On lying: intentionality, implicature, and imprecision

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Abstract

Although lying is a classical topic in philosophy, and certainly is very important in everyday life, there is a lack of genuine linguistic analyses of lying. In this article, lying is viewed as a speech act of insincere assertion. The liar misrepresents truth in order to deceive. While definitions like this are fairly common, consequences for the semantics/pragmatics interface, and, more importantly, for the ongoing debate about minimalism versus contextualism, never have been worked out in detail. This is what the article aims at, concentrating on three relevant issues, namely intentionality, implicature, and imprecision. It takes a moderate contextualist stand by showing that the possibility of lying is built into the language, thus allowing speakers to manipulate the representation of truth according to certain social goals. A case in point would be lying while saying the truth; in this case, the risk of being caught in the act of lying is reduced.

1. Introduction

Lying is a topic everyone is interested in. Being a liar and being lied to are fundamental experiences in human life. Lying may be approached from a number of angles: From ethics and religion to pedagogy, (forensic) psychology (Vrij 2000), sociology (Barnes 1994), and jurisprudence (Green 2007), from novels and films to theatre and photography. There is an immense public interest in lying, not only with regard to lying in the political sphere, but also in the commercial sphere in which the security industry is heavily engaged in the development of lying detectors. Public life is chock-full of reflections about lying, as a quick glance in a newspaper, a soap opera, or the Internet will show (Whitty and Joinson 2008).

A great tradition of analyzing lies in philosophy and the philosophy of language ranges from Saint Augustine and Immanuel Kant to Arthur
Jörg Meibauer

Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, to name only the most famous thinkers. Until today, the question of why lying is usually evaluated as a bad behavior arouses the interest of moral philosophers (Dietz 2002, Martin 2009, Carson 2010). However, reflecting on the fact that lying is primarily a linguistic act, one wonders why there is so little linguistic analysis of lying. We find an important tradition dealing with truth and truth conditions, but only a few attempts at clarifying the speech act of lying. An entry on lying in the recent, otherwise well-informed, The Pragmatics Encyclopedia (Cummings 2010) is lacking.

I propose that lying as an object of linguistic study should be firmly settled in linguistic pragmatics, or, to be more precise, in the semantics/pragmatics interface. Drawing the boundary between pragmatics and semantics—both being disciplines that deal with linguistic meaning—belongs to the most basic problems of modern linguistics. In recent years, a lively debate has emerged about that problem (cf. Szabó 2005). Most researchers engaged in the debate relate their approaches to the fundamental work of Paul Grice, who made the by now classical distinction between “what is said” and “what is implicated” (Grice 1989a). Obviously, the exact nature of the semantics/pragmatics interface is itself a matter of debate. Firstly, there is a debate between minimalists (roughly, those researchers who stick to truth-conditional semantics) and contextualists (roughly, those researchers who stress the influence of the context on meaning constitution); secondly, there are different views in the contextualist camp, e.g., between Neo-Griceans (Kent Bach, Laurence Horn, Stephen Levinson) and Relevance Theorists (Robyn Carston, Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson), but also with respect to other approaches (Mira Ariel, Kasia Jaszczolt, François Recanati, etc.).

My approach pursues a double strategy: On the one hand, it tries to analyze lying by settling it within this broader debate; on the other hand, it tries to show that this debate may profit from an exact case study of lying. It is obvious that lying is indeed a case that is suitable for that purpose. Lying has to do with truth and truth conditions, i.e., issues that traditionally are associated with (truth-conditional) semantics. But lying is also a speech act that is deeply embedded in rich situational and discourse contexts. What a lie is cannot be detected when abstracting away from the cognitive and social goals the liar has in mind.

It should be clear, then, that the focus on the semantic/pragmatics interface is not meant to exclude the other linguistic and communicative aspects of lying; quite on the contrary, it is intended to build a solid fundament for the description and explanation of these other aspects, including prosody, syntax, and the lexicon. In addition, since pragmatics consists of a number of sub-disciplines, aspects of lying have to be pointed out not only in relation to speech acts, but, as we will see in greater detail, also to implicature, and, more-
over, reference and deixis, presupposition, information structure, and discourse structure. It goes without saying that the emerging linguistic picture of lying is not yet complete: We need also historical, acquisitional, and intercultural studies of lying (see Zagorin 1990; Lee, to appear; Vincent Marelli 2004; Danziger 2010).

