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Guilt-Tripping in Gaslighting Discourse: From Self-Trust to "I'm Sorry"

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"Guilt isn't always a rational thing.
Guilt is a weight that will crush you whether you deserve it or not."
Maureen Johnson, Girl at Sea

Abstract

This study examines guilt-tripping as a pragmatic technique used in gaslighting discourse, emphasising how emotional responsibility is linguistically constructed and interpreted. The analysis employs Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95a; Wilson and Sperber, 2004; Carston & Powell, 2009), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2006; Maillat & Oswald, 2011), and perspectives from truth-conditional semantics (Vanderveken, 1990; Seuren, 1998; Nordquist, 2025). The empirical data include dialogue extracts from contemporary film and television, such as *No One Would Tell (1996), Before I Go to Sleep (2014), Alice, Darling (2022), Resurrection (2022), Priscilla'(2023),* and *Fake (2024).* A qualitative analysis of fifteen dialogue segments explores how explicitly encoded content interacts with pragmatically inferred meaning.

The findings identify three types of guilt-tripping – speaker-referential, hearer-referential, and dual-referential – each representing distinct patterns of responsibility attribution. In all instances, guilt-tripping functions through the interaction of entailment and implicature, whereby ostensibly factual propositions serve as cognitive anchors for evaluative inferences. This mechanism facilitates the internalisation of responsibility while preserving plausible deniability.

The study views guilt-tripping as a linguistically mediated and cognitively rooted strategy, enhancing research on manipulative discourse and providing a structured understanding of guilt induction in gaslighting.

Keywords: *entailment, gaslighting, guilt-tripping, implicature, manipulative discourse, pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Guilt-tripping is a widespread form of interpersonal influence in which an individual induces guilt in another person to regulate their behaviour, perceptions, or emotional responses. Although often regarded as a relatively benign or commonplace communicative practice, its role within manipulative and psychologically abusive discourse remains insufficiently theorised. Specifically, guilt-tripping serves as a prominent mechanism of gaslighting, which is understood as a form of psychological manipulation whereby a speaker systematically destabilises the hearer's sense of reality, responsibility, and self-trust. (Purtseladze, 2025)

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While gaslighting has been extensively examined in psychological and popular discourse as a process that causes individuals to question their perceptions and judgments, comparatively little attention has been paid to the micro-level linguistic and pragmatic strategies through which such effects are achieved during interaction. This article advances the claim that guilt-tripping is a major discursive resource in gaslighting, functioning not merely to evoke remorse but also to reshape epistemic and moral alignment within interaction. By means of highlighting the speaker's emotional experience, invoking narratives of suffering, or explicitly attributing responsibility to the addressee, guilt-tripping reconfigures accountability and gradually diminishes the hearer's interpretative autonomy.

Although previous studies have explored the psychological effects of gaslighting and guilt induction, they have paid limited attention to the linguistic methods through which guilt is constructed during interaction. Few studies have distinguished various referential setups of guilt-tripping or analysed how truth-conditional entailment and implicature work together to create manipulative meaning. This study aims to fill that gap by developing a systematic typology of guilt-tripping and combining semantic and pragmatic approaches to analyse gaslighting discourse.

The study employs a discourse-analytic framework based on key concepts from Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95a; Wilson and Sperber, 2004; Carston & Powell, 2009), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2006; Maillat & Oswald, 2011), and insights from truth-conditional semantics (Vanderveken, 1990; Seuren, 1998; Nordquist, 2025). These approaches facilitate the distinction between explicitly encoded content and pragmatically inferred meaning. This theoretical combination enables the examination of both overt (direct) and covert (indirect) forms of guilt induction, as well as the interaction between what is said and what is implied in manipulative discourse.

Empirically, the analysis is based on a corpus of dialogue extracts from contemporary film and television, including *No One Would Tell (1996), Before I Go to Sleep (2014), Alice, Darling (2022), Resurrection (2022), Priscilla (2023),* and *Fake (2024).* These texts exemplify interpersonal interactions in which guilt-tripping is embedded within broader dynamics of control, dependency, and emotional negotiation. The analysis identifies three main referential patterns: speaker-referential guilt induction, hearer-referential guilt attribution, and dual-referential guilt induction. These categories capture different yet interconnected mechanisms through which guilt is elicited, ranging from indirect, affective engagement to explicit, overt blame, as well as hybrid forms that combine both strategies.

By investigating the cognitive-linguistic features of guilt-tripping, this article contributes to the growing body of research on gaslighting and manipulative discourse tactics. It specifically provides a systematic classification of guilt-inducing practices based on both pragmatic and semantic theories.

