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## **ON THE CONCEPT OF LIE – FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF SEMIOTICS**

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### **1 Introduction**

Let us begin with a typical example of a lie. A husband coming back home several hours later than usual says to his wife: "I've been held up in the office by an important conference;" whereas in fact he spent this time with some pleasant company.

We are dealing here with a verbal communication act, i.e. people communicating with the use of language signs. The speaker utters a false sentence and knows that it is false; he utters it in order to mislead the recipient. The speaker is lying. The sentence he has said is a lie.

This simple example makes it possible to observe several things.

Firstly, we may distinguish an ACTION – LYING from its PRODUCT – i.e. A LIE.

Secondly, it is possible to note that a condition necessary for lying is to SEND some SIGN, and the lie is such a SIGN sent; there is no lying and no lie without a sender.

Thirdly, for the lying person to achieve her/his purpose the lie needs to have a RECIPIENT; otherwise it would not have any effect. A lie which has not been realized would be like counterfeit money which has not been put into circulation, and lying without a recipient is like manufacturing counterfeit money and not putting it on the market; it would have a supposed addressee but no actual recipient.

Fourthly, lying and lies appear in the course of communication, and in the case under discussion – in the course of language communication.

Thanks to its sign character they are a part of the process of SEMIOSIS, i.e. the process of using signs.

Fifthly, within this process, a SEMANTIC FEATURE of a lie, i.e. of a certain sign, and to be more precise of a given use of a sign in specific circumstances, is its FALSENESS. Further, the PRAGMATIC FEATURES of semiosis in this instance are (a) the fact that THE SENDER WISHES TO MISLEAD THE RECIPIENT, (b) the fact that the sender KNOWS THAT THE SIGN HE IS USING IS FALSE, (c) the fact that the recipient BELIEVES THAT THE SIGN, used in this manner, IS TRUE.

On the basis of the above example it is possible to provide a temporary proposal – the following definition of lying:

X IS LYING WHENEVER HE UTTERS A FALSE SENTENCE, KNOWING THAT IT IS FALSE, AND DOES SO TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT OF SUCH AN UTTERANCE MISLEAD, I.E. TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT CONSIDER IT TO BE TRUE.

Is the above definition correct? We will now attempt to analyse it.

## **2 What Kind of Beings are Lies and Lying**

What kind of being is a lie? Is it a real or a fictional object, a feature, a phenomenon, a state of affairs, a situation, an event (occurrence) or a process?

The sentence from our example “I’ve been held up in the office by an important conference” may be treated either as an EXAMPLE OF A SENTENCE or a SENTENCE AS A TYPE. In the first instance this would be a concrete object, e.g. the speech apparatus of the speaker, vibrating by articulation of sounds, which comprise this example of a sentence, and the environment vibrating as a result thereof, i.e. the air and the objects in the vicinity of the speaker. On the other hand, a sentence as a type is not a physical object, but a set in a set theory sense, i.e. an abstract object. Therefore, the presented sentence may be considered either to be a PHYSICAL OBJECT or an ABSTRACT OBJECT. We are dealing with the former when we say that a lie was this utterance sent by Mr. X in a concrete situation, which is composed of the place, time, the person of the addressee, the circumstances preceding the sending of this utterance and many other things. The latter is the case when we say that this type of expression in a certain kind of situation is a lie.

The above observation entails another. The considered sentence is not a lie, if it has been isolated from THE CONTEXT OF ITS USE, i.e. the person of the sender, the place and time and generally, the situation of the sending

of the utterance, the person of the recipient and the situation of the receipt. For it to be a lie, the abovementioned factors need to be added thereto. It is only TOGETHER WITH THE ACCOMPANYING SITUATION THIS SENTENCE may be classified as a LIE.

What is therefore the ontological status of a SITUATION? Into which category of beings does it fall? The answer to this question depends on the philosophical views of the person answering. Some believe that a situation is no different from such and such things: inanimate and animate things, and among the latter non-psychological beings such as plants, and beings with psychological life, e.g. humans and animals, which exists in one way or the other in a given time and place. From this point of view, a situation is a COMPLEX PHYSICAL BEING, something concrete. Others perceive the situation as an ABSTRACT BEING: not such and such things but the fact that these things are such and such. These two standpoints are possible if one has in mind a particular unique situation. If however one thinks of a TYPE OF SITUATION, one must agree that a situation is an ABSTRACT BEING. Therefore it appears that each of the elements of a lie, both the sentence as well as the situation, may be interpreted in two ways: either as a concrete, physical thing, or as an abstract or ideal being.