In the following contribution, I will go into three topics I consider as relevant for the task of properly situating lying in the semantics/pragmatics interface, namely intentionality, implicature, and imprecision.

2. Intentionality

A core problem in the study of lying is, obviously, how to define it. Numerous proposals have been made in the past (for a review, see Mahon 2008, Vincent 2006). Many proposals show a mixture of moral, psychological, and verbal aspects, so the first lesson for a linguistic approach to lying should be to use only those notions in the definition of lying that are rooted in linguistic analysis.

Basically, there are two linguistic points of departure available. The first is to develop a definition of lying with the tools of speech-act analysis, as developed for instance by Searle (1969), Bach and Harnish (1979), and Alston (2000). All in all, speech-act theoretical analyses of lying are scarce, but see Reboul (1994).

The second is to elicit speaker judgments on the meaning of the verb lie, as in the seminal paper of Coleman and Kay (1981) (see also Sweetser 1987, Tsohatzidis 1990, Hardin 2010). The method used here is to present stories containing putative acts of lying and then ask test persons how to evaluate these acts. Interestingly, the very old philosophical method of interpreting problematic cases (for example, Has someone lied who erroneously told the truth?) is used here in an experimental setting.

Moreover, the linguistic analysis of lying can profit from a long-standing psychological research into lying, especially with regard to the acquisition of lying (cf. Bosco and Bucciarelli 2008; Lee, to appear). Recently, in so-called experimental pragmatics, these two strands of research, the psychological and the pragmatic, converge to a certain extent.

It is a widely accepted assumption in speech-act theory that the speaker has certain intentions when uttering a speech act, and that part of the understanding of a speech act is uncovering this intention. Now, what is the intention of a liar? A natural answer would be that it is the liar’s intention to deceive, deceiving broadly construed as the causing of a false belief in someone else. Therefore, we need to clarify what the relation between lying and deceiving is. In most analyses, lying is a subtype of deceiving. Typologies of deceiving, such as
Chisholm and Feehan (1977) and Vincent and Castelfranchi (1981), contain several types of deception, lying being one of them. The main distinction between lying and deceiving certainly is that (i) deceiving may be non-verbal, and (ii) if verbal, is not bound to assertions (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, Vincent and Castelfranchi 1981, Meibauer 2005, Carson 2010: 47–53). Note, in particular, that Carson (2010) argues at length against lying as involving an intention to deceive. I will come back to his argument below.

Now we may ask whether the intention to deceive should be part of the felicity conditions of the speech act of lying. This seems not a promising move, since the liar is, by definition, insincere; hence we would need an “insincerity” condition, and that is an implausible construct, as Searle (1969) already pointed out with respect to insincere promising. Rather, the deceptive intention of the liar should be captured through an analysis of lying as an act of insincere assertion. Lies do not constitute a separate type of speech act like promises, commands or questions: They are always assertions.

Improving on a proposal of Falkenberg (1982), I proposed in my (2005) the following definition of assertion:

(1) **Assertion**

A asserted at t that p
iff (a) A uttered at t the declarative sentence σ meaning p,
(b) by uttering the declarative sentence σ, A presented p as true,
(c) by uttering the declarative sentence σ, A M-intended that an addressee B to whom A uttered p actively believes that p.

This definition draws upon the framework of Grice (1989b), but it also comprises insights of speech-act theory (cf. Searle 1969), notably the Essential Condition stating that the speaker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the proposition expressed. Attempts at defining the assertion as in (1) are of course theory-dependent, as can be seen from numerous other proposals, e.g., the attitudinal approach of Bach and Harnish (1979: 42), or Alston (2000: 120), who focuses on the speaker taking responsibility (see Jary 2010). Condition (1b) resembles the Searlean Essential Condition for assertions.

