



# They Are All Armed and Dangerous!

## Biased Language Use in Crime News With Ingroup and Outgroup Perpetrators

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**Abstract:** The present research aims to verify the presence of linguistic biases in crime news reports (Study 1) and their role (Study 2) in activating a crime stereotype toward racial/ethnic minorities. In a first content analysis study, the natural occurrence of a set of linguistic biases was analyzed in Italian news articles that described comparable crimes committed by an in- or an outgroup aggressor. Results indicated that when the crime was committed by an outgroup (vs. ingroup) member, more aggravating and less attenuating adjectives were used. Moreover, the nationality of the perpetrator was not only mentioned more frequently, it also appeared in most cases as a noun. In Study 2, participants read a fictitious news article that either described an in- or outgroup criminal act with neutral or biased language. Their implicit associations between in- and outgroup members and weapons (vs. tools) were measured immediately afterward in the weapon paradigm. Results confirmed that a biased (vs. neutral) language use increased participants' crime-related associations with the outgroup in general only when an outgroup criminal was staged. The role of media portrayals in determining the cognitive representations of racial/ethnic minorities is discussed.

**Keywords:** media effects, crime news, linguistic biases, racial/ethnic minorities, stereotyping and prejudice

The media provide a window on the world that potentially molds our beliefs and expectations, especially about the lesser-known aspects of the environment we live in. Racial/ethnic minorities are relatively unknown and scores of studies have provided empirical evidence on the negative impact of the media on stereotype formation and endorsement toward a broad range of social minorities (see Mutz & Goldman, 2010, for a review). The most common subject of analysis has been media portrayals that link crime to racial/ethnic minorities. Little attention, however, has been paid to the linguistic aspects that make media portrayals of minority groups activate and maintain a social stereotype. Here we present two studies: The first documents the natural occurrence of biased language in Italian newspaper articles reporting crimes perpetrated by racial/ethnic minorities versus Italian ingroup members; the second study aims to show that such a biased language plays an important role in the activation of a crime stereotype only when it is used to describe members of the outgroup.

### Media and Stereotyping

Most of the research that studied the role of the media in the formation of stereotypes has analyzed the content

of televised and written portrayals of racial/ethnic minority groups. Television in the United States, for example, has a documented history of underrepresenting, caricaturing, and marginalizing racial/ethnic minorities (Bogle, 2001; Greenberg & Baptista-Fernandez, 1980; Ramirez Berg, 1990) in a large variety of programs ranging from comedy (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), sit-coms (Weisbuch, Pauker, & Ambady, 2009), reality shows (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Hasinoff, 2008; Oliver, 1994; Shugart, 2006), to news programs (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Mastro & Robinson, 2000). In the latter type of programs, the recurrent reported finding is that African Americans and Latino Americans are consistently overrepresented in criminal and law-breaker roles, while they are systematically underrepresented as victims and law-defenders. Also in Europe, similar biased media portrayals have been reported. In two local newspapers in Italy, for example, immigrants were overrepresented as offenders and underrepresented as victims by comparison with objective crime statistics (Di Nicola & Caneppele, 2004).

That such biased representations lead to biased perceptions has been the center of a number of cross-sectional studies demonstrating that increments in media exposure

reinforce negative attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority groups (Dixon, 2008a; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009; Ramasubramanian, 2010; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007; Vaes, Latrofa, Vieno, & Pastore, 2015). Similarly, media exposure moderated the emotional concern experienced after reading a crime story, with heavy-news viewers perceiving more emotional discomfort about a Black (vs. White) perpetrator (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Media priming studies have further corroborated this finding potentially providing evidence for a causal relation between biased media representations and stereotype activation. Ford (1997), for example, found that a comedy skit portraying African Americans stereotypically (poor, uneducated, and prone to violence) versus neutrally, activated stereotypical beliefs about African Americans and increased guilt attributions to a crime suspect identified as African American (see also Johnson, Adams, Hall, & Ashburn, 1997; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996).

Despite this evidence, priming people with crime news that contains racial/ethnic protagonists does not always activate stereotypes. Indeed, several studies have individuated variables that moderate the effects of the media on stereotype activation. Mastro et al. (2009), for example, showed that gender mattered, showing that only women gave less favorable judgments when confronted with a Black male crime suspect. Some studies only found changes in the perception of some minorities (such as Latino immigrants or Asian Indian minorities), but not for others, such as European immigrants or African American minorities (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). Also, biased media reports impact especially those people who have only little direct contact with the portrayed minority group (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007) and lead to divergent outcomes as a function of the involvement of the reader (Igartua, 2013).

While these studies focused on viewer or target characteristics, the impact of specific features of media portrayals have been understudied. Tan, Fujioka, and Tan (2000) posited that the valence of portrayals of racial and ethnic minorities on television (i.e., positive or negative) predicted stereotypic responses associated with these groups. Extending these initial findings, Mastro and Kopacz (2006) found that the prototypicality of the representation is more incisive than its valence. Specifically, they proposed that the more the representation of a racial/ethnic minority deviates from the White prototype or norm, the more the endorsement of negative stereotypes will increase. The present research focuses on another characteristic of media portrayals testing the occurrence and the consequences of linguistic biases in reporting crime news comparing

instances where the perpetrator is an in- or outgroup member.