The case is similar in the case of LYING. According to some it is no different from a person lying at time *t* AS SUCH, i.e. an animate concrete object with psychological life, acting in a certain manner. In the opinion of others lying is either an attribute of the lying person or a certain ACTION, OCCURRENCE or PROCESS – and by no means a concrete, physical object.

What kind of beings therefore are a lie and lying? These may be both CONCRETE THINGS, as well as BEINGS BELONGING TO OTHER ONTOLOGICAL CATEGORIES. The same is with signs – they may belong to each ontological category. And so each B1 – each thing, attribute, phenomenon or occurrence – may be used as a sign of any B2, different from B1, similarly, each thing, attribute, phenomenon, occurrence or situation may be used as a lie.

### **3 Semantic Features of a Lie**

Let us stop for a while over the concepts of the verbal lie and of verbal lying. Are lying and a lie connected only with falsehood? Is it true that every time one is lying, either in writing or in speech, she/he formulates a false sentence; are only false sentences lies? Can a true sentence be a lie? Can a lie be a sentence deprived of logical value, i.e. a sentence which is neither

true nor false? Can a lie be a non-sentence expression, i.e. an expression which cannot be qualified on the basis of its logical value?

Let us imagine the following situation. Peter promised that today he would return his debt to a friend living in a neighbouring town. Since he does not have the money, he calls his friend and tells him that he is not able to come, because the trains are not running due to a malfunction. It turns out that at the same time due to technical reasons train traffic on this line was indeed suspended, which Peter does not know about. When he is calling his friend he thinks that he is uttering a false sentence and is doing so in order to mislead his friend, whereas in fact this sentence is true.

Is it therefore necessary for a sentence to be a lie it must also be false, or is it sufficient for the speaker to CONSIDER IT TO BE FALSE? I opt for the second solution. As a result thereof, the above definition of lying shall be modified in the following manner:

X IS LYING WHENEVER HE UTTERS A SENTENCE, WHICH HE CONSIDERS TO BE FALSE, AND DOES SO TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT OF SUCH UTTERANCE MISLEAD, I.E. TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT CONSIDER IT TO BE TRUE.

It is therefore visible that what counts is not the semantic feature of a lie, i.e. the falseness of the sentence qualified as a lie, but only its pragmatic features, namely: firstly – the attitude of the speaker towards the contents and the truth value of the uttered sentence – the speaker considers the sentence to be false – and secondly the intention of the speaker: he wants to mislead the recipient.

Can therefore a grammatical sentence which IS NEITHER TRUE NOR FALSE be a lie? Such sentences are analysed in the theory of truth value gaps, i.e. gaps in ascribing to a sentence its truth value. They are sometimes considered to be void sentences in literary works, i.e. sentences which refer to non-existent beings, such as sentences on Sherlock Holmes. If, according to the second version of our definition, we assume that no such or other truth value is co-decisive on whether a sentence is a lie, but the fact that the sender considered this sentence to be false, then we may also consider as lies so called void sentences which, according to the truth gap theory, are neither true nor false, such as *Sherlock Holmes played the flute*, if the speaker considers it to be false and wants to mislead the recipient.

We have reached the conclusion that BOTH FALSE as well as TRUE SENTENCES AND SENTENCES WHICH HAVE NO TRUTH VALUE may be used in the role of a LIE.

Nonetheless, in the light of the second of the abovementioned definitions

of a lie, it is connected with the truth and falseness to such an extent, to which the lying person considers the sentence he utters to be false and utters it in order for the recipient to consider it to be true. It may be therefore assumed that the views on problems of the truth do not affect the standpoint with respect to the notion of lie.