Condition (1a) is important in that it relates the speech act of assertion to syntax and semantics. In most analyses and examples given, it is simply presupposed that assertions are connected to declarative sentences. Of course, other sentence types may be used for lying, too, e.g., by containing presuppositions or triggering implicatures. But these facts should be carefully modeled in a theoretical framework that contains these notions and allows for the explanation of non-literality and indirectness. A connection to semantics is also needed, because declarative sentences typically contain propositions that may be contextually evaluated as true or false.
On lying: intentionality, implicature, and imprecision

Condition (1c) refers to the Gricean notion of a M(eaning)-intention, which is an intention that is necessary for the speaker’s attempt to produce a certain belief in the addressee by his very utterance (Grice 1989b). What is important here is that the analysis of lying is embedded in a more general theory of communication. All the major pragmatic theories mentioned in the Introduction must have such a general account of communication.

With definition (1) in mind, we may go on to define the term “lie,” following again Falkenberg’s approach, as in (2) (cf. Falkenberg 1982: 75):

(2)  **Lie**
A lied at t,
iff (a) A asserted at t that p,
(b) A actively believed at t that not p.

Falkenberg (1982: 56) assumes that, if someone is not lying, he is truthful. By and large, this seems right, with the following two exceptions: First, A believes neither that p nor that not p, but asserts that p. Second, A fails to believe p, but asserts p (see the example of Carson 2010 discussed below). In the following discussion, I will concentrate on those cases where the simple opposition between lying and being truthful holds.

Let us now illustrate the different instances of being or not being truthful with the example of a speaker A, called Barbie, who utters *I’m suffering from a heart disease* (cf. Falkenberg 1982: 54–58). First, Barbie believes at t that she is suffering from a heart disease, and it is indeed the case that she is suffering from a heart disease. The propositional content p is true and the speaker is truthful (she did not lie). Second, Barbie believes at t that she is suffering from a heart disease but, actually, she is not. Thus, she is mistaken. The propositional content p is false, but the speaker is truthful (she did not lie). Third, Barbie does not believe at t that she is suffering from a heart disease, and she knows that, as a matter of fact, she is not suffering from a heart disease. It follows that she lies (she is not truthful). Fourth, Barbie does not believe at t that she is suffering from a heart disease, but in fact, she is. She is mistaken, since the propositional content p is true. Moreover, she lies (she is not truthful) since she wants to deceive.

For a theory of lying, it is very important that it can deal with this last case. With regard to the speaker’s intention to deceive, it does not matter what actually is the case, it only matters what the speaker believes to be the case. (This seems to represent at least the majority opinion to which I stick.) As a consequence, the definition (2) refers to (weak) ‘believing’ instead of (strong) ‘knowing.’ The notion of “actively believing” in definition (2) intends to exclude those cases in which speaker A is merely accidentally or mistakenly in a certain state of belief (Falkenberg 1982: 45–50). To give an example, consider
the case of someone who asserts that she is a student while forgetting or not knowing that her registration was cancelled the day before.

Let us shortly compare our definition of lying to the recent proposal of Carson (2010). Through a series of careful redefinitions on the basis of prototypical lying scenarios, he finally ends up with the following definition of lying (his L7):

(3) *Lying* (Carson 2010: 37)

A person S tells a lie to another person S1 iff:

1. S makes a false statement X to S1,
2. S believes that X is false or probably false (or, alternatively, S does not believe that X is true), and
3. S intends to warrant the truth of X to S1.

Definition (3) is intended to implement the following two basic tenets of Carson’s approach: (i) lying does *not* require that the liar intends to deceive others, (ii) lying requires making a statement that one warrants to be true (Carson 2010: 15).

Requirement (ii) is connected with the basic assumption that lying is essentially a breach of trust. Most speech-act theoreticians would wholeheartedly agree with that conviction. But warranting the truth of p is of course built into standard definitions of assertion (or statement, the difference often being neglected), be it in the style of Searle (1969)—(Constitutive Rule: “Counts as an undertaking to the effect that \( p \) represents an actual state of affairs”—or as (1b) above. Therefore, “warranting the truth” follows from a reasonable taxonomy of speech acts.

As for (i), I agree that deception should not directly be written into definitions of lying; the deception follows from the lack of truthfulness on the part of the liar. But is it correct that lying does not require that the liar intends to deceive others?