2. Theoretical Framework

Guilt is frequently conceptualised within moral psychology as a self-reflective emotion rooted in perceived wrongdoing. It involves an individual's recognition of having violated particular obligations or normative standards. As indicated, scholars such as Wallace (2019) conceptualise guilt as an understanding of oneself as having breached practical or moral requirements, whereas Clarke (2013) emphasises the "constitutive thought" of being blameworthy. Similarly, Greenspan (1992) highlights the agent's self-ascription of responsibility for a wrongful act. Across these perspectives, guilt assumes that the individual considers the emotion justified based on their own conduct (Archs, 2024).

Within interpersonal contexts, this emotional mechanism becomes susceptible to exploitation through what is commonly termed *guilt-tripping*. Empirical research suggests that guilt trips are pervasive across a wide range of relationships and often arise in response to relatively trivial situations (Humeny, 2013). These may include minor interpersonal expectations or everyday disappointments, yet they are strategically framed to induce compliance. Guilt-tripping can thus be defined as a manipulative practice that aims to influence

another person's behaviour by evoking feelings of guilt and responsibility for outcomes they may not objectively control. Importantly, such practices are less about eliciting genuine moral reflection and more about exerting control, as victims frequently report feelings of discomfort, frustration, and powerlessness rather than authentic guilt (Humeny, 2013).

This manipulative dynamic is also closely related to broader phenomena such as gaslighting, which employs guilt-tripping as a discursive strategy (Purtseladze, 2025). The effectiveness of these strategies can be explained through insights from cognitive psychology and Argumentation Theory. As argued by Maillat and Oswald (2011), certain assumptions can be made so cognitively salient that they become difficult, if not impossible, for the hearer to reject. In this sense, manipulation constrains the interpretive space available to the recipient.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), communication is governed by the principle that interlocutors seek maximal cognitive effects while minimising processing effort. Each utterance presumes optimal relevance, implying that the hearer expects it to be worthwhile to process and interpretable within the given context. As noted by Carston and Powell (2009), comprehension proceeds along a path of least effort: the hearer selects the first interpretation that fulfils expectations of relevance. This cognitive heuristic introduces a vulnerability that manipulative discourse may exploit. Since hearers generally presume cooperativity on the part of speakers (Mooney, 2004; Sorlin, 2017), they are inclined to accept contextually justified interpretations, even when such interpretations are intentionally misleading.

A fundamental linguistic mechanism underlying such manipulation is the use of indirect speech acts. Research demonstrates that gaslighting discourse frequently relies on indirectness, whereby speakers communicate meanings beyond the literal content of their utterances (Purtseladze, 2024). According to Searle (1975), indirect speech acts depend on shared background knowledge and the inferential capacities of the hearer. This shared background encompasses both interpersonal factors–such as trust–and pragmatic conditions of felicity. Consequently, hearers often reconstruct intended meanings in a manner consistent with the speaker's implicit intentions, particularly when relational trust exists. In manipulative settings, this results in the internalisation of distorted claims as if they were part of a shared reality (Purtseladze, 2024).

These pragmatic processes can be further elucidated through the concept of semantic *entailment*. In both semantics and pragmatics, entailment denotes a relation whereby the truth of one proposition guarantees the truth of another (Nordquist, 2025). Vanderveken (1990) differentiates between truth-conditional and illocutionary entailments, illustrating how a single utterance may generate multiple levels of meaning. Similarly, Seuren (1998) observes that linguistic expressions inherently permit inferences based on their semantic content. Within the context of manipulative discourse, particularly gaslighting, assertive speech acts are pivotal, as they introduce propositions that entail additional, often implicit, interpretations (Purtseladze, 2024).

Similarly, guilt-inducing expressions attain pragmatic *felicity* through their entailment. When segments of an utterance align with verifiable or ostensibly objective facts, the associated emotive implicatures are more readily regarded as legitimate. This establishes a link between factual content and evaluative meaning, encouraging the hearer to perceive the implied emotional responsibility as justified. Consequently, the perlocutionary effect–specifically, the elicitation of guilt or compliance–is realised through the hearer's inferential processes, which are guided by the presumption of optimal relevance and the prominence of cognitively unavoidable implicatures.

The analysis of the data has identified three distinct referential types of guilt-tripping: *speaker-*, *hearer-*, and *dual-referential guilt-tripping*. This classification is based on the direction of responsibility attribution encoded or implied within the utterance.

Speaker-referential guilt-tripping focuses on the speaker as the primary referent of the situation being expressed. In such instances, the speaker emphasises their own emotional state, suffering, or disadvantage (e.g., loneliness, disappointment, sacrifice), while deliberately avoiding explicit reference to the hearer as the cause. Nonetheless, through pragmatic inference, the hearer is guided to interpret themselves as responsible for the speaker's condition. Consequently, responsibility is not explicitly assigned but emerges through implicature, which renders this form predominantly covert in realisation.

