

On Lying: A Conceptual Argument for the Falsity Condition

Tobies Grimaltos and Sergi Rosell

(Universitat de València)

Abstract: In this paper, we put forward a conceptual argument for the Falsity Condition for lying, upon the assumption that lying is a form of deception. We argue that if the definition of lying did not include the Falsity Condition, then successful lying would not secure that the addressee ends up believing a falsehood (about what the lie is about), which is necessary for deceiving, and then successful lying (as such) would not necessarily be a form of deception.

Although there is no generally accepted definition of lying, some conditions have recurrently been proposed as necessary conditions; especially, but not only, the statement condition (i.e. the requirement that the speaker assert or make a statement), the believe-to-be-false condition (that the speaker believe that what she states is false), the intention-to-deceive condition (that the statement be done with the purpose of causing the addressee to believe something false), and the falsity condition (that what is stated be false). So, this could be a *prima facie* convincing analysis of lying:

A speaker S lies to an addressee A iff:

- (i) S asserts [says, states] p to A;
- (ii) S believes that p is false;
- (iii) by asserting p to A, S intends to deceive A about p; and
- (iv) p is false.

However, (iv), the Falsity Condition, is particularly controversial, and has been widely rejected, as a necessary condition. Indeed, the idea that, in addition to the intention to deceive, the mere belief that what is asserted be false is sufficient for an assertion to be a lie has an undeniable intuitive force. If George W. Bush says, without believing it, that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, he appears to have lied even if it turns out that there actually are (cf. Saul 2012, 4-6).

Yet we want to offer here a conceptual argument in favour of the Falsity Condition, based on the assumption that lying is a way of deceiving. We will first characterize the setting for the argument, and will then offer the argument. Afterwards, we will respond to an important objection and defend one of the disjuncts of the argument's conclusion.

1. Preliminaries

A first thing to be noted, before going to the argument, is that it is commonly assumed that lying is a form of deception. Indeed, if there is a historically, socially, and morally distinguished form of linguistic deception, that is lying. Although, no doubt, one can deceive another in many other different ways, both linguistically and behaviourally: such as misleading, holding back or concealing relevant information, not correcting a mistake, or just being silent, assenting or denying with a head movement, making a gesture, acting or role-playing, and, more generally, bluffing, plagiarizing, cheating, etc.

Strictly speaking, any lie need not be an instance of deception, since the speaker can fail in her attempt to deceive the addressee, i.e. to cause him to believe what

she has stated. Unlike deceiving, lying is not an achievement or success verb (Ryle 1949; also Carson 2010). A speaker S has not deceived an addressee A if A does not come to believe what S states (p), since to deceive is to cause another to have a false belief;¹ but S can lie to A even if A does not come to believe p. So, lying is rather to be compared with attempting to deceive, and successfully lying with actually deceiving. When it is successful, lying appears to be a form of (deliberate) deception; when it is not, lying would merely be an attempt to deceive.

We will call *veridical lies* to those supposed lies in which the Falsity Condition does not obtain, i.e. cases in which one ‘lies’ by asserting something true. Our argument objects to this very possibility of lying with the truth.²

2. *The argument*

Now, here is the argument. If lying does not include, as a necessary condition, the requirement that what is stated be false (Falsity Condition), then even successful lying does not secure that the addressee ends up believing a falsehood. But causing to believe a falsehood is necessary for deceiving, so that, if lying by saying something true (veridical lies) is possible, then successful lying does not secure deception.

Recall Bush’s case. Let us accept for the sake of argument that he is lying, even though what he says is true, since he does not believe it—indeed, he thinks it is false—and states it with the intention to deceive about it. But, then, the result is that lying (or attempting to lie)—i.e. Bush’s saying that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—and succeeding in this lie—actually causing the addressee to believe that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—does not secure that the addressee comes to believe something false (about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq)—since, in the example, it is true that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—, if the Falsity Condition is not a necessary condition in the definition of lying.

If this is so, then either (i) not all forms of (successful) lying are actually forms of deceiving, since some forms of (successful) lying would not cause a false belief in the addressee; or (ii) it must be accepted that the Falsity Condition is a necessary condition for lying.

This is basically the argument. But, before trying to adjudicate between the conclusion’s disjuncts, there is an objection that needs to be met.

