## ***Results***

Means and standard deviations of all measures are shown in Table 2. All measures were submitted to 2 (speaker group membership)  $\times$  2 (linguistic abstraction) between-groups ANOVAs. A moderated mediation was run to test whether perceived congruency, the attribution of hidden agenda, and the attribution of prejudice accounted for the impact of speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction on the perceived sincerity of the praise.

*Sincerity.* The analysis on sincerity revealed no significant main effects,  $F_s < 0.82$ ,  $p_s > .367$ .

The interaction between speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction was significant,  $F(1, 85) = 11.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .119$ . As in Study 1, ingroup praise was considered less sincere in the concrete vs. abstract condition,  $p = .034$  (hypothesis 1b). Conversely, outgroup praise recipients rated an abstract message as less sincere than a concrete one,  $p = .010$  (hypothesis 2b).

*Perceived Congruency between Speaker's Beliefs and Words.* The analysis showed a main effect of speaker group membership,  $F(1, 85) = 5.25$ ,  $p = .024$ ,  $\eta^2 = .058$ , due to the overall

higher perception of congruency when the speaker was an ingroup rather than an outgroup member. There was no effect of linguistic abstraction,  $F(1, 85) = 0.16, p = .899$ . The interaction was significant,  $F(1, 85) = 13.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .134$ . As expected, perceived congruency was higher for abstract vs. concrete message in the ingroup praise condition,  $p = .015$  (hypothesis 3a), whereas the opposite was found for outgroup praise,  $p = .010$  (hypothesis 4a).

*Attribution of Hidden Agenda.* There were no significant main effects of either speaker group membership,  $F(1, 85) = 0.02, p = .896$ , or linguistic abstraction,  $F(1, 85) = 0.38, p = .527$ , on the attribution of hidden agenda. However, the interaction was significant,  $F(1, 85) = 17.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .171$ . As expected, the ingroup speaker was attributed a hidden agenda to a greater extent when the praise was formulated in concrete rather than in abstract terms,  $p = .013$  (hypothesis 3b). Conversely, the outgroup speaker was attributed a hidden agenda to a greater extent when the praise was formulated in abstract than in concrete terms,  $p = .001$  (hypothesis 4b).

*Attribution of Prejudice.* The ANOVA on the attribution of prejudice revealed significant main effects of speaker group membership,  $F(1, 85) = 7.83, p = .002, \eta^2 = .084$ , and linguistic abstraction,  $F(1, 85) = 5.17, p = .025, \eta^2 = .057$ . Participants attributed higher prejudice to the outgroup ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.58$ ) than the ingroup speaker ( $M = 2.70, SD = 1.19$ ), and to speakers who used abstract ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.58$ ) compared to concrete ( $M = 3.45, SD = 1.58$ ) terms. The interaction between the two terms was significant,  $F(1, 85) = 9.51, p = .003, \eta^2 = .101$ . The outgroup speaker was attributed higher prejudice when the praise was abstract rather than concrete,  $p < .001$  (hypothesis 4c).

*Mediation Analysis.* Table 2 shows the correlations among the measures in the whole sample. A moderated mediation analyses run using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; model 8, 5000 bootstrap resampling) tested whether the perceived congruency, the attribution of

hidden agenda and the attribution of prejudice – inserted as parallel mediators – mediated the effect of speaker group membership (entered as independent variable; 0 = ingroup, 1 = outgroup) and linguistic abstraction (entered as moderator variable; 0 = concrete, 1 = abstract) on perceived sincerity of praise.

The results showed a significant interaction effect of speaker group membership and linguistic abstraction on all the mediators, that is, perceived congruency,  $b = -1.46$ ,  $SE = .40$ ,  $t = -3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-2.26, -0.66]$ , the attribution of hidden agenda,  $b = 1.99$ ,  $SE = .48$ ,  $t = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[1.05, 2.94]$ , and the attribution of prejudice,  $b = 1.71$ ,  $SE = .55$ ,  $t = 3.08$ ,  $p = .003$ , 95% CI  $[0.61, 2.81]$ . Perceived congruency and the attribution of hidden agenda were significantly associated to the dependent variable,  $b = 0.47$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = 4.54$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI  $[0.26, 0.67]$  and  $b = -0.28$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = -2.34$ ,  $p = .022$ , 95% CI  $[-0.42, -0.03]$ , respectively. The relationship between the attribution of prejudice and the dependent variable was not significant,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 0.25$ ,  $p = .805$ , 95% CI  $[-0.14, 0.18]$ .