As it is known, there are several theories of truth, and therefore of falsehood; these have been presented in a clear and concise manner by Jacek Jadacki (1986), from which we have taken the following enumeration:

According to the classical definition of truth, i.e. the correspondence definition of truth, using the notion of consistency of the judgement with the state of the facts, *Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei, secundum quod intellectus dicit esse quod est, vel non esse quod non est* – the truth is the consistency between comprehension and a thing consisting therein that we believe that it is (so and so) about what is (exactly this way) or that it is not (so and so) about what is not (so).

The coherence theory of truth, connected with the name of Leibniz, as the universal criterion of truth of a given sentence indicates the fact that it is not inconsistent with respect to the remaining sentences within a given system or whether it is possible to infer such a sentence from the latter in a finite number of steps.

The so-called obviousness theory of truth sees the universal criterion of truth in the fact that we are ready to accept a given sentence without any hesitation, and this is due to its clarity and distinctiveness, i.e. the features emphasized by Descartes: *Verum est quod clare ac distincte percipio*, truth is what I see clearly and distinctively.

According to the pragmatic theory of truth the universal criterion of truth of a sentence, or more broadly – of an action – is the usefulness in some respect for the individual or for society of the state of affairs to which a given sentence pertains or the effectiveness for some respect of a given behaviour, be it linguistic behaviour or action; Peirce, James and Dewey are the propagators of this theory.

The so-called operationalist theory of truth sees the universal criterion of truthfulness of a sentence in its decidability, understood sometimes, e.g. by Bridgman, as existence of a method of deciding on a given question.

Finally, the theory of experiential verifiability of truth, propagated i.a. by Schlick, considers a sentence to be true when it either itself pertains to the observable state of affairs, or whose consequences pertain thereto. These theories are not universal: each of them is possible to apply only to certain categories of expressions or actions, however, these theories are not mutually

exclusive but rather supplementary with respect to one another. On their basis it is possible to construct relevant theories of falsehood and subsequently of a lie. And so: the semantic features of a lie are characterised by the classical, operationalist and truth verifiability theories; partially semantic and partially syntactic features of the properties of lies are explained by the coherence theory and the theory based on the notion of obviousness; the pragmatic theory, as the name itself indicates, focuses on the pragmatic features of a lie.

#### **4 Pragmatic Features of a Lie**

Does X, whenever he is lying by uttering or writing a certain sentence, need to consider the sentence to be false? This is what follows from the modified definition of lying. Maybe it was inapt and requires further modifications? Can X use for lying a sentence, which he considers to be true or with respect to the truth value of which he has no conviction whatsoever?

Before we try to answer this question, we need to draw our attention to the second pragmatic component of lying: the intention of the speaker to mislead the recipient. We omit here the disinterested autotelic, so called “children’s” lies, which are uttered as a kind of fantasizing, close to literary activity.

MISLEADING consists in the fact that recipient TAKES THE FALSEHOOD TO BE TRUE, and at another time in the fact that the recipient TAKES PARTIAL AND IMMATERIAL TRUTH TO BE THE WHOLE TRUTH or in the fact that the recipient TAKES THE TRUTH TO BE FALSE, and according thereto, the recipient acts or refrains from acting, and in other instances the misleading consists in the fact that something WHICH IS DEPRIVED OF TRUTH VALUE is treated by the recipient in certain cases as being TRUE and in other cases as being FALSE, and as a consequence thereof the recipient still acts inadequately.

A lie not only needs a lying person, but also a person who is or has been deceived. The former, the speaker, when lying, sometimes uses a sentence which he believes to be true or with respect to the truth value whereof he has no opinion whatsoever.

This category of lying may include instances, when the lying person is counting on the fact that the recipient will apply A DIFFERENT CRITERION OF TRUTH than the speaker. For example the speaker, who intends to lie, uses a sentence which he himself considers to be true under criterion C1, however, he is counting on the fact that the recipient will consider it to be false under criterion C2, which is different from C1. Let us imagine that

the speaker professes to some ideology and therefore considers under the coherence truth criterion some sentence taken out of that system to be true. Seeing, that this system is alien to the recipient and that the recipient will apply, for example, the obviousness criterion to this sentence, the speaker utters this sentence in order to deceive the recipient, i.e. to have him consider this sentence to be false and to undertake actions resulting from this opinion and to bear the consequences thereof. At another time, an author, writing or uttering a sentence, to which he ascribes no truth value, i.e. considers it neither to be true nor false, uses this statement of his, in order to have the reader or interlocutor, who applies a different criterion truth than the author, to consider the utterance to be true. These types of instances appear in texts of literary fiction, which are calculated to have the readers consider as true expressions contained therein, which are not judgments.