Hearer-referential guilt-tripping, by contrast, directly targets the hearer as the locus of responsibility. The utterance explicitly encodes blame through reference to the hearer's actions, omissions, or character. This type typically involves overt accusatory structures in which the illocutionary force clearly identifies the hearer as the agent of wrongdoing. As a result, hearer-referential guilt-tripping is most commonly realised in overt forms, with minimal reliance on inferential reconstruction.

Dual-referential guilt-tripping combines elements of both mechanisms, simultaneously invoking the speaker's emotional state and the hearer's implied or explicit responsibility. In such instances, the utterance constructs a relational framework wherein the speaker's suffering is contextually connected to the hearer's behaviour. This form is notably adaptable, as it may be realised either overtly – via explicit causal linkage – or covertly – through implicatures that the hearer is anticipated to infer.

Within these classifications, the distinction between *overt* and *covert* forms is pivotal. Overt guilt-tripping entails direct attribution of blame, wherein responsibility is explicitly embedded within the propositional content of the statement. Conversely, covert guilt-tripping relies on implicature, allowing the hearer to infer their culpability from information that is either partially conveyed or ostensibly neutral. Notably, while hearer-referential guilt-tripping generally leans toward overt realisation, speaker-referential variants are predominantly covert. Additionally, instances involving dual referentiality may shift between overt and covert modes depending on the level of explicitness.

This typology demonstrates that the effectiveness of guilt-tripping is not solely dependent on the content of the message conveyed, but also on the approach employed in allocating responsibility across both explicit and implicit levels of meaning. This issue will be examined in greater detail within this paper.

3. Methodology

The study employs a critical discourse-analytic approach to explore the function of guilt-tripping as a pragmatic device within gaslighting discourse. The analysis is conducted on a corpus of 15 dialogue extracts sourced from contemporary film and television texts, chosen for their clear depiction of manipulative interpersonal interactions. The dataset comprises examples from *No One Would Tell (1996), Before I Go to Sleep (2014), Alice, Darling (2022), Resurrection (2022), Priscilla (2023),* and *Fake (2024)*.

Contemporary film and television dialogues were selected because they provide linguistically comprehensive, contextually rich, and publicly accessible representations of manipulative interpersonal interactions. Such texts facilitate detailed analysis of pragmatic processes while maintaining coherent interactional sequences, which are frequently challenging to acquire from naturally occurring abusive communications due to ethical, legal, and privacy considerations.

The extracts were chosen for their relevance to the phenomenon under examination, particularly instances in which guilt is elicited in response to conflict, disagreement, or perceived transgressions within relationships. Each extract was analysed at the utterance level, with a specific focus on the correlation between explicitly encoded content and the pragmatically inferred meaning.

The initial corpus comprised a larger collection of gaslighting-related interactions identified across the selected films and television series. The fifteen extracts included in the present study were purposively selected because they contained complete instances of guilt-tripping in which responsibility attribution,

entailment, and implicature could be examined in sufficient linguistic detail. The objective was not statistical representation but analytical depth.

The analytical procedure involved two stages. First, the data were classified according to referential orientation. Each extract was examined to determine the primary target of guilt attribution, based on linguistic markers such as pronoun use, agency assignment, and evaluative framing. Evaluative framing was operationalised as the use of linguistic resources that assign moral value or emotional impact, including (a) lexical evaluation (e.g., *selfish, inconsiderate*), (b) affective positioning (e.g., expressions of *hurt* or *disappointment*), (c) moral obligation markers (e.g., *you should have, you were supposed to*), and (d) contrastive constructions highlighting imbalance or norm violation (e.g., *after everything I've done*).

Extracts where the speaker positioned themselves as the affected party (e.g., through first-person constructions emphasising personal suffering or sacrifice) were categorised as *speaker-referential guilt-tripping* (4 extracts). Those who primarily attributed responsibility or moral failure to the hearer (e.g., through second-person constructions and either direct or indirect blame) were classified as *hearer-referential guilt-tripping* (4 extracts). Instances where guilt was constructed through references to both speaker and hearer, or where responsibility was discursively distributed between them, were labelled as *dual-referential guilt-tripping* (7 extracts). These instances were not seen as ambiguous; instead, the simultaneous presence of multiple referential strategies was understood as a mixed strategic approach and categorised accordingly.

This distribution shows a dominance of dual-referential forms; however, the statistical prevalence of specific types goes beyond the scope of this study and is not considered representative. Instead, the distribution is documented descriptively, with the primary emphasis on the qualitative analysis of the mechanisms through which guilt is formed and functions within discourse.

Since the dataset consists of scripted fictional dialogues rather than naturally occurring interaction, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of everyday communication. Instead, the corpus serves as an analytical resource for examining linguistic mechanisms under controlled discourse conditions.

Secondly, each extract was analysed for overt versus covert features, truth-conditional entailment, and implicature. *Overtness* was defined as the clear expression of blame or responsibility in the propositional content, such as direct accusations or obligation statements, such as *you hurt me* or *you should have done X*. *Covertness*, in contrast, was recognised when guilt was not explicitly stated but suggested through implicature, including indirect complaints, affective displays, or contrastive framing (e.g., *I guess I just care more than you do*).