## The Role of Linguistic Biases

Newscasts and newspapers are supposed to provide factual information on what happens in the world, but when covering crime news involving racial/ethnic minorities, content and style might change. Differences in the use of linguistic and style elements when describing crimes committed by an in- or outgroup member are understudied, even though they might distort the way people perceive and judge the crime itself, the criminal, and his/her social group at large.

The literature offers a plethora of linguistic biases. Arguably, one of the most studied is language abstraction. Following the linguistic category model (LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1991), the same event or behavior can be described on different levels of abstractness ranging from descriptive action verbs (e.g., kick), which are most concrete, via interpretive action verbs (e.g., attack), state verbs (e.g., hate) to the most abstract category, adjectives (e.g., aggressive). Building on this framework, the linguistic intergroup bias (LIB; see Maass, 1999, for a review) has shown that positive behaviors conducted by ingroup members and negative behaviors by outgroup members are described in a more abstract fashion than negative ingroup and positive outgroup behaviors. Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, and Sommer (2010) demonstrated that news reports using an abstract compared with a concrete language to describe outgroup negative behavior led to the expression of higher levels of prejudice against outgroup minorities. Similarly, content analyses of the ideas and reflections of participants who read news stories of a crime committed by immigrants (vs. their economic contribution) reflected a more abstract and negative affective language (Fernández, Igartua, Moral, Palacios, Acosta, & Muñoz, 2012).

Carnaghi and colleagues (2008) added nouns as an even more abstract level to the LCM. Labeling someone as *an aggressor* rather than *aggressive* contains categorical information that goes well beyond the person's qualities; it reveals the individual's essence. Therefore, one can expect that references to a person's provenance (group membership) are omnipresent when describing negative actions of racial/ethnic minority members, while they are hardly specified when the actions of an ingroup member are described. Extending this reasoning, one can expect the overrepresentation of immigrants in crime news to be even more accentuated when social membership is expressed with nouns rather than adjectives. Such references put a person on a par with his/her group membership, and when used in the context of crime news, reinforce the idea that

**Table 1.** Examples of linguistic biases that were coded in Study 1

	Linguistic biases	Examples
Abstract language	Descriptive verb	The aggressor " <b><i>throws away the knife, goes home, washes</i></b> "
	Interpretative verb	The aggressor " <b><i>tries to remove all traces</i></b> "
	State verb	The aggressor " <b><i>did not accept the Western style of life of the daughter</i></b> "
	Adjective	The aggressor was "a master-father, as you say, but also very <b><i>ignorant</i></b> "
References to nationality	Adjective	<b><i>"An Italian thirty-nine-year-old was put in jail ..."</i></b>
	Noun	<b><i>"Chiara, raped by a Tunisian ..."</i></b>
Verb tense	Active	<b><i>"He hit and kicked her, dragged her behind the bushes and raped her"</i></b>
	Passive	<b><i>"Yesterday morning the victim was cleaning the offices of a call center when she got assaulted"</i></b>
Descriptive adjectives	Aggravating	<b><i>"A Tunisian irregular immigrant sexually abused a 15-year-old"</i></b>
	Attenuating	<b><i>"An uncensored employee that [was] pressured by the military at the end collapses and confesses"</i></b>

Note. The text as it appears in the articles is indicated in italics, while the linguistic biases are bold-faced.

belonging to a racial/ethnic minority says something about a person's criminal nature creating or maintaining a crime stereotype toward these minorities (Graf, Bilewicz, Finell, & Geschke, 2012).

A linguistic bias that has received the most attention in the realm of sexual violence regards the use of an active or passive voice. Previous research demonstrated that passive voices (e.g., "The girl was raped by an older man" vs. "The older man raped the girl") put the aggressor in the background emphasizing the role of the victim. Such language use has been shown to increase the perceived responsibility of the victim while decreasing the responsibility of the assailant (Bohner, 2001). Following the research on rape cases, such language use might decrease the perceived responsibility of ingroup perpetrators, an attenuation that may not be used in the case of outgroup criminals.

More related to the content, and less to the syntax of the message, is the use of aggravating and/or attenuating adjectives in describing criminal acts. Such adjectives qualify the description of the acts, the aggressor, or even the victim, making the crime seem worse (aggravating) or less severe (attenuating). For example, describing the act as *fierce* (vs. *unintentional*), the aggressor as a *previous offender* (vs. *uncensored*), or the victim as *defenseless* (vs. *armed*) are all aggravating (vs. attenuating) the crime and the way the criminal will be perceived. Even though these adjectives often describe what really happened, they can be easily omitted or included to change the gravity of the reported crime. We expect that aggravating adjectives will appear more frequently, while attenuating adjectives will be omitted more easily when crimes are committed by a racial/ethnic minority rather than by ingroup members.

In sum, journalists might create a range of systematic linguistic biases when describing crimes committed by racial/ethnic minorities compared with ingroup members,

and in this way help to create and maintain a distorted and stereotyped image of minority group members (see Table 1 for examples of all the different types of linguistic biases that were coded).