The above observations provoke us into introducing another definition of lying. It has the following form:

X IS LYING WHENEVER HE UTTERS A SENTENCE S, TO WHICH HE ASCRIBES TRUTH VALUE V1, AND DOES SO TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT OF SUCH UTTERANCE MISLEAD, I.E. TO HAVE THE RECIPIENT ASCRIBE TO THIS UTTERANCE TRUTH VALUE V2, WHICH IS DIFFERENT FROM V1.

Let V1 and V2 in the above formulation symbolize instances, when we ascribe no truth value to a given sentence.

The analysis of the notion of MISLEADING, appearing in all of the above versions of the definition of lying needs to be supplemented by a few remarks. The recipient in some sentences is deceived by the CONTENT of the statement of the speaker, such as it was the case with the sentence "I've been held up in the office by an important conference," uttered in a relevant situation. At another time the recipient may be misled by the fact that THE SPEAKER IS THE AUTHOR of the utterance or by the mere FACT THAT THE SPEAKER SAID SOMETHING. Then lying is successful not because of what has been said but because of WHO said it or THAT somebody said it. This is the manner in which a cynical politician could lie, who enjoys authority and is respected and trusted by credulous listeners. On the opposite pole we have a liar who constructs his lies on the fact that nobody believes him, which he himself is aware of. For this reason he utters the truth, which he wants either ignored or considered to be false. This way he MISINFORMS the recipients.

Such instance of a lie, which can be illustrated by the example of the sign "For adults only," put on a food item, for example chocolates containing liquor

or on a book not intended for children and young people, deserves a separate remark. The sender – the manufacturer or the publisher – CONSIDERS THIS ABBREVIATED SENTENCE TO BE TRUE and moreover IT IS TRUE. The sender also counts on the fact that minor recipients WILL BELIEVE IN THE TRUTH of this sentence and will be all the more eager to purchase the forbidden fruit. Lying here is not based on the difference between qualification of the logical value of the sign “For adults only” by the sender on one part and the recipient on the other. It consists therein that from the expression “For adults only” there follows an implicit prohibition addressed to the minors, issued by the sender in bad faith and for the purpose of it actually being broken.

### **5 The Axiological Aspect of a Lie**

The formulation repeated in each of the above attempts at providing a definition of a lie, i.e. “in order to mislead the recipient” is PEJORATIVE. Therefore, this raises the question WHETHER A PERSON IS LYING if he intentionally says something which is not true, but does so in order to SPARE SOMEONE ELSE'S FEELINGS or CAUSE PLEASURE, e.g. a man who is asked by a woman “Do you love me?” replies that he does, despite the fact that the feeling is long gone, or the man when being asked “Do I look nice” answers “beautifully,” although something opposite has thrown at his head. Is a person lying, when she/he wishes to observe etiquette or does not want to bore the surroundings with her/his ailments and to the stereotypical “How are you?” she /he answers casually “Just fine,” although in fact she/he barely walks? Is a person lying when she/he HIDING THE TRUTH from a hopelessly ill person, or intentionally presents to this person her/his health condition falsely? Is a person lying when she/he provides a student with information diverging from the truth, although she/he knows it is not true, but does so in order to make it easier for the student to understand a problem, which is too complicated for the intellectual capabilities of the adept? Is a person lying when she/he presents to a child a consciously distorted, yet edifying, vision of reality in order to benevolently influence the child's moral development? In short, is a person also lying when she /he acts in accordance with the last provided definition of lying, but does so out of a noble intention, being driven by the welfare of the recipient or the social good, and moreover, achieves her/his purpose? Does the category of lies contain also noble lies, or are noble lies no lies at all, since only reproachful acts are stigmatized with the appellation “lie.”

These questions and doubts are on the borderland of ethics and semiotics,

in particular a section thereof called pragmatics. This is however not a place to dwell upon them; these remarks are limited to the field of semiotics, and out of necessity we leave these significant and interesting questions unanswered. Although solving them may be facilitated by a regulatory definition of lying and of lie, yet the choice of this or that definition will depend, among others, on the hierarchy of values we have adopted, and this already exceeds the limits of semiotics.