All extracts were manually coded according to the analytical framework presented above. Coding involved identifying referential orientation, overt or covert realisation, truth-conditional entailment, and pragmatically inferred implicatures. The coding categories were theory-driven and derived from the conceptual framework rather than generated inductively from the data.

To consider the interaction between semantic and pragmatic meanings, each extract was analysed with respect to both *truth-conditional entailment* and *implicature*. Truth-conditional content was identified on the basis of logical entailment, i.e., meanings that necessarily follow from the propositional content and whose truth depends on the veracity of its components. Simultaneously, implicatures were examined as context-dependent inferences arising from evaluative framing and relational dynamics. Rather than treating these as separate levels, the analysis considered how entailed meanings and implicatures operate conjointly, with explicitly encoded content providing a structural foundation for, and often reinforcing, indirectly conveyed guilt attribution. This method allowed for the identification of both direct and indirect mechanisms through which evaluative force is created.

4. Results and Discussion: Guilt-Tripping in Gaslighting Discourse

4.1. Speaker-Referential Guilt-Tripping

The following extracts exemplify the mechanism of *speaker-referential covert guilt-tripping* within the context of gaslighting discourse. Each instance illustrates how the speaker emphasises their own emotional or psychological condition, whilst the hearer's obligation is implied through *entailed implicature*.

Data Extract 1
(*Before I Go to Sleep, 2014)*
Christine: How can I trust you if you lie to me?
Ben: I live with you. With this. Sometimes, when the truth is painful or complicated, I don't always have the strength. Usually I do, but not always. I'm sorry.
Christine: So what, you edit my life?
Ben: This isn't just about you! Sometimes it's about what I can handle, and I can't always handle everything. Not every day. Sometimes we both need a day off.

In this exchange, Ben reinterprets his deception as a result of his emotional constraints. By emphasising his capacity to endure (*sometimes it's about what I can handle, and I can't always handle everything)*, he redirects attention from his misconduct to his internal struggle. Although he explicitly dismisses hearer-centred blame (*this isn't just about you*), the implicature indicates that Christine's expectations contribute to his distress. This covert attribution induces doubt in the hearer's evaluative perspective, a hallmark of gaslighting, whereby the victim starts to question the validity of their own response to objectively problematic behaviour.

Data Extract 2
(Before I Go to Sleep, 2014)
Christine: Why did you divorce me?
Ben: You want the truth?
Christine: Yes.
Ben: We had a little boy. He got very sick very suddenly, and we lost him. I walked away. I was broken. I came back, and I'm here now. I'll never leave you, Chris. Never.
Christine: I'm sorry.

In this context, Ben develops a trauma-based narrative that emphasises his suffering (*I was broken*), thereby providing context and alleviating the impact of his abandonment. The emotional weight of the situation serves as a stabilising factor, making the implicature cognitively persuasive: questioning him is deemed morally inappropriate. Christine's apology indicates her internalisation of responsibility, despite her role as the one seeking answers. This role reversal – where the victim accepts guilt – is a fundamental mechanism of gaslighting facilitated through covert guilt-tripping.

Data Extract 3
(Fake, 2024)
Birdie: Joe, we were waiting for you. I was really worried.
Joe: Look, I'm sorry. I was saving a boy's life. You weren't at the front of my mind, I have to admit.
Birdie: I'm sorry too.

Joe elevates his own actions to a morally superior level by *saving a boy's life*, thereby implicitly diminishing Birdie's concern. Although no explicit accusation is made, the implicature suggests that her expectations are trivial or selfish in comparison. Birdie's immediate apology indicates her acceptance of this framing. In terms of gaslighting, this process contributes to the gradual invalidation of the hearer's emotional responses, as legitimate concern is reinterpreted as inappropriate.

Data Extract 4

(Alice, Darling, 2022)

Simon: I was really worried about you when you didn't reply. I heard about a girl who went missing.

Simon emphasises his emotional distress and introduces an external threat to intensify the seriousness of the situation. He refrains from direct blame; however, the implicature indicates that the listener is responsible for causing his anxiety through non-responsiveness. This exemplifies covert guilt-tripping, whereby manipulation relies on the listener's inference. In gaslighting contexts, such tactics influence behaviour while maintaining plausible deniability.

Throughout the examined excerpts, speaker-referential guilt-tripping is consistently realised in a *covert* manner, wherein blame is not explicitly stated but is implied through *entailed implicature*. The speaker emphasises their own emotional or psychological state, thereby creating an apparent layer of self-reference, while indirectly attributing responsibility to the listener via inferential reasoning.