The conditional indirect effects (Figure 1) showed that the perceived congruency worked as a mediator in the abstract praise condition, but not in the concrete praise condition. The attribution of a hidden agenda worked as a mediator in both the concrete praise and the abstract praise condition. There was no mediation by the attribution of prejudice. The index of moderated mediation was significant for perceived congruency, estimate =  $-0.69$ ,  $SE = .23$ , 95% CI  $[-1.26, -0.31]$  and for the attribution of hidden agenda, estimate =  $-0.45$ ,  $SE = .23$ , 95% CI  $[-1.01, -0.10]$ , but not for the attribution of prejudice, estimate =  $.03$ ,  $SE = .18$ , 95% CI  $[-0.25, 0.46]$ . Thus, even though one should be cautious about inferring causal mediation from a single significant statistical test due to the correlational nature of mediation analysis (Fiedler et al., 2018), the findings are consistent with the hypothesized mediation roles of perceived congruency and the attribution of hidden motives to the speaker.

## ***Discussion***

The findings of Study 2 were consistent with those of Study 1 in showing that recipients of ingroup praise see it as more sincere when formulated in abstract than concrete terms, whereas the opposite pattern occurs for outgroup praise. These findings also revealed that the impact of linguistic abstraction might be accounted for by variations in the perceptions of the speaker. Recipients of ingroup praise perceived higher congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs, and reported lower attribution of a hidden agenda when the praise was formulated in abstract terms. Conversely, recipients were more suspicious about the beliefs and the motives of an outgroup speaker who used abstract vs. concrete terms. Overall, these findings highlight that linguistic abstraction provides a cue of the speaker's "real" intentions and goals, resulting in the attribution of malevolent motives to outgroup members that praise the recipients' group in an "overly favorable" (that is, abstract) fashion.

## **General Discussion**

The present studies examined whether the linguistic abstraction of praising messages moved by ingroup or outgroup speakers influences the perceptions of the praise and the speaker's motives. In line with previous evidence on group-directed praise (Hornsey & Imani, 2004; Rabinovich et al., 2012, 2015), the group membership of the source *per se* does not seem to impact upon recipients' responses, possibly because, in general terms, individuals enjoy being lauded and seeing the positive attributes and behaviors of their group recognized.

However, enjoying group praise does not mean that recipients embrace such positive comments without wondering whether they are sincere and moved by truly benevolent motives. In fact, an ingroup member's concrete praise was considered less sincere than abstract praise, whereas concrete praise by an outgroup representative was considered more sincere than abstract praise (Study 1). Moreover, a concrete language raised doubts about the ingroup speaker's motives and beliefs, in line with the assumption that individuals expect to

be favored by fellow ingroup members (e.g., Moscatelli et al., 2014; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000). Conversely, recipients attributed hidden agenda and prejudice to a greater extent to outgroup speakers who used abstract terms, possibly because individuals usually do not expect to be commended so favorably (e.g., Insko et al., 1990; Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018) – as implied by the use of abstract positive terms – by outsiders. The perception of congruency between the speaker's words and beliefs and the attribution of hidden agenda accounted for the impact of linguistic abstraction and speaker group membership (Study 2).

Overall, these findings add to the scarce evidence on group-directed praise (Rabinovich et al., 2012, 2015), highlighting that to the aim of understanding how individuals respond to ingroup and outgroup praise, it is essential to take linguistic abstraction into account. In a related way, they somehow mirror the findings obtained by Moscatelli et al. (2019) for criticisms. Whereas outgroup critics who used abstract vs. concrete terms were seen as more hostile and prejudiced (Moscatelli et al., 2019), in the current research linguistic abstraction raised recipients' suspicion about an outgroup speaker who conveyed praise.