To support his claim, Carson (2010: 20–23) invents three examples in which a person can lie without intending to deceive anyone. All of these are not really convincing to me. Let us focus on the first example, which goes like this:

Suppose that I witness a crime and clearly see that a particular individual committed the crime. Later, the same person is accused of the crime and, as a witness in court, I am asked whether or not I saw the defendant commit the crime. I make the false statement that I did not see the defendant commit the crime, for fear of being harmed or killed by him. However, I do not intend that my false statements deceive anyone. (I hope that no one believes my testimony and that he is convicted in spite of it.) (Carson 2010: 20)

Carson (2010: 20) goes on to comment: “Deceiving the jury is not a means to preserving my life. Giving false testimony is necessary to save my life, but
On lying: intentionality, implicature, and imprecision

283

deceiving others is not; the deception is merely an unintended ‘side effect.’ I do not intend to deceive the jury in this case, but it seems clear that my false testimony would constitute a lie.”

However, I assume that the witness has deceived the jury as well as the defendant—both are deceived because the witness asserts that he has certain belief, which he actually has not. Hinting at the possible fact that the witness does not hold that belief in fact and that he only pretends to have that belief, is, according to my linguistic approach, not a “side effect,” and may best be analyzed as a conversational implicature. But this concept is not available within Carson’s framework. Thus, there is no need to skip condition (1c) in my above definition.

From a linguist’s point of view the “modular” approach in (1) and (2) fares better on a number of counts:

- It refers to sentence types, sentence types being basic illocutionary force indicating device that are connected with basic speech-act types.
- It refers to speech-act types, like assertion, that should be properly defined in the speech-act component of pragmatics.
- It does not contain characterizations like “warranting the truth” that may be derived from the definition of speech acts.
- Last, but not least, it is settled within a broader theory of communication that is needed for an understanding of the semantics/pragmatics interface anyhow.

Of course, one is free to choose the definition of lying that fits best to one’s overall approach. I have no problems with that strategy. My point is that a genuine linguistic analysis should use more-or-less corroborated elements of analysis that are needed anyhow. Speech act theory is a case in point, and it has much to say on core concepts like truth, truthfulness, intention and deception that are necessary for a comprehensive analysis of lying.

3. Implicature

It goes without saying that most liars have a severe interest not to be caught in the act of lying. Making the lie explicit (as for example in a performative construction) would destroy it. However, in lying by falsely implicating, the risk of being caught is heavily reduced for a number of reasons. First, conversational implicatures are cancelable, either by context or by an addition of cancelling material (cf. Jaszczolt 2009). Second, since the hearer has to put some effort into the derivation of the implicature, the burden of the proof is shifted to him. That may cause an effect lucidly characterized by Adler (1997: 442) in the following quote: “Not only has he [the victim, J.M.] been misled, but the
embarrassment of horror of it is that he has been duped into collaborating on his own harm.”

The interrelation between lying and implicature is nicely shown in the following Story of the Mate and the Captain in (4) (cf. Posner 1980):

(4) The Story of the Mate and the Captain
A captain and his mate have a long-term quarrel. The mate drinks more rum than is good for him and the captain is determined not to tolerate this behaviour any longer. When the mate is drunk again, the captain writes into the logbook: Today, 11th October, the mate is drunk. When the mate reads this entry during his next watch, he is first getting angry, then, after a short moment of reflection, he writes into the logbook: Today, 14th October, the captain is not drunk.

The point is that the logbook entry of the mate is true. It is indeed the case that the captain is not drunk. However, a reader will understand that this is an exception, because the captain is usually drunk most of the time. The calculation of the implicature starts from assuming a presumptive violation of the maxim of Relevance, for entries in logbooks must be relevant. In this story, we have a classical case of “lying while saying the truth.”

For the sake of the following discussion, let us define a conversational implicature as in (5):

(5) Conversational Implicature
A conversationally implicated at t that q, iff
(a) A asserted at t that p,
(b) A presented q as true,
(c) q is calculable from the assertion of p,
(d) q is cancelable.