## The Present Research

Two studies were conducted to investigate the presence of linguistic biases in news reports (Study 1) and their role (Study 2) in activating a crime stereotype toward racial/ethnic minorities. Study 1 compared the natural occurrence of a set of linguistic biases in the description of comparable criminal acts that appeared in Italian newspapers in which only the nationality of the aggressor differed, keeping all other characteristics constant as much as possible. Study 1 was therefore a content analysis study that tested the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Counting the number of linguistic biases that naturally occur in the description of comparable crimes that were committed by in- or outgroup members, we expect to find: more references to the nationality (H1a) especially in the form of nouns compared with adjectives (H1b); a more abstract language (H1c); less use of a passive language to describe the crime (H1d); and more aggravating and less attenuating adjectives (H1e) when crimes were committed by outgroup compared with ingroup members.

Study 2 consisted in an experimental study in which we created four fictitious crime news articles systematically manipulating both the aggressor's nationality (ingroup vs. outgroup) and some linguistic elements that described the criminal act in a biased vs. a neutral way. A fifth control condition was created in which participants read a neutral and unrelated news report. Immediately afterward,

participants stereotype activation was measured and they were asked to indicate what punishment they would give to the aggressor in the crime news story. In Study 2 the following hypotheses were tested:

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Reading a criminal act conducted by an outgroup member would increase the activation of a crime stereotype of the outgroup as a whole, especially when the crime is described using linguistic biases. When a neutral, more factual language is used to describe the same criminal act, the activation of the crime stereotype is expected to be comparable to the one in the control condition where no mention is made of the outgroup or any criminal acts. Instead, reading a criminal act conducted by an ingroup member is not expected to activate a crime stereotype and the use of linguistic biases is not expected to change this effect.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Reading a crime news story that uses biased language would lead to a harsher punishment compared with when the same crime is described in a neutral manner only when the aggressor is an outgroup member.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Article Selection

The newspaper articles included in the content analysis were selected on the basis of an event search. Using the search engine provided by Google news (<http://news.google.it>), comparable criminal acts were selected in which only the nationality of the aggressor differed, keeping all other characteristics constant as much as possible. In addition, the nationality of the victim was registered and if possible both intergroup (outgroup aggressor/ingroup victim, ingroup aggressor/outgroup victim) and intragroup (ingroup aggressor/ingroup victim, outgroup aggressor/outgroup victim) crime stories were gathered. As a consequence, only crime stories in which the aggressor and the victim and their nationality were certain could be included. The typology (i.e., similar number of victims and aggressors, comparable context, use of the same weapon if any) and the cruelty of the crimes needed to be comparable, as well as the time of the year in which the crimes were committed. This search focused on criminal events that happened in the period between the beginning of 2008 and the end of 2009. According to these criteria, six types of criminal events were retained

(see Table 2 for an overview and Electronic Supplementary Materials, ESM 1 for a full description).

After this selection procedure, 16 criminal events were retained and 73 articles that reported on these events were found. Care was taken that these articles were from some local and some national newspapers that covered the complete political spectrum. Given that neither the type (local vs. national) of newspapers nor their political orientation influenced the dependent variables, they will no longer be discussed.

#### Coding

All articles were copied in a word processing file and given to four independent coders. The coders were trained to recognize and correctly classify all the indices. They were divided into two dyads that each received half of the total amount of articles. As such, each article was read and analyzed by two coders independently. Inter-coder reliability was verified calculating Krippendorff's alpha ( $K\alpha$ ) for each pair of coders' independent judgments and was generally high or satisfactory (see next paragraph). Afterward, the coders met in person and resolved the few inconsistencies that were present in their separate files. Analyses were conducted on this final file that included the coding on which both coders agreed.

For the current study, we will focus on the following indices:

- The total number of times the nationality of the aggressor was mentioned in terms of a noun ( $K\alpha_1 = .83$ , 95% CI = .68-.96;  $K\alpha_2 = .83$ , 95% CI = .97-1.00) or an adjective ( $K\alpha_1 = .98$ , 95% CI = .96-1.00;  $K\alpha_2 = .91$ , 95% CI = .83-.97), partialized for the total number of words used in each article.
- The number of aggravating ( $K\alpha_1 = .80$ , 95% CI = .62-.94;  $K\alpha_2 = .90$ , 95% CI = .77-1.00) and attenuating adjectives ( $K\alpha_1 = .57$ , 95% CI = .08-.89;  $K\alpha_2 = .79$ , 95% CI = .00-1.00) mentioned in the article, partialized for the total number of words used in each article.
- The language abstraction in the article was measured following the LCM (Coenen, Hedebouw, & Semin, 2006). This index is calculated based on the sum of descriptive action verbs ( $K\alpha_1 = .88$ , 95% CI = .81-.93;  $K\alpha_2 = .93$ , 95% CI = .84-.98), the sum of interpretive action verbs multiplied by 2 ( $K\alpha_1 = .91$ , 95% CI = .83-.96;  $K\alpha_2 = .85$ , 95% CI = .61-.97), the sum of state verbs multiplied by 3 ( $K\alpha_1 = .81$ , 95% CI = .54-.96;  $K\alpha_2 = .65$ , 95% CI = .34-.91), the sum of adjectives multiplied by 4 ( $K\alpha_1 = .83$ , 95% CI = .68-.95;  $K\alpha_2 = .83$ , 95% CI = .73-.92), and the sum of the nouns multiplied by 5 ( $K\alpha_1 = .99$ , 95% CI = .97-1.00;  $K\alpha_2 = .98$ , 95% CI = .97-.99). The result was divided by the total number of words used.