These studies also add to the evidence on linguistic abstraction and its functions. As expectable based on the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1998), in general terms recipients viewed abstract praise as more pleasant than concrete praise, likely because of the higher stability and generalizability implied in abstract terms (Semin & DePoot, 1997). However, extending previous studies on the perception of speakers (e.g., Assilaméhou & Testé, 2013; Douglas & Sutton, 2006, 2010), these findings reveal that linguistic abstraction acted as a cue of the “true” motives underlying a praise and influence recipients' inferences about ingroup and outgroup speakers.

At first glance, the finding that abstract praise is overall considered more pleasant than concrete praise might seem at odds with the evidence on the negative repercussions of person-focused feedbacks gathered in learning contexts (e.g., Cimpian et al., 2007). However,

these results are not necessarily in contrast: Recipients may find abstract praise referring to the addressee's intrinsic qualities more pleasant while unaware of their possible unfavorable consequences on future performance. Based on the present findings, it would be interesting to examine the appraisal and repercussions of abstract vs. concrete praising from ingroup members (e.g., classmates, siblings, or friends) in learning contexts.

One might argue that the present findings are at odds with those of Hansen and Wänke (2010), according to which recipients considered ambiguous statements more probably true if they were formulated in concrete rather than abstract terms. However, the messages we employed as stimuli were unambiguous as they referred to typical and well-known characteristics of Italians. Moreover, recipients were asked to rate the sincerity of the praise rather than the truth of the Italian characteristics themselves. It should also be noted that these results can be considered in line with those of Menegatti and Rubini (2013) on political speeches. Even though the authors reported an overall tendency to judge concrete messages as more convincing, their findings clearly highlighted that the recipients who share the political attitudes of the speaker – and can therefore be equated to ingroup members – consider abstract message more effective, whereas the opposite emerged for recipients with different political attitudes (i.e., outgroup members). Thus, despite the different communication goals, the results of the present studies and those of Menegatti and Rubini (2013) appear coherent in highlighting how recipients react to abstract or concrete messages from insiders and outsiders.

A possible limitation of these studies is that the messages employed only referred to characteristics that are usually attributed to Italians. Since the expression of positive stereotypical beliefs fosters the attribution of prejudice to the speaker (Garcia et al., 2006) and leads to infer omitted negativity (Fiske et al., 2015), abstract praise might have enhanced recipients' inference that the speaker holds negative stereotypic beliefs. Future research might

examine whether an omission effect (Fiske et al., 2015) plays a role in explaining the impact of outgroup praise. More generally, we suspect that even when recipients are exposed to praising messages unrelated to stereotypical dimensions, the pattern of findings might be similar to those observed in this research. As mentioned, research in inter-race contexts (Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018) pointed out that members of racial minorities attribute compliments from representatives of racial majorities to covert racial bias. Therefore, it seems plausible that a highly favorable (i.e., abstract) praise by outgroup members would raise suspicions of hidden motives even when the praise involves non-stereotypical dimensions, as people do not expect a favorable treatment by the outgroup. Future research should deepen the understanding of intergroup praise effects by focusing on praising messages that do not imply shared representations about a group. Moreover, it should consider other variables that might influence recipients' reactions, such as the apparent reasons for praise (e.g., whether the group obtained success due to its sacrifice or unequivocal merits), the timing of praise, or the specific relationship between the groups involved.

Future studies might also extend these results by examining the impact of the dimensions implied in the praise. Indeed, there is evidence that, in the evaluation of groups, individuals rely primarily on morality compared to other dimensions of judgment, such as competence or sociability (Brambilla et al., 2016; Menegatti et al., 2020; Prati et al., 2019). Whereas in the present studies we did not consider the type of dimension involved in the praising message, it would be important to examine whether recipients react differently to praise referring to different dimensions.