A pivotal role in this mechanism is fulfilled by *truth-conditional entailment*. Components of the utterances are anchored in propositions perceived as factual or difficult to contest (e.g., emotional limitations, past trauma, external dangers). Once these propositions are accepted as true, they permit additional evaluative inferences, rendering the implied responsibility of the hearer appear justified. Consequently, the listener is encouraged to internalise guilt without being explicitly accused.

Thus, the effectiveness of speaker-referential guilt-tripping in gaslighting resides in the interplay between covert manipulation and the structure of truth conditions: the lack of explicit blame diminishes opposition, whereas the existence of seemingly valid premises enhances the cognitive plausibility of the implicated judgment.

4.2. Hearer-Referential Guilt-Tripping

The subsequent extracts exemplify the functioning of *hearer-referential guilt-tripping* through both *covert* and *overt* realisations. In these instances, responsibility is chiefly assigned to the hearer, either implicitly via implicature or explicitly through direct blame. Importantly, these strategies frequently depend on *truth-conditional entailment*, wherein partially verifiable propositions support broader evaluative judgments.

Data Extract 5

(*Fake, 2024*)

Joe: You thought I wouldn't be able to pay for dinner, didn't you? Here, this is for the room.
Birdie: I'm really happy to pay my share.
Joe: Oh, well, you can pay for breakfast.
Birdie: It's included.
Joe: I promise not to involve you in any more boring business meetings.
Birdie: I really want to be part of your life–even the boring dinners. I'm sorry I doubted you.

In this exchange, Joe attributes a negative assumption to Birdie (*You thought I wouldn't be able to pay*), thereby positioning her as distrustful. While the accusation appears explicit on the surface, it remains *covert* in its guilt-tripping function, as it relies on an *entailed evaluation* rather than direct moral condemnation. The utterance draws on a plausible, though unverified, proposition, which functions as a truth-conditional anchor: if Birdie did entertain doubt, then the implied judgment (that she lacks trust or respect) follows as a seemingly justified conclusion.

The perlocutionary effect is evident in Birdie's response, as she apologises and reasserts her supportive stance. This exemplifies how truth-conditional entailment enables manipulation: once the initial proposition is accepted–or even deemed plausible–the evaluative implicature becomes difficult to dismiss. In the context of gaslighting dynamics, this process contributes to self-doubt, as the hearer assumes responsibility for an attitude that may not have been explicitly expressed.

Data Extract 6
(*Alice, Darling, 2022*)
Simon: You told me you were visiting your friends, but you're actually at a cottage. So you lied to me. This is typical. Why would you say you're going on a road trip when you're not?

This excerpt exemplifies *overt hearer-referential guilt-tripping*, wherein blame is explicitly articulated. Simon formulates a sequence of propositions: the discrepancy between what was stated and what is observed (*visiting friends* vs *at a cottage*) truth-conditionally implies the conclusion *that the individual lied*. Although the initial inference may appear to have logical justification, it is extended into a generalised assessment (*This is typical*), which is not substantiated by evidence.

Thus, a single potentially verifiable inconsistency is employed to justify a broader negative characterisation of the hearer. This shift from specific fact to generalised judgment exemplifies how truth-conditional entailment can be strategically overextended. In gaslighting terminology, this approach not only assigns blame but also undermines the hearer's credibility, thereby prompting them to question their own behaviour and patterns.

Data Extract 7
(*Priscilla, 2023*)
Elvis: Now don't go imagining things.
Priscilla: Like Ann-Margret?!
Elvis: That's it, woman! I don't want to hear another word.
Priscilla: Well, is there something you're hiding?
Elvis: I don't have a goddamn thing to hide. You're just being too goddamn aggressive and demanding. I think you should go see your parents for a little while.
Priscilla: What? Well, I'm not going!
Elvis: I think you should. Matter of fact, I'll help you. Start packing!

In this interaction, Elvis explicitly attributes negative qualities to Priscilla, describing her as *aggressive and demanding*. This exemplifies a clear instance of *hearer-referential overt guilt-tripping*. The manipulation functions as a distortion of inferential relations: Priscilla's questioning is reinterpreted as unreasonable behaviour. Although her suspicion might be contextually justified, Elvis constructs an alternative evaluative framework in which her reaction itself is depicted as problematic.

The absence of a valid truth-conditional entailment is noteworthy in this context: no concrete proposition is provided to logically substantiate the negative characterisation. Instead, assertion supersedes

evidence; however, the assertiveness of the presentation compels acceptance. In the context of gaslighting, such strategies serve to delegitimise the hearer's perceptions and to reframe justified concerns as personal shortcomings.

Data Extract 8

(Priscilla, 2023)

Elvis: Cilla, this is never gonna work if you don't share my interests and philosophies. I mean, there are a lot of women out there that would wanna share in this with me. Come on, sit up, so you can really pay attention.

Priscilla: I can't stand it! It's driving me crazy! I don't wanna hear it anymore!