**Table 2.** Summary of selected articles in the archival study (Study 1)

Event	Outgroup aggressor						Ingroup aggressor											
	Outgroup victim			Ingroup victim			Outgroup victim			Ingroup victim								
	Circulation		Political aff.	Circulation		Political aff.	Circulation		Political aff.	Circulation		Political aff.						
#	Loc	Nat	L	R	N	#	Loc	Nat	L	R	N	#	Loc	Nat	L	R	N	
Baby gang	5	2	3	2	2	1	3	1	2	1	0	2	5	3	2	1	1	3
Gang rape	5	2	3	2	1	2	5	2	3	3	1	1	5	2	3	3	1	1
Car incident	5	2	3	2	2	1	5	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	3	0	0
Rape	5	2	3	3	1	1	5	2	3	3	1	1	5	2	3	3	1	1
Father kills daughter	4	2	2	1	2	1	4	2	2	1	2	1	4	2	2	1	2	1
Husband kills wife	24	10	14	10	8	6	13	5	8	7	2	4	22	10	12	11	5	6
Total	-	42	58	42	33	25	-	39	61	54	15	31	-	46	54	50	23	27
% of Total	-	42	58	42	33	25	-	39	61	54	15	31	-	46	54	50	23	27

Note. # = Total number of selected articles within a given category and event. Loc. = Number of newspaper articles with a local circulation. Nat. = Number of newspaper articles with a national circulation. L = Number of articles coming from a left-wing newspaper. R = Number of articles coming from a right-wing newspaper. N = Number of articles coming from a newspaper with a neutral political affiliation. Total = The total number of articles in a given category. % of Total = The percentage of the total number of articles in a given category.

## Results and Discussion

Given that several articles described the same event, this was treated as a random factor in the linear mixed models performed with the lmer function of the R package lme4 (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2014; R Core Team, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

In order to test H1a and H1b that verifies whether national membership was mentioned quantitatively and qualitatively differently according to the aggressor's nationality, the number of references to national membership was used as a dependent variable in a linear mixed model, with aggressor and victim nationality as independent factors, type of reference (adjective vs. noun) was a repeated factor, and type of event was included as a random factor. The data better fitted the tested model (AIC = 164.10, BIC = 196.92) compared with the null model (AIC = 176.96, BIC = 188.90),  $\chi^2 = 26.86$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = .00035$ . As can be seen in Table 3, there is a main effect of the aggressor's nationality, which is further qualified by the type of reference. The number of references to the nationality of immigrant criminals is more frequent in the noun ( $M = 0.69$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) than adjective form ( $M = 0.31$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ). The references to the nationality of Italian criminals are generally lower (close to zero), with no difference between the noun ( $M = 0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ) and adjective ( $M = 0.06$ ,  $SD = 0.13$ ) form. The interaction effects of the tested model are visually represented in Figure 1.

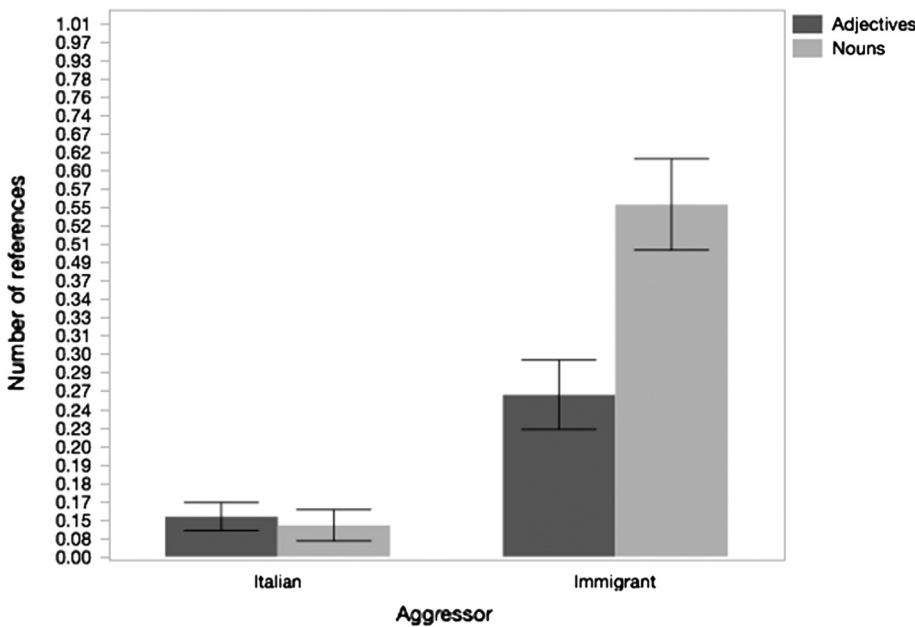
Testing H1e, we looked at whether Italian and immigrant criminals are described with different types of adjectives. A mixed linear model with aggressor and victim nationality as independent factors, type of adjective (attenuating vs. aggravating) as repeated factor, and type of event as a random factor had a better fit (AIC = -1,451.9, BIC = -1,419.1) compared with the null model (AIC = -1441.6, BIC = -1429.7),  $\chi^2 = 24.30$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = .001$ . As can be seen in Table 4, there is a main effect of the aggressor's nationality, which is further qualified by the type of adjective. Immigrant criminals are more frequently described with aggravating adjectives ( $M = 0.002$ ,  $SD = 0.0009$ ) than attenuating adjectives ( $M = 0.0001$ ,  $SD = 0.0005$ ), whereas Italian criminals are more frequently described with attenuating adjectives ( $M = 0.006$ ,  $SD = 0.001$ ) than aggravating adjectives ( $M = 0.0004$ ,  $SD = 0.0004$ ). The interaction effects of the tested model are visually represented in Figure 2.