## **6 The Semantic Foundation of a Lie**

In each and all of definitions of lying proposed herein, its core consists in the uttering of a certain sentence. Is it really necessary to verbalize a sentence in order to lie? More generally speaking, does lying need to be a verbal activity? No, it does not. Facial expressions, gestures, various actions, silence, refraining from doing something, presence or absence at a given time in a given place – all these can be lies in certain conditions.

Are humans the only ones to lie? I guess not: it is also the case with certain animals, e.g. a dog which rapidly demands to be taken out for a walk in the middle of the night pretending that it is *dura necessitate coactus*, forced by a hard necessity, when in fact all it wants to do is to take a run. Yet, in the animal world there is a fluent borderline between intentional pretending and spontaneous and inborn pretending, on one end whereof there is the natural mimetism or mimicry.

The borderline is also fluent in the human world between lying, pretending, hypocrisy, mystification, perfidy and deception. Yet, as one may think, the lie is the core of each of the above. A person who cheats when playing cards, pays with counterfeit money, trades in counterfeited products, presents false documents, forges someone else's signature, commits plagiarism, fails to keep his promise, breaks an agreement, manifests false kindness, sorrow or regret, is lying. And every person who is lying is always using a sign. THERE IS NO LIE WITHOUT THE USE OF A SIGN. LYING IS A SEMIOTIC ACTION, HAVING AT LEAST ITS SENDER AND ADDRESSEE, AND IN CASE OF AN ACCOMPLISHED LIE – ITS RECIPIENT. It is therefore also an action OCCURRING IN SOCIETY, and finally, it is a CULTURAL ACT.

I believe that deception may be reduced to a lie, and each LIE MAY BE REDUCED TO A CERTAIN LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR, CONSISTING IN THE SENDING OF A CERTAIN SENTENCE, TO WHICH THE SENDER ASCRIBES A DIFFERENT LOGICAL VALUE THAN, IN THE SENDER'S INTENTION, IS TO BE ASCRIBED TO THIS SENTENCE

BY THE RECIPIENT. For example, someone who adds glycol to wine, and then sells this mix as pure natural wine – is lying: in the sense that his non-verbal behaviour is tantamount to uttering the following false sentence “This is pure wine,” connected with the awareness that this is a false sentence, and with the intention to have the recipient convinced that this is a true sentence.

Here we have a typical example of a lie: a speaker utters a false sentence, knows that it is false, and is uttering it only to mislead the recipient into considering this sentence to be true. We are dealing here with a classical lie, we may say. Such a description does not usually raise any doubts or objections, in particular if one adds, that the sender was not acting with good intent.

But how should we qualify the remaining instances mentioned in the course of our deliberations, and namely those containing a sentence deprived of truth value, considered by the sender to be true or treated by the same as deprived of logical value; are these lies no more, or are these various concepts of lie, and therefore, in other words, various meanings of the word “lie,” or different intensities of lying, but in each case within the same sense of the word?

In order to answer this question one needs to be aware that both the fact that we proposed subsequent approximation to the definition of lie, as well as the contents of these definitions, it suggests that the concept of lie, and of lying, are typological and not classificational concepts. This results in the gradual nature of each of them: a greater lie – a smaller lie, he lies more – he lies less. This grade depends on whether one is lying in a more important or less important matter, whether one lies notoriously or exceptionally, whether the damage caused to the recipient is smaller or greater. But maybe it depends also on the semantic and pragmatic features of a lie, included in the subsequent above proposals of the definition of a lie, namely, whether one is lying with the use of a false sentence, or merely with the use of a sentence which the sender considers to be false, or finally with the use of a true sentence, which the sender considers to be true, but counts on the fact that the recipient will not acknowledge its truth or will take a partial truth to be the whole truth.

Bearing in mind the typological and so the gradual character of the concepts of lie and of lying, one may consider as less material the terminological issue, whether only the first of the discussed instances, “I’ve been held up in the office by an important conference,” should be called a lie, or maybe the remaining as well, and whether in all the remaining cases there is a different

concept of lie or merely there is a difference in its intensity.

### **Bibliography**

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