Note that condition (5a) is not meant to imply that asserting is a precondition for conversationally implicating; quite on the contrary, implicating is also possible with other types of speech acts; e.g., the so-called existential implicature (formerly existential presupposition), as in Who comes? \( \Rightarrow \) “Someone comes,” may be realized through wh-questions. However, since we are interested in the relation between assertion and conversational implicature, the condition (5a) may be justified for the sake of the argument. Condition (5b) captures the fact (seldom touched upon in the literature) that conversational implicatures go together with a commitment to the truth of the implicature’s content. Conditions (5c) and (5d) include the two most important criteria for conversational implicatures. Condition (5c) abbreviates “calculable with the help of the cooperative principle and the maxims,” and condition (5d) says that implicatures can be defeated by the addition of premises. One has to bear in mind that the calculation of a conversational implicature is actually a hypothesis. In the fol-
lowing discussion, I will assume that the hypothesis with regard to the conversational implicature derived by the hearer is identical to the conversational implicature intended by the speaker.

Conversational implicatures, being no speech acts, certainly do not have sincerity (or success) conditions. Whether they have truth conditions of their own, seems open to dispute. Horn (2009: 19), however, is crystal clear about that: “it must be borne in mind that implicatures—whether conventional or conversational—are propositions that have their own truth conditions” (cf. also, with more reluctance, Horn 2004: 25, Fn. 1). Indeed, this view is supported by Grice (1989a: 39), who observes, “Since the truth of a conversational implicature is not required by the truth of what is said (what is said may be true—what is implicated may be false), the implicature is not carried by what is said, but only by the saying of what is said, or by ‘putting it that way.’”

If conversational implicatures are additional propositions, these propositions should be either true or false. Assuming that the content of the assertion as well as the content of the conversational implicature may be true or false, we must consider the four pairs in (6):

(6)  
\[ p = \text{‘Today, 14th October, the captain is not drunk.’} \]  
\[ q = \text{‘The captain is mostly drunk.’} \]  
\[ p \text{ is true and } q \text{ is true} \]  
\[ p \text{ is true and } q \text{ is false} \]  
\[ p \text{ is false and } q \text{ is true} \]  
\[ p \text{ is false and } q \text{ is false} \]

All of these possibilities might exist, as I pointed out in my (2005) in more detail. In order to capture the case of lying while saying the truth (i.e., \( p \) is true and \( q \) is false), it seems reasonable to propose the following extended definition of lying.

(7)  
\textit{Lie: extended definition} (Meibauer 2005)  
A lied at \( t \) by uttering the declarative sentence \( \sigma \)  
iff (a) if the definition of the lie [as in (2)] holds,  
(b) or if A thereby conversationally implicated that \( q \), but actively believed that not \( q \).

This definition tries to capture the intimate connection between the assertion and the false implicature. Thus, false implicatures are not only bound to assertions, they are also directly intended.

Empirical support for my view comes from a recent study by Hardin (2010), partly replicating Coleman and Kay’s seminal study (Coleman and Kay 1981) for a group of 49 speakers of Spanish living in Eastern Ecuador. With respect to story 6 (“ex-boyfriend”), where a false implicature is to be derived, “the implicature itself was perceived as lying” (Hardin 2010: 3209).
Juan and Maria recently started going together. Valentino is Maria’s ex-boyfriend. One night Juan asks Maria, “Have you seen Valentino this week?” Maria answers, “Valentino has been sick with the flu for two weeks.” Valentino has in fact been sick with the flu for two weeks, but it is also true that Maria had a date with Valentino the previous night. Did Maria lie? (Translation from the Spanish version by the author, Hardin 2010: 3211)

This story received a mean scale score of 4.84 out of a seven-point scale with 7.0 as the highest value for lying (Hardin 2010: 3205). Even if it is admitted that there may exist intercultural variation here (the values for English and Arab speakers being somewhat lower, see Hardin 2010: 3205, Table 1), the results point to the fact that extending the definition of lying is a quite natural move.

A critic might object that the extended definition is only of terminological value, because cases of indirect lying are subsumed under the label of deceptive acts. In my view, however, it follows from the differences between deceptions and lies listed above that false implicatures should not be treated as deceptions (as distinguished from proper lies). The crucial point is that a false implicature only comes about through a verbal act of assertion to which it is bound. In contrast, a characterization of false implicature as deception misses this connection and remains purely terminological. In the same vein, we do not need a separate category of “misleading,” as Horn (2009: 27) proposes.