We also tested the role of linguistic abstraction (H1c) and the use of passive (vs. active) sentences (H1d), but none of

<sup>1</sup> Given that a variable number of articles described the same event, we used a mixed model approach (Pinheiro & Bates, 2006) that treats each observation as a unit of analysis. Such an approach allows one to verify the contribution of the predictors (i.e., fixed effects), while controlling for the random source of variability (i.e., random effects) owing to the fact that data are grouped together (i.e., they refer to the same event). Moreover, they are robust to nested designs that are not balanced in terms of the number of observations (as in the present data set). Therefore, the event was treated as a random factor in the linear mixed models performed with the lmer function of the R package lme4 (Bates, Maechler, Bolker & Walker, 2014; R Core Team, 2013).

**Table 3.** Parameter estimates of the model: references ~ aggressor × victim × reference type + (1|event) + (1|article)

Fixed effects	Estimate	SE	df	t	p >  t
(Intercept)	.044	.12	18.86	.38	.71
Aggressor nationality	.404	.19	19.56	2.11	.048
Victim nationality	.086	.19	19.56	.45	.66
Reference type	-.03	.11	125.25	-.29	.77
Aggressor: victim	-.28	.27	19.43	-1.03	.31
Victim: noun reference	.36	.19	125.25	1.92	.05
Aggressor: reference	.05	.19	125.25	.27	.79
Aggressor: victim : reference	.04	.26	125.25	.18	.85

**Figure 1.** The effect of the aggressor's membership on the number and type of reference to group membership (error bars represent the standard error of the mean).

these linguistic features were related to the group membership of the criminals.

Together, these findings partially confirm our first hypothesis. As we expected, the nationality of immigrant criminals is more often specified (H1a), and it is provided as a noun (rather than an adjective; H1b) when the aggressor is an immigrant compared with an ingroup member. Furthermore, immigrant criminals are more likely further characterized by aggravating than attenuating adjectives compared with Italian criminals (H1e).

## Study 2

Going beyond documenting the presence of linguistic biases in the printed media, Study 2 was designed to test the role of linguistic biases in crime news in determining a crime stereotype associated with immigrant outgroup members. Therefore, both the aggressor's group

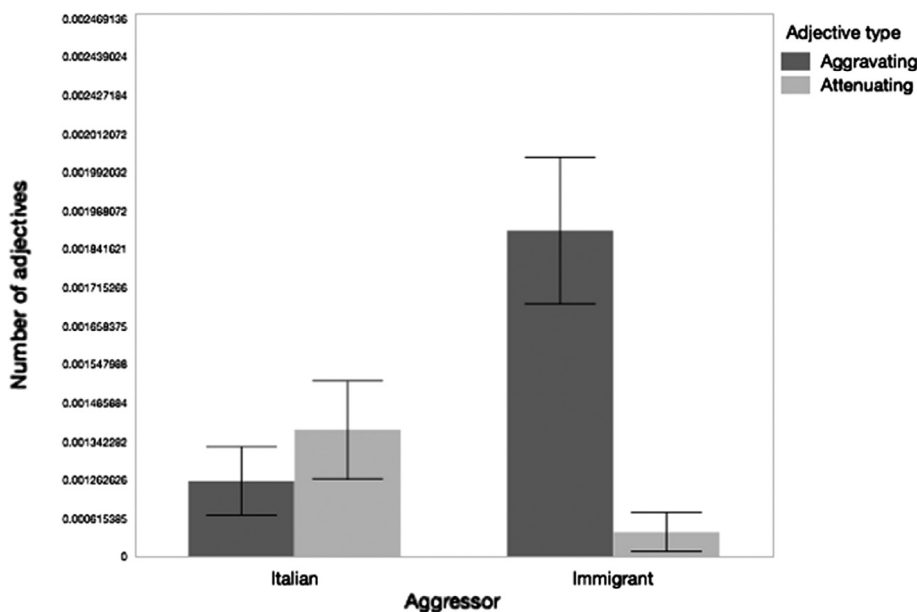
membership (Italian vs. African) and the linguistic style of the crime news were manipulated. In this way, we wanted to investigate whether it is the mention of the outgroup per se that creates people's racial bias, or if the way journalists report these crimes through the use of linguistic biases is key in determining stereotype activation.

The present study used the weapon paradigm (Payne, 2001, 2006) to implicitly measure people's activation of a crime stereotype. The weapon paradigm measures the extent to which the appearance of a Black (vs. White) face facilitates the recognition of a gun (vs. a tool). The common reported finding in the United States is that guns are detected faster in the presence of a Black face, indicating the existence of a crime stereotype toward African Americans (Payne, 2001), a finding that has been called the weapon bias.