3. *Objection*

No doubt, a fair objection to be made is the following: even though the speaker’s words are not actually false (and then the addressee cannot be directly deceived in believing them), there is an obvious sense in which the addressee is still deceived, i.e. regarding the speaker’s own beliefs. If the liar succeeds, the addressee is at least caused to believe that the liar believes something that he does not actually believe—and this is being caused to believe something false. Although the liar has not deceived the addressee

¹ We do not need to take a stance on whether deceiving is necessarily intentional or not, since the forms we are concerned with are all intentional.

² It has been argued that there is a special kind of lies—‘bald-faced lies’—which are not attempts to deceive, so that the intention-to-deceive condition is not necessary (see Sorensen 2007; Fallis 2009, 41-43; and Saul 2012). So, we will restrict our argument to ‘deceptive lies’ (or lies intended to be deceptive; Fallis 2009, 54-56). Importantly, bald-faced lies would also satisfy the Falsity Condition, since it is definitely impossible to lie by saying the truth and not intending to deceive, at once; and they would be neither morally nor epistemically problematic.

about the world, he has done it about his own mind. Is this not enough to speak of a deception?

We think that a promising answer to this should appeal to the idea that lying is strictly about what is said. It is true that veridical lies also deceive, although not in the relevant way that is central for lies. Indeed, it can be argued that veridical lies are not deceptive *qua* lies, given that lies concern only what is said. They should rather be characterized as a way of misleading through lying. That is, in these cases A would be deceived owing to an inference that A draws from p (what is said), which A thereby comes to believe, but not about p itself (which A does believe but it is true).

In general, it seems true that an instance of lying can at once be an instance of misleading. For example, if I am asked about whether my partner is at home with me and, knowing that she is, I say that she is not, I am lying to my interlocutor about what I say, but I am also misleading him, since, in addition, I am making him to infer something more, also false, i.e. that she is in some other place—which could cause a very specific belief in him, if there were well-defined alternatives—which is something that I just implicate.

In our cases things are a bit more complicated, since, as mentioned, when one victim of a lie one typically gets deceived about p by means of believing that S believes p, and this is something that S does not say; so that this is a necessary inference. However, veridical lies fail to deceive in the crucial sense: in causing a false belief in the addressee about what is said. Thus, successful veridical lies would still be non-deceptive, in the relevant sense, because one would lie while causing the true belief p in the addressee.

But now, our argument needs to be slightly re-phrased as follows: either (i) not all forms of (successful) lying are actually forms of deception *about what is said*, since some forms of (successful) lying would not cause a false belief about *what is said* in the addressee; or (ii) it must be accepted that the Falsity Condition is a necessary condition for lying. This formulation is surely less impressive, but it is what we basically meant.

4. *Can there be veridical lies?*

Eventually, we would ideally need a follow-up argument against (i); so that, if sound, (ii) would have to be endorsed. Unfortunately we do not have such a decisive argument, but we can offer the following tentative remarks (which mainly stick with intuition).

On the one hand, take into account that lying, whenever it is an attempt to cause the addressee to believe what is said, appears to involve attempting to deceive the addressee. And it is unintelligible that an attempt to deceive which succeeds (in the right way) not be an act of deception. To this, our adversary will surely reply that we are unjustifiedly assuming here that (what we call, and is usually called) the intention-to-deceive condition is a necessary condition for lying; when, for not begging the question, this condition should at least be rephrased as the requirement that S attempt to cause A to believe what S states, which (contrary to what S can believe) can be true—so that an intention to deceive, in the sense of causing a false belief, is not necessary; but only in the sense of intending to cause the addressee to believe in the contrary to what one believes.

Now, if this line of response—which just seems to be a quite simple internal readjustment in the definition of lying for those who reject the Falsity Condition—sounds convincing enough, then the only thing that we can finally adduce in response is intuition: (i)—i.e. that there is a type of lie (veridical lie) that is not a form of deception, given that even if it is successful, it will not deceive the addressee—clashes with the

common assumption that lying in general is a form of deception. And this counterintuitive result, at least, shifts the burden of proof on the side of the denier of the Falsity Condition.

To sum up, since veridical lies would be non-deceptive (regarding what is said), and lying is generally thought to be a form of deception (about what is said), their possibility is hard to hold, and the burden of proof is on the side of those who hold it. But, if there cannot be veridical lies, the conclusion to endorse is that (independently of which other conditions are jointly necessary) the Falsity Condition is a necessary condition for lying.

References

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