What really matters is the way of bringing about the lie, namely by false assertion and/or by false implicature. Hence, I take it that it is adequate to treat false implicatures as lies, as long as their status as implicature is acknowledged and the distinction between assertion and implicature is not blurred.

4. Imprecision

When defining lying as in (2), we supposed that a speaker is either lying or truthful. However, there appear to be cases where someone is not truthful, yet cannot be considered a liar. Typically, those cases have to do with measurements. In the following, I will argue that imprecision may pave the way for lying.

The first case relates to truthfulness in telling the time. Look at the exchange in (8):

(8) Peter: Mary arrives at three o’clock.
    John: [Mary arriving 15 seconds later]: #You said she came at three!

When A tells B that Mary arrives at three o’clock, but later he finds that she in fact arrives 15 seconds later, it is unreasonable of B to complain (# indicating
pragmatic inadequateness). Lasersohn (1999: 522), to whom we owe the example, comments: “But whether or not John is acting unreasonably in this situation, I think we have to concede that he is, strictly speaking, right: when I told him that Mary arrived at three, I said something that was literally false, not true. As people often do, I was just speaking a little loosely. My defense is not that I was telling the truth, but that what I said was ‘close enough’ to the truth for practical purposes.”

With regard to the sentences in (9), Lasersohn (1999: 522) points out a semantic puzzle. If (9a) is literally true then it seems truth-conditionally equivalent to (9b):

(9) Mary arrived at three o’clock.
    Mary arrived at exactly three o’clock.

But these sentences do not mean the same, since exactly contributes to sentence meaning. Words like exactly are viewed as lexical devices signaling the intended degree to the approximation of truth. Sentences like (9a) allow greater “pragmatic slack” in comparison to sentences like (9b). Therefore, lexical elements like exactly are called “slack regulators.” Lasersohn (1999: 527) develops a formal theory of “pragmatic halos”: “Given an expression α denoting some object x, I like to think of the set the context associates with x as arrayed around x in a sort of circular cluster, so I will call this set, together with its ordering relation, the PRAGMATIC HALO of x, extending the terminology, as the pragmatic halo of x.”

The second case relates to truthfulness in telling distances. The following examples are taken from Krifka (2002: 430–431). Note that the distance between Amsterdam and Vienna is in fact 965 kilometers.

(10) A: The distance between Amsterdam and Vienna is one thousand kilometers.
    B: #No, you’re wrong, it’s nine hundred sixty-five kilometers.

According to Krifka, in this context, B’s answer is true but pedantic, while, in (11), it is perfectly adequate.

(11) A: The distance between Amsterdam and Vienna is nine hundred seventy-two kilometers.
    B: No, you’re wrong, it’s nine hundred sixty-five kilometers.

This shows that speakers face the problem of “precision level choice”: “When expressing a measurement of an entity, choose a level of precision that is adequate for the purpose at hand.” (Krifka 2002: 433) Krifka eventually finds that short expressions and vague interpretations are pragmatically favored. Furthermore, short expressions correlate with vague interpretations, while long expressions correlate with precise interpretations.
Recently, the idea of a convention or maxim of truthfulness has come under attack by Relevance theorists. Wilson and Sperber (2002: 583) argue, “that language use is not governed by any convention or maxim of truthfulness in what is said.” Instead, relevance is what governs language use, and therefore, “expectations of truthfulness—to the extent that they exist—are a by-product of expectations of relevance” (Wilson and Sperber 2002: 584). According to Wilson and Sperber, prima facie evidence against the claim that speakers try to tell the truth are lies, jokes, fictions, metaphors, ironies, and more generally, so-called loose uses of language such as approximations and sense extensions. Note that van der Henst, Carles, and Sperber (2002) is an attempt at verifying that claim experimentally with respect to the question of truthfulness in telling the time. What they found is that subjects strived for relevance and not for truthfulness, and that they tended to rounding.