In addition, participants' explicit attitudes toward African immigrants were measured in all conditions and before they read one of the crime stories. In this way

**Table 4.** Parameter estimates of the model: references ~ aggressor × victim × adjective type + (1|event) + (1|article)

Fixed effects	Estimate	SE	df	t	p >  t
(Intercept)	3.67e−04	3.88e−04	2.85e+01	.95	.35
Aggressor	1.84e−03	6.43e−04	2.97e+01	2.87	.007
Victim	1.140e−04	6.43e−04	2.97e+01	.177	.860
Adjective type	−5.53e−06	4.56e−04	1.19e+02	−.01	.99
Aggressor: victim	−8.15e−04	9.07e−04	2.94e+01	−0.899	.376
Victim: Adjective type	4.954e−04	7.592e−04	1.191e+02	0.652	.515
Aggressor: Adjective type	−2.093e−03	7.592e−04	1.191e+02	−2.757	.007
Aggressor: victim : Adjective type	2.056e−04	1.070e−03	1.191e+02	.19	.858



**Figure 2.** The effect of the aggressor’s membership on the type of descriptive adjectives (error bars represent the standard error of the mean).

it was possible to ascertain that participants’ prejudice and contact with the outgroup before the manipulation was similar in all conditions. At the same time, it became possible to explore the moderating effects of people’s explicit prejudice on the extent to which they were influenced by the crime story, given that some studies have found that people’s initial prejudice potentiates media priming effects (Dixon, 2006; Dixon, 2008b; Peffley, et al., 1996).

**Method**

**Participants**

In all, 91 White Italian participants took part in the study (40 male and 49 female; two did not report their gender). To reach a larger range of participants besides university students, participants were approached in a local community center. Volunteers were led to a room that was set up appositely, in which participants responded individually to all the measures. The participants’ age ranged from 18 to 65 years (*M* = 26.42, *SD* = 9.47).

**Procedure**

All participants first responded to an adapted version of the Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Nine affirmations were indicative of participants’ blatant prejudice (e.g., “People of color come from less able races and this explains why they are not as well off as most Italians”), while seven items were presented to measure participants’ subtle prejudice (e.g., “How different or similar do you think people of color living here are to other Italians like yourself in the values they teach their children?”). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement (1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*). Subsequently, participants rated a set of positive (i.e., hospitable, athletic, warm, musical, and sociable) and negative (i.e., aggressive, criminal, dishonest, hostile, and violent) stereotypical traits indicating the extent to which each described African immigrants in general (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely*). Afterward, two feeling thermometers were added where participants indicated – separately for the personal and the societal level – how

http://econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/pdf/10.1027/1864-1105/a000216 - Jeroen Vaes <jeroen.vaes@unim.it> - Tuesday, May 02, 2017 7:29:33 AM - Universita' di Trento IP Address: 193.205.210.79

favorable they or Italians in general felt toward African immigrants on a vertical scale labeled at 9-degree intervals from 0° (*very cold, or unfavorable*) to 38° (*very warm, or very favorable*). Finally, participants responded to an adapted Social Contact scale (Brown, 1995) indicating on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *none*, 4 = *five or more*) how many African immigrants lived in their neighborhood, could be found among their friends, among their colleagues, and they had (had) as a fiancé. The quality of contact was measured with a single item (i.e., “Overall, how would you rate the quality of the contacts you have had with African immigrants?”) and was answered on a bipolar scale ranging from 1 (= *negative*) to 7 (= *positive*).

### Manipulation

After filling out the explicit questionnaires, participants were asked to read one of five news stories. In the control condition the news story talked about the beneficial effects of acupuncture in reducing physical pain. In the experimental conditions, participants read a news story about an episode of mugging. The nationality of the aggressor (African immigrant vs. Italian) and the presence (vs. absence) of linguistic biases were varied between subjects in the four experimental conditions. The crime victim was Italian for immigrant criminals and an immigrant for Italian criminals, providing an intergroup scenario. The linguistic biases were taken from the results of Study 1 and from the literature on linguistic biases in intergroup relations. Specifically, the nationality of the aggressor was always identified with a noun (e.g., the Nigerian, the Italian). Aggravating adjectives (e.g., illegal, armed) were used to describe the aggressor and his acts, while attenuating adjectives were used to describe the victim (e.g., very young, defenseless). The crime itself was described using the active form and an animal metaphor describing the criminal was also included (see Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Differently, the language used in the unbiased condition was factually the same as in the other article, but the language remained more neutral (see Electronic Supplementary Materials, ESM 2 for examples of the full articles in English. The Italian originals can be obtained from the first author on request).

### Weapon Paradigm

After the manipulation, participants performed a priming task that was identical to that used by Payne (2001; Study 1). Participants were instructed to classify, as fast and as accurately as possible, a target picture as either a gun or a tool. Each target was preceded by the picture of a Black or White face (priming stimulus). Participants were instructed to ignore the primes and focus on the target pictures. The prime remained on the screen for 200 ms and was immediately replaced by the target picture lasting

200 ms and replaced by a white screen until participants responded. After each response there was a 500-ms inter-trial interval. First, participants completed 10 practice trials, after which they responded to 128 test trials. Four different stimuli were used for each prime (White or Black faces) or target (tool or gun) category. The prime-target pairs were presented in a random order.