Overall, the present findings have important implications for communication between groups. Since the language through which speakers convey praise might have a substantial influence on the message's perceived sincerity, ingroup and outgroup speakers should mind their language if they genuinely wish the praise to be accepted and have positive

repercussions. Indeed, these findings suggest that even well-intentioned outgroup speakers, or the journalists covering public speeches by representatives of outgroups, might inadvertently fuel intergroup distrust if they do not pay attention to their language. Conversely, strategic use of linguistic abstraction in communication about groups might pave the way to harmonious intergroup relations and successful negotiations. Turning to our initial examples, based on the present findings, the WHO Director-General and the German Chancellor would have better conveyed their lauds to the European countries more heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic using relatively concrete terms. Doing this, they might have also eased the negotiation on collective plans to address the pandemic's economic consequences, such as the 2020 Recovery plan agreed by the European Council. Conversely, if the Italian Prime Minister wishes to motivate his citizens to hold on and accept European negotiation results, he will better rely on abstract words.



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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All materials of the Pilot Study, as well as of the main Studies, were in Italian. The Italian (abstract/concrete) statements were: “Gli italiani sono socievoli” / “Gli italiani stringono amicizia facilmente”; “Gli Italiani sono buongustai”/ “Gli Italiani fanno lunghi pranzi e cene”; “Gli Italiani sono creativi”/ “Gli Italiani creano opere architettoniche”; “Gli Italiani sono amichevoli”/ “Gli Italiani escono spesso con gli amici”; “Gli Italiani sono eleganti”/ “Gli Italiani indossano abiti formali”; “Gli Italiani sono allegri”/ “Gli italiani scherzano”; “Gli italiani sono ospitali”/ “Gli italiani ospitano i visitatori nelle loro case”. In Italian the term “buongustai” (food lovers) is an adjective.

<sup>2</sup> Three additional items measured participants’ overall perception that Italians are a target of stereotyping and discrimination (“Italians are often stereotyped”; “Italians are generally considered as less prestigious than citizens of other European countries”; “People from other countries often have negative views of Italians”;  $\alpha = .87$ ). A 2 (speaker group membership)  $\times$  2 (linguistic abstraction) analysis of variance on this measure of perceived discrimination revealed a significant main effect of linguistic abstraction,  $F(1, 85) = 4.29$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $\eta^2 = .048$ , due to the higher discrimination reported by recipients of abstract ( $M =$

4.64,  $SD = 1.46$ ) compared to concrete ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) praise. No other effects were significant,  $F_s < 2.67$ ,  $p_s \geq .106$ .

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**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Measures (Study 1).