Here, I would like to object. That relevance or the choice of the right precision level plays a role in the above cases does not mean that a maxim of Quality (or some device with the same function) is superfluous. Take irony as an example. If Ken says to Barbie \textit{Dan is a fine friend} in order to ironically convey the proposition that Dan is not a fine friend, then this is nevertheless compatible with his statement being a lie. Ken believes that Dan is a fine friend, but for some reason he wants to deceive Barbie about his attitude toward Dan. I do not see how to explain the deceptive manipulation of contents without any appeal to the notions of truth and truthfulness. In short, lying is not evidence against truthfulness, but evidence for truthfulness.

Coming back to the example by Lasersohn (1999) in (8), I would like to argue that the pragmatic slack opens up another promising avenue for the liar to go, similar to the case of lying while saying the truth working with false implicatures. Imagine a situation in which it is clear that precision is called for. When a defendant is asked when Mary arrived, he is nevertheless licensed to answer at three o’clock, even if he knows (and knows that this matters) that her arriving happened at three minutes past three o’clock. The pragmatic slack therefore is also a lying slack. Does that mean that truthfulness is irrelevant? On the contrary, it shows that truthfulness is relevant, and, what is more interesting, that the liar finds niches built into language structure that could be used as “lying halos.” I would like to propose that this should be researched in more detail in order to get a more fine-grained picture of subtle acts of lying. It goes without saying that standard definitions of lying have to be accommodated along the lines of future findings.

This is not to say that we need a (Gricean) maxim of Quality in any case (Levinson 2000 does not provide such a maxim, but see Meibauer 2006), and it does not say that relevance plays no role at all. All I want to emphasize is that there is no way to explain lying without recursion to notions like truth and truthfulness, wherever they ultimately stem from.
5. Lying at the semantics/pragmatics interface

I have portrayed lying as an insincere speech act of asserting aiming at influencing the hearer’s belief. Since acts of lying have propositional contents that are manipulated, lying cannot be explained without recursion to semantics. On the other hand, as a speech act, and in particular as a speech act connected with implicatures, lying is also the subject of pragmatics. Hence, lying may be portrayed as a phenomenon that supports the semantics/pragmatics distinction (cf. Horn 2009).

In the introduction, I alluded to the “border wars” between minimalists and contextualists. The issue is far too complex to be dealt here with respect to lying in any detail, but have a quick look at the minimalist picture of the semantics/pragmatics divide that is presented by Recanati (2010: 16) (see Table 1 on the next page).

Saturation is, according to Recanati (2010: 4), defined as “a pragmatic process of contextual value-assignment that is triggered (and made obligatory) by something in the sentence itself, namely the linguistic expression to which a value is contextually assigned.” Indexical variables that are contextually instantiated are a case in point. Modulation, by contrast, is a “free” pragmatic process, as in the case of metaphor. Recanati’s “truth-conditional pragmatics” is an approach that says that truth-conditional processes may be affected not only by saturation but also by modulation. For lack of space, I cannot go into a comparison with the approaches by Levinson (2000) and Carston (2002) with their notions of “pragmatic intrusion into what is said” and explicature (cf. also Capone 2009, Bach 2010). All I want to stress here is that there is need to reflect about the question how processes of saturation and modulation could influence lying. For example, one might start with the question whether lying by intentionally false saturation or modulation is possible.

Similarly, cases of missing or unarticulated constituents—whatever their ultimate status in minimalist or post-minimalist approaches is—should be considered. When Ken says to Barbie that he had no sex, he may lie by leading Barbie to the proper (but intentionally false) enrichment “throughout his life.”

What is much needed in the analysis of lying and, as far as I see, not covered by the recent, otherwise quite sophisticated, approaches to the semantic/pragmatics interface, is the level of sentence type and the level of speech act. Models as in Table 1 are typically centered on the Gricean distinction between what is said and what is implicated. However, for the definition of lying, we need an explication of the declarative sentence, but where in the grammar is this done? And what about the semantics of this sentence type, i.e., its sentence modality? When it comes to pragmatics, the picture is similar. Where are speech acts defined? What is the exact relation between speech acts and implicatures? What about other pragmatic entities that interact with speech acts and
implicatures, for example presuppositions? All this should be built into a comprehensive linguistic theory of lying. Models as in Table 1 are an important step for modeling the semantics/pragmatics interface, but the ultimate aim should be to explain lying with respect to the interaction of grammar and pragmatics.

References


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