### Crime Punishment

Only in the experimental conditions, participants were asked to evaluate the crime and indicate what punishment they would give to the aggressor on a scale ranging from 1 to 7 (1 = *no punishment*, 2 = *less than 1 year of imprisonment*, 3 = *between 1 and 5 years of imprisonment*, 4 = *between 5 and 10 years of imprisonment*, 5 = *between 10 and 20 years of imprisonment*, 6 = *life imprisonment*, and 7 = *death sentence*).

At the end of this judgment task, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Explicit Measures

The explicit attitudes measures showed a satisfactory reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.98$  for blatant prejudice;  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.81$  for subtle prejudice;  $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.01$  for the attribution of positive stereotypes;  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.22$  for the attribution of negative stereotypes;  $\alpha = .64$ ,  $M = 1.17$ ,  $SD = 0.72$  for the quantity of contact; and  $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.38$  for the quality of contact) allowing us to calculate mean scores for each participant. Each index was analyzed in a one-way ANOVA comparing the five conditions, but no significant differences between the various conditions emerged (all  $p$  values > .51).

### Weapon Race Bias

In order to calculate the weapon race bias, outliers were removed using the same cut-off criteria as in Payne (2001), so that reaction times (RT) faster than 100 ms and slower than 1000 ms, as well as incorrect responses, were dropped. The analyses were conducted on a natural log-transformation of the original RTs. A weapon race index (WRI) was computed subtracting the mean of the stereotype congruent trials (Black-gun, White-tool) from the mean of stereotype incongruent trials (White-gun, Black-tool) and. As such, higher values indicated a stronger bias in identifying guns compared with tools after the presentation of a Black versus a White face prime. As expected, a one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of the experimental condition on the WRI,  $F(4, 86) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ . To better understand the meaning of this effect, two independent contrasts were calculated comparing the influence of linguistic biases in the case of an immigrant or an Italian aggressor. For each type of target a contrast code was given



to the different language conditions (2 = biased condition,  $-1$  = unbiased condition, and  $-1$  = control condition). Confirming H2, contrast comparisons indicate that the WRI was stronger in the immigrant condition that used linguistic biases ( $M = 0.10$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ) compared with both the immigrant unbiased ( $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.06$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.08$ ),  $t(51) = 2.83$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $d = .79$ . Importantly, the immigrant unbiased and the control condition did not differ from one another. In the case of an Italian aggressor, no significant differences between the various conditions emerged (see Table 5).

### Crime Punishment

The level of punishment participants chose for the aggressor was analyzed comparing the role of linguistic biases separately for each type of target (African immigrant vs. Italian). In the immigrant conditions, participants expressed a marginally higher level of punishment for the African perpetrator in the biased ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) compared with the unbiased condition ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(34) = 1.91$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $d = .66$ . By contrast, there was no difference in the level of punishment for the Italian perpetrator between the biased ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and unbiased conditions ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(34) = .18$ , *ns*.

No moderating role of the participants' explicit judgments on the WRI and their judgment of the crime was found.

### Discussion

Study 2 demonstrated that the content and stylistic characteristics of crime news about an outgroup aggressor can change our perception of the whole outgroup category associating them more easily with a crime stereotype. Comparing their performance with the control condition, those participants who read a crime news article that portrayed a black African criminal using biased language increased their tendency to associate guns with African immigrants in general. When the article had the same factual content, but used a more neutral language or when the aggressor was an ingroup member, no differences with the control condition were observed. As such, these findings confirm H2 and indicate that not the simple mention, but the way members of racial/ethnic minorities are depicted in the media is detrimental to the development and maintenance of crime-related stereotypes that typically target such social groups.

In this study, participants were also required to assign a punishment to the aggressor. Confirming H3 only in the case of an outgroup criminal, biased language use tended to increase participants' punishment, a judgment that could truly influence the fate of crime suspects belonging to a racial/ethnic minority.

Unlike Peffley and colleagues (1996), none of the reported findings were moderated by participants' initial explicit

**Table 5.** Mean weapon race bias as a function of condition (Study 2)

Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Immigrant Biased	.10 <sup>a</sup>	.07	Italian Biased	.07 <sup>a</sup>	.07
Immigrant Unbiased	.03 <sup>b</sup>	.06	Italian Unbiased	.05 <sup>a</sup>	.06
Control	.05 <sup>b</sup>	.08	Control	.05 <sup>a</sup>	.08

Note. Numbers with a different superscript differ from each other within the same column,  $p < .05$ .

attitudes toward African immigrants. Both individuals with positive or negative explicit attitudes or outgroup contact were equally influenced by the changes in the crime reports suggesting that biased language use might be equally important in creating as well as in maintaining people's stereotypic associations with members of racial/ethnic minorities.