Elvis: I see a mad woman…

In this passage, Elvis formulates a conditional proposition (*this is never gonna work if you don't share my interests*), which functions as a truth-conditional framework. The success of the relationship is presented as dependent on the hearer's conformity. This is subsequently followed by a comparison (*other women*) and concludes with direct labelling (*a mad woman*).

The progression demonstrates how an initially organised and seemingly rational assertion develops into a clear devaluation. The element based on truth-conditions initially seems plausible; however, subsequent assertions go beyond what is logically implied. In terms of gaslighting, this sequence advances from conditional reasoning to an attack on identity, ultimately impairing the hearer's self-perception and portraying them as inherently inadequate.

As observed, hearer-referential guilt-tripping may intersect with *emotional blackmail*, whereby affective pressure, such as threats of abandonment, withdrawal, or relational loss, is employed to secure compliance, and with *triangulation*, in which references to real or hypothetical third parties reinforce evaluative judgments through comparison. These strategies do not function independently; rather, they mutually reinforce one another, thereby amplifying the persuasive power of manipulation by framing blame as both cognitively substantiated and emotionally pressing.

Furthermore, the presence of pronounced emotional cues enhances inferential processing. When integrated with seemingly plausible or partially verifiable propositions, such cues direct the listener toward cognitively unavoidable implicatures of guilt. Consequently, the victim is not only influenced on an emotional level but is also led to perceive the inferred responsibility as logically justified, thereby aiding in the internalisation of blame and reinforcing the overall impact of gaslighting.

4.3. Dual-Referential Guilt-Tripping

The following extracts demonstrate the manner in which *dual-referential guilt-tripping* functions through both *overt* and *covert* realisations. In such instances, the speaker emphasises their own emotional condition while simultaneously attributing blame–either explicitly or implicitly–to the hearer. This dual anchoring amplifies the manipulative force within gaslighting mechanisms.

Data Extract 9

(Alice, Darling, 2022)

Simon: You didn't tell me you were living like this… How can we be happy if we don't trust each other? … It completely destabilises me – it affects my work.

Alice: I know. I'm sorry.

Simon: I'm trying to understand why you would hurt me like this.

Alice: I just wanted to spend time with my friends.

Simon: So you chose them over me. That's selfish…

In this extract, Simon integrates speaker-referential distress (*it destabilises me*) with explicit hearer blame (*that's selfish*), thereby rendering the strategy overtly dual-referential. The truth-conditional framework (*you didn't tell me*) is extended into evaluative and moral judgments that are not strictly entailed. Implicature fills this interpretative gap, prompting Alice to assume disproportionate responsibility. This dynamic results in a classic instance of gaslighting: her neutral action is recast as betrayal, consequently leading to an apology and compliance.

Data Extract 10
(No One Would Tell, 1996)
Robbie: You think English is easy for you, so it should be easy for everyone. That's not true. This is important to me. My grades matter. If you distract me, that's a problem.
Sarah: I'm not getting angry at my best friend for asking for help. You were the one talking about the weekend.
Robbie: Don't turn this around on me. I don't like being manipulated.

This exchange exemplifies a *dual-referential, overt* form of *guilt-tripping*. Robbie combines speaker-focused justification (*My grades matter*) with direct hearer blame (*you distract me*), thereby constructing a seemingly logical, truth-conditional framework. However, the evaluative conclusion extends beyond what is strictly entailed and depends on implicature to portray Sarah as inconsiderate.

When Sarah resists, Robbie escalates by explicitly accusing her of manipulation. This reinterprets her defence as a wrongdoing, despite the absence of clear evidence. In gaslighting terms, this shifts and destabilises responsibility, pressuring the hearer to accept both blame and a distorted view of the interaction.

Data Extract 11
(No One Would Tell, 1996)
Sarah: I didn't do anything. Robbie, stop!
Robbie: Those were private!
Sarah: Girls like to share their boyfriend's romantic gestures. It's a compliment.
Robbie: They were laughing at me. You were laughing too.
Sarah: No!
Robbie: I just want you to treat me with more respect.

This exchange exemplifies dual-referential, overt guilt-tripping accompanied by apparent gaslighting behaviour on Robbie's part. Robbie articulates the situation through a truth-conditional claim (*They were laughing at me*), which is presented as an objective fact but remains unverifiable. From this, he derives an evaluative conclusion that Sarah's conduct was disrespectful. Although Sarah proposes an alternative interpretation (*It's a compliment*) and explicitly denies his claim (*No!*), Robbie persists with his version of events, thereby prioritising his perception over hers.

The transition to *I just want you to treat me with more respect* combines speaker-referential vulnerability with an implicit reproach towards the hearer. The implicature suggests that Sarah has acted immorally, despite the initial premise of mockery being subject to challenge.