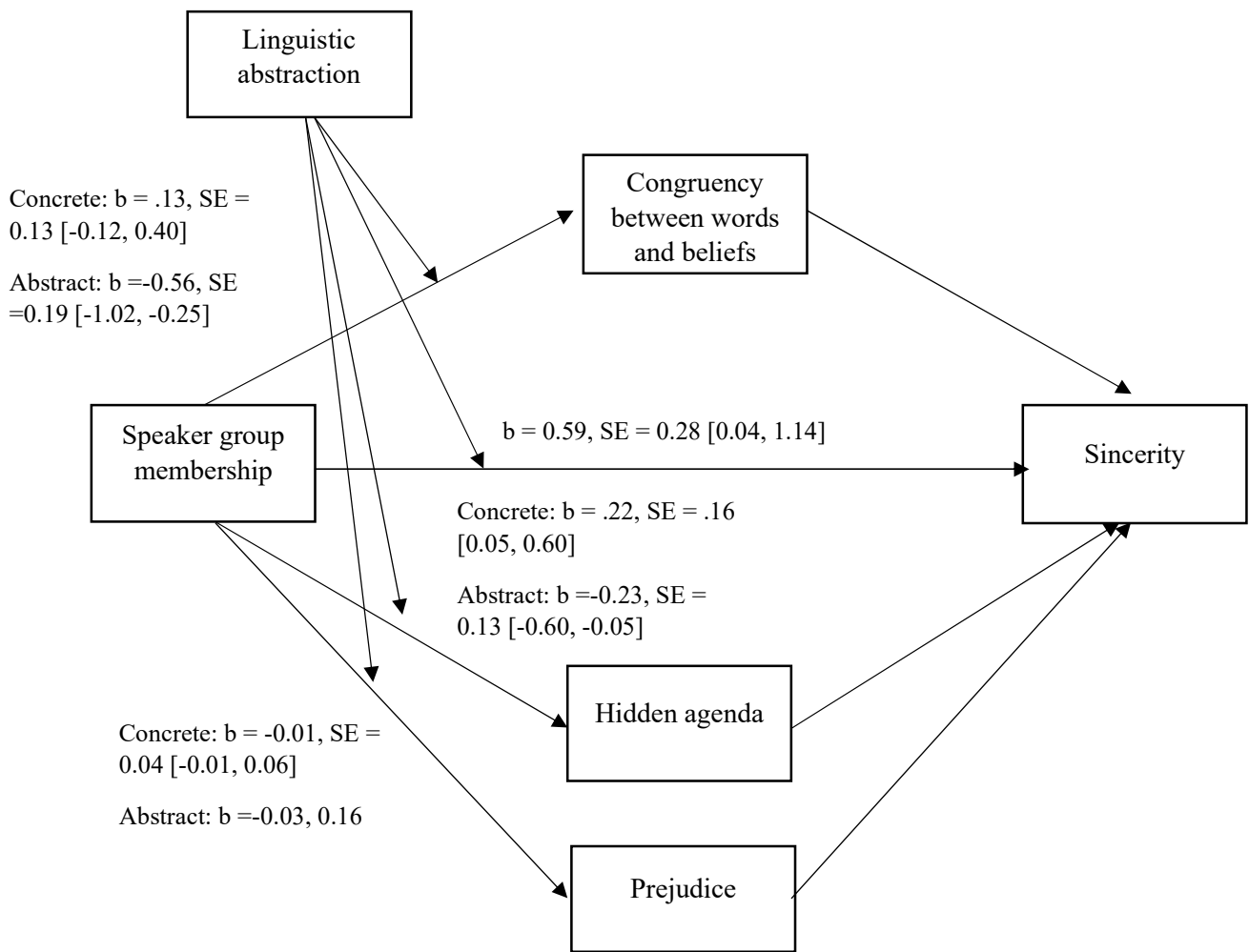
Variables	Ingroup speaker		Outgroup speaker		Correlations		
	Concrete praise	Abstract praise	Concrete praise	Abstract praise	1	2	3
Pleasantness	6.05 (1.11)a	6.73 (0.62)b	6.38 (0.65)a,b	6.55 (0.83)a,b	1	.15	.54***
Sincerity	3.92 (1.36)a	4.73 (1.08)b	4.78 (0.99)b	3.90 (1.31)a		1	.38***
Agreement	4.53 (1.40)a	4.90 (1.00)a	5.10 (1.42)a	4.93 (0.85)a			1

*Note.* Standard deviations are in parenthesis. Means with different subscripts differ significantly ( $ps < .050$ ) within rows. Correlations are in the whole sample; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Measures (Study 2)

Variables	Ingroup speaker		Outgroup speaker		Correlations			
	Concrete	Abstract	Concrete	Abstract				
	praise	praise	praise	praise	1	2	3	4
Sincerity	4.17a	4.83b,c	5.10c	4.29a,b	--	.51***	-.42***	-.16
of praise	(0.90)	(0.91)	(1.10)	(1.17)				
Congruency	4.30a,b	5.00c	4.57a,c	3.81b		--	-.31***	-.17
	(1.07)	(0.90)	(0.64)	(1.12)				
Hidden	4.28a	3.43b	3.32b	4.46a			--	.49***
agenda	(0.92)	(1.28)	(1.32)	(0.85)				
Prejudice	2.82a	2.59a	2.74a	4.22b				--
	(1.07)	(1.31)	(1.55)	(1.23)				

*Note.* Standard deviations are in parenthesis. Means with different subscripts differ significantly ( $ps < .050$ ) within rows. Correlations are in the whole sample; \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



*Figure 1.* Mediation model of the effects of speaker group membership on perceived sincerity of the praise, showing mediation via perceptions of the speaker and moderation by linguistic abstraction (Study 2).

## **Author Biographies**

**Silvia Moscatelli** is an associate professor of Social Psychology at the Department of Psychology, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Italy. Her main research interests include linguistic discrimination and gender inequality.

**Monica Rubini** (Ph.D) is a full professor of social psychology at the Department of Psychology, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna. She studies the relation between language and psycho-social phenomena, social prejudice and its reduction.