It is important to note, however, that we cannot rule out the possibility that the measurement of participants' explicit attitudes at the beginning of the study influenced the reading process of the crime news articles. These explicit measures might have made participants more aware of the existence of certain stereotypes and emphasized our stereotype activation findings. Still, given that these attitudes were measured in all conditions, this procedure cannot account for the relative differences in stereotype activation between conditions. Another limitation of the current study lies in the fact that we manipulated the nationality of both the aggressor and the victim. This procedure was followed in order to create an intergroup situation in all conditions. Still, future research could add the within-group situations (ingroup aggressor and victim/outgroup aggressor and victim) to ascertain whether biased language use triggers the activation of the crime stereotype regardless of the nationality of the victim (both ingroup and outgroup).

All in all, increasing the awareness among newsmakers about their language use is one of the most concrete applicative implications of the current study. Journalists and editors decide how certain news facts are told to the general public often using a language that emphasizes and potentially sensationalizes certain details. While this might be done to attract the readers' attention and boost sales, the present study showed that such seemingly small linguistic choices increase people's implicit stereotypes only when the aggressor is a member of a racial/ethnic minority.

### General Discussion

The mass media provide people with a unique window on reality. Especially when focusing on racial/ethnic minorities, a group with which the general public often has less familiarity, media input can become pervasive and the only source of information. The way in which the media filter and shape reality then becomes an important variable in molding and even distorting people's beliefs and perceptions about the

world they live in. When focusing on people's beliefs about racial/ethnic minorities, the most common studied subjects have been crime and criminality, and media portrayals that link crime to racial/ethnic outgroups (Mutz & Goldman, 2010). This emphasis is warranted given the consistent overrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities in law-offending roles, not only compared with the White majority, but also in relation to actual crime statistics (Di Nicola & Caneppele, 2004; Dixon & Linz, 2000). Sometimes it seems to be the only context in which they appear in the media. The association "Carta di Roma" (see Morcellini, Binotto, Bruno, & Lai, 2009), for example, that monitors the Italian media for biased reporting of racial/ethnic minorities, has found that 76.2% of the times immigrants are mentioned in the Italian media, they appear in crime news.

But is it indeed enough to simply mention racial/ethnic minority members in the context of a crime story to activate people's crime-related stereotypes? Early priming studies in social psychology have demonstrated that the presentation of a group member (i.e., name or image) is a sufficient condition to activate the associated group stereotypes in perceivers' minds (e.g., Bargh, 1999; Devine, 1989), therefore suggesting an affirmative answer to this question. However, recent developments in this field have underlined the flexibility of such effects emphasizing the importance of personal, contextual, and motivational variables (e.g., Blair, 2002; Dasgupta, 2013) in the activation of people's prejudice and stereotypes. In line with these more recent findings, the present research effort documented and manipulated linguistic biases in crime news that were expected to moderate the activation of a crime stereotype toward members of racial/ethnic minorities.

In Study 1, a set of linguistic biases were analyzed in crime news articles that described comparable crimes committed by an ingroup or an outgroup member. Results indicated that when the crime was committed by an outgroup member, the nationality of the perpetrator was not only mentioned more frequently, it appeared in most cases as a noun. This means that the mass media more likely refer to a single outgroup aggressor using a categorical label. In line with Carnaghi and colleagues' (2008) work, such references essentialize the person's criminal nature and link it to his or her group membership making generalizations more likely. In addition, even though the crimes that were committed by ingroup and outgroup members were similar in terms of gravity and the conditions in which they occurred, the latter ones were described using more aggravating and less attenuating adjectives.

Even though language abstraction has been found in a large range of spontaneously written texts and has been used to favor the ingroup over the outgroup (see Maass, 1999, for a review), the crimes described in the current study did not use a significantly more abstract language

when the crime was committed by an outgroup rather than an ingroup member, at least, at the level of the verbs that were used to describe the crimes. When having the choice to refer to the nationality of the outgroup criminal in terms of an adjective or a noun, however, clearly the most abstract noun was used suggesting that language abstraction occurred in the current crime news articles, but not at all possible levels. In addition, no evidence was found for the more consistent use of the active voice when describing the criminal act of an outgroup compared with an ingroup member. This hypothesis was derived from work on sexual harassment and rape in which the passive voice is regularly used increasing the co-responsibility of the victim. The current results seem to suggest that such a mechanism cannot be extended to crime news articles in general.

In Study 2, four different experimental conditions were created that varied the group membership of the perpetrator and the victim together with the use of a neutral or biased language. Results suggested that the simple mention of an outgroup target in the realm of a crime story was not a sufficient condition to activate crime-related stereotypes. Only when biased language was used to describe an outgroup perpetrator's acts was an increase in stereotype activation observed.

Besides a theoretical advance, these findings also have practical implications. Newsmakers in general and journalists in particular make choices on what events will be covered in the media and how they are reported. The current research especially speaks to the stylistic/linguistic choices that are made when portraying racial/ethnic minority members in crime reports. While newsmakers might be under pressure to color and sensationalize their news reports, the present findings plead for a more factual-based and neutral language when reporting crimes in the media, especially when the crime suspect is a member of a racial/ethnic minority.

### Electronic Supplementary Materials

The electronic supplementary material is available with the online version of the article at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000216>

*ESM 1.* Table (PDF)

Detailed description of the articles that were analyzed in Study 1.

*ESM 2.* Text (PDF)

Examples of the articles that we used in Study 2.

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