Regarding gaslighting, this strategy involves recharacterising Sarah's innocuous act of sharing the poem as detrimental, while simultaneously dismissing her account of the events. The outcome is epistemic pressure: her interpretation is invalidated, and she is portrayed as both the source of harm and the individual responsible for its restitution.

Data Extract 12
(No One Would Tell, 1996)
Sarah: Nikki was upset.
Robbie: About what?
Sarah: I can't say.
Robbie: You're a bad liar. You chose her over me – just say it.
Sarah: Her mom drinks a lot. She needed a place to stay.
Robbie: Why didn't you tell me?
Sarah: I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.
Robbie: I'm not "anyone". I'm your boyfriend. If you loved me, you would have told me. I would never do that to you.
Sarah: I'm sorry.

This extract exemplifies *dual-referential, overt guilt-tripping* with clear gaslighting.

Robbie constructs his accusation on a fragile *truth-conditional foundation*: Sarah did not promptly disclose information or respond as anticipated. However, this fact does not logically lead to the conclusions he derives (such as *You chose her over me; If you loved me*). These are *evaluative inferences* that depend on *implicature*, reinterpreting a situational constraint (such as confidentiality or delay) as evidence of disloyalty.

His statement *You're a bad liar* preemptively discredits Sarah's account, while *the assertion I'm not 'anyone'* redefines her boundary as invalid. The statement *If you loved me, you would have told me* functions as *emotional blackmail*, equating love with complete transparency and prompt responsiveness. In terms of truth conditions, this statement serves to induce guilt by framing the hearer's behaviour as indifferent.

Within gaslighting dynamics, Robbie distorts the causal structure of events: Sarah's reasonable action (respecting a promise, delayed response) is reconstructed as betrayal. The resulting implicature – that she is at fault both morally and relationally – becomes difficult to resist, leading to her apology and internalisation of guilt.

Data Extract 13
(*No One Would Tell, 1996*)
Sarah: That wasn't a normal fight.
Robbie: I know. I need to do better. But you make me better. Please don't give up on me. You don't give up on people you love.

This example exemplifies *covert dual-referential* guilt induction. Robbie appears self-critical (*I need to do better*), foregrounding speaker responsibility; however, the implicature, supported by manipulated truth-conditionality, shifts the obligation onto Sarah (*You don't give up on people you love*). No explicit blame is articulated; nevertheless, the implication is strongly inferred: leaving him would be regarded as a moral failure. The absence of overt accusations minimizes resistance, while inference renders the guilt implication challenging to dismiss. This subtle approach is particularly effective in gaslighting, as it disguises control as vulnerability.

Data Extract 14
(Priscilla, 2023)
Elvis: Every goddamn paper in town's picked it up. Honey, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. There's gonna be press all over the place.
Priscilla: What's going on?! Why doesn't she go back to Sweden where she belongs?!

Elvis: Goddamn, I didn't know things were gonna get out of hand. I need a woman who understands things like this might happen. Are you going to be her – or not?

Priscilla: I'll leave tomorrow. I'll be waiting in Memphis.

This exchange exemplifies dual-referential, overt guilt-tripping. Elvis bases his argument on a truth-conditional premise *(Every paper's picked it up; there's going to be press*), which portrays the situation as objectively uncontrollable. Nonetheless, he infers an evaluative demand that is not logically entailed: that Priscilla must leave and accept the situation. The statement *I need a woman who understands… Are you going to be her – or not?* constructs a false entailment, whereby external circumstances are made to logically necessitate her compliance.

The implicature suggests that her refusal would be perceived as a sign of inadequacy or lack of support. This notion is further reinforced through triangulation (*a woman who understands*), invoking an idealised alternative against which her actions are implicitly evaluated.

From a gaslighting perspective, Elvis reframes his actions and their consequences as inevitable, while shifting responsibility onto Priscilla's reactions. Her emotional response is bypassed, and the burden is placed on her to "understand". The outcome is compliance (*I'll leave tomorrow*), illustrating how the combined force of entailment and implicature produces internalised guilt and submission.

Data Extract 15

(Resurrection, 2022)

Margaret: I went to the police. I can have you arrested at any time.

David: Arrested? For what? Drinking tea? Sitting in a park?

Margaret: Why are you here?

David: Because he's still inside me. He's suffering. Every day he cries, "Where is Mother?"

Margaret: Stop it.

David: "Why did she abandon me?"

Margaret: Shut up. Those are lies!

David: He refuses to let go. He still wants you.

This excerpt exemplifies a notably compelling case of *covert dual-referential guilt-tripping*, amplified through emotional blackmail, triangulation, and a quasi-metaphysical distortion of reality strategically employed to exert dominance over the victim.

David constructs an emotionally charged narrative in which the suffering of the dead child is attributed to Margaret's alleged abandonment. Although the statement is initially framed as speaker-referential (*he's still inside me*), it simultaneously incorporates an explicit hearer-oriented component (*Why did she abandon me?*), thus rendering it dual referential. The implicature assigns responsibility to the hearer while maintaining a surface focus on the speaker's internal state. The intensity and repetition of the statement increase the salience of this implication, making it cognitively challenging to resist. This approach aligns with gaslighting techniques that obscure the boundary between reality and constructed, mystified narratives, thereby exerting pressure on the victim to engage with – and potentially internalise – distorted representations.

As demonstrated in the examples above, dual-referential guilt-tripping operates through a complex interaction of *overt and covert techniques*, combining explicit accusations with implicit inferences. While overt expressions directly assign blame, covert expressions mainly rely on implicature, making the guilt induced less contestable. In both cases, *truth-conditional entailment* provides a basic foundation, which is then extended beyond logical limits via evaluative inference.

Within the discourse of gaslighting, this dual structure proves to be particularly efficacious: it concurrently appeals to the listener's reasoning and emotions, thereby fostering the internalisation of blame while concealing the manipulative nature of the interaction.

Although the three referential types are presented as analytically distinct categories, the analysis demonstrates that they should be understood as points along a continuum rather than as entirely discrete phenomena. In particular, dual-referential guilt-tripping incorporates features of both speaker- and hearer-referential strategies, combining self-positioning with explicit or implicit blame. This overlap reflects the dynamic nature of manipulative discourse, in which speakers frequently combine multiple pragmatic resources within a single interaction to maximise persuasive effect.

5. Conclusion

This investigation explored guilt-tripping as a pragmatic device within gaslighting discourse, emphasising how emotional responsibility is linguistically constructed and interpretively processed. Based on a qualitative analysis of fifteen dialogue excerpts, the results reveal that guilt-tripping functions as a systematic and potent discursive tactic that reconfigures both epistemic and moral orientations during interaction.

The analysis identified three types of guilt-tripping – namely, speaker-referential, hearer-referential, and dual-referential – each corresponding to a specific configuration of responsibility attribution. Speaker-referential forms predominantly rely on implicit expressions, emphasising the speaker's emotional state while assigning responsibility through implicature. Hearer-referential forms, in contrast, tend to be explicit, directly assigning blame and often grounding it in seemingly plausible truth-conditional premises. Dual-referential forms combine these strategies, integrating emotional self-positioning with direct or implied accusations, thereby achieving the highest degree of manipulative flexibility.

In all categories, the interaction between truth-conditional entailment and implicature has been identified as a central mechanism. Neither phenomenon operates as a separate layer but as mutually reinforcing components of meaning construction. Propositions presented as factual or difficult to contest serve as cognitive anchors, facilitating further evaluative inferences that are not strictly entailed but are perceived as justified. Guided by principles of relevance, listeners tend to accept these inferences as the most accessible and contextually appropriate interpretations. Consequently, responsibility is internalised even in the absence of explicit accusation, rendering the manipulation both efficient and resilient against challenge.

The findings additionally indicate that guilt-tripping frequently co-occurs with reinforcing strategies such as emotional blackmail and triangulation. Emotional pressure – often articulated through conditional expressions of love, obligation, or abandonment – amplifies the inferential process, while triangulation introduces comparative or idealised third-party references that further legitimise evaluative judgments. Collectively, these mechanisms contribute to what may be characterised as cognitively inescapable implicatures, wherein the hearer is led to perceive the imposed interpretation as both logically and emotionally justified.

Within the broader context of gaslighting, these tactics aim to destabilise the hearer's interpretative independence. By twisting causal links, redefining normative expectations, and prioritising the speaker's version of reality, guilt-tripping gradually erodes the hearer's trust in their own perceptions and judgments. Importantly, this process does not rely solely on overt coercion; instead, it is maintained through the subtle interaction of explicit messages and implicit meanings. In this regard, the study enhances the understanding of gaslighting by emphasising its micro-level linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the proposed typology may assist researchers and practitioners in recognising recurring linguistic patterns of manipulative communication. It may prove useful in discourse

analysis, psychology, communication studies, and educational contexts by supporting greater awareness of guilt-inducing strategies and facilitating the identification of covert forms of interpersonal manipulation.

Future research should evaluate the proposed typology using a larger, systematically compiled dataset to assess the distribution and stability of *speaker-*, *hearer-*, and *dual-referential* patterns across various contexts. Since the present investigation analyses written dialogue rather than audiovisual performance, future research should examine how prosodic cues such as intonation, stress, pauses, and voice quality interact with semantic and pragmatic mechanisms to strengthen or weaken guilt-inducing implicatures.

This research demonstrates that guilt-tripping in gaslighting operates through a coordinated application of semantic and pragmatic strategies, laying the groundwork for a more structured, evidence-based analysis of guilt induction as a pragmatic component of gaslighting discourse.

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