

# Lying and Insincerity

Forthcoming in the *International Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*

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## Abstract

What is lying? This entry provides a general overview of scholarly attempts to define lying in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. First, it addresses the distinction between lying and misleading, considering whether only explicit statements can be lies. The second topic is insincerity, and how it can vary in degrees under conditions of uncertainty. Its final part discusses whether lying requires an intent to deceive and genuine assertoric force.

## Key Points

- Lies are typically defined as explicit assertions of a proposition that the speaker believes to be false.
- Insincerity admits of degrees, depending on (among other factors) the speaker's confidence in the falsity of the statement.
- There is growing agreement that, although most lies are intentionally deceptive, intending to deceive is not a necessary condition for lying.
- To lie, a speaker must assert a proposition, meaning that they must communicate that the asserted content is true, thereby taking responsibility for its truth.

## Introduction

What is lying? This question has preoccupied scholars from a variety of backgrounds, since its answer has important implications not only for the study of communication, but also for its applications in ethics, politics, jurisprudence, psychology, and epistemology – to name a few. Scholars who aim to address this question typically assume<sup>1</sup> that an analysis of the concept of lying should aim for a definition stated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and which captures ordinary language intuitions about particular cases. This question has preoccupied scholars from a variety of background, since its answer has important implications that go beyond the study of communication, and that find application in ethics (Saul, 2012; Shiffrin, 2014), politics (Bakir, 2018), jurisprudence (Green, 2018), psychology, and epistemology (Peet, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

## Defining lying

There is general (but not universal) agreement that stating what you believe to be false is a *necessary* condition for lying: you cannot lie unless you explicitly say (as opposed to imply) something that you believe to be false. Schematically:

### LYING-NEC:

A speaker S lies *only if*:

(SAYING) S explicitly says that *p*, and

(INSINCERITY) S believes *p* to be false.

## Saying Explicitly

Let us begin with the SAYING condition. Its purpose is to distinguish lying, which paradigmatically involves communication, from other forms of deception (which need not involve communication). This distinction is not universally accepted: psychologists and biologists often use ‘lying’ synonymously with ‘deception.’<sup>3</sup> However, conflating lying with deception impoverishes our conceptual repertoire, and goes counter to our ordinary use of these terms. Dyeing hair and wearing makeup, for example, can be forms of deception, but they fall short of lying. Unless

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<sup>1</sup> This assumption is perhaps incorrect. For an approach based on prototype theory, see Coleman & Kay, 1981; for an exploration of the view that lying has loose boundaries, Marsili, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief introduction to the underlying methodology, see Fallis, 2009, pp. 30–32.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Smith, 2007; Dawkins, 1976; Ekman, 1986; Vrij, 2008.

we want to invite this sort of confusion, we had better include SAYING in our definition.

A good formulation of SAYING should also acknowledge that lies can be conveyed by a variety of communicative vehicles. Subsential constructions (e.g. ‘For you,’ indicating a letter), elliptical expressions (e.g. nodding in response to a question), and other symbolic means of conveying propositional content (smoke signals, morse code, etc.) can certainly amount to lying. ‘Saying’ must therefore be understood to encompass these expressions (Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Mahon, 2008).

SAYING is generally understood to require that the speaker explicitly state the believed-false proposition. This requirement of explicitness grounds the distinction between *lying* and *merely misleading*. To illustrate, imagine a slandering student who tells the dean: ‘Yesterday, the professor was sober during his lecture,’ to insinuate that his professor regularly hits the bottle before teaching. The devious student has not explicitly said anything false: the professor was sober the previous day. While the student’s statement is misleading (it’s designed to deceive), it’s not technically a lie (it’s literally true).

It has been suggested that the distinction between lying and misleading parallels the distinction between *what is said* and *what is implicated*, or between *semantic content* and *pragmatic enrichment* (or *literal* vs. *non-literal* content, *explicit* vs. *implicit*, etc.). Some scholars have conjectured that our pre-theoretical intuitions about the lying/misleading distinction could help settle how these distinctions should be drawn (Michaelson, 2016; Saul, 2012). However, experts today equally disagree about how the boundary between lying and misleading should be drawn (Borg, 2019; García-Carpintero, 2021; Saul, 2012; Stokke, 2013b, 2016; Vignolo, 2021, 2022). An influential proposal comes from Saul (2012, p. 57), who suggests that ‘a putative contextual contribution to what is said is a part of what is said only if without this contextually supplied material, [the sentence] would not have a truth-evaluable semantic content in [the context],’ but many alternative views have been proposed (Borg, 2019; Stokke, 2016).

Recently, the project of recruiting intuitions about the lying/misleading distinction to settle the ‘border wars’ between semantics and pragmatics has encountered two obstacles. First, it seems that ‘non-literal lies’ exist after all, and can be conveyed by substitutional implicatures (such as (1)) and presuppositions (such as (2)):

- (1) The party was a blast!
- (2) Did you know that Romualda is pregnant?

Various authors (Dyner, 2011, pp. 148–149, 2016; Saul, 2012, p. 16; Simpson, 1992; Viebahn, 2017, 2021) have noted that indirect expressions of this sort can intuitively be used to lie – respectively, in the examples, to lie about whether the speaker thinks that the party was fun (1) and whether Romualda is pregnant (2). If this is right, since neither construction explicitly states a believed-false proposition, the lying/misleading distinction does not straightforwardly track the distinction between explicit and implicit content.<sup>4</sup>

Second, a growing empirical literature indicates that laypeople’s intuitions about the lying/misleading distinction are not as closely aligned with the distinction between literal and non-literal content as philosophers assumed (Reins & Wiegmann, 2021; Weissman & Terkourafi, 2018; Wiegmann, 2022; Wiegmann et al., 2022; Willemsen & Wiegmann, 2018). Some take these findings to support the view, defended by some linguists, that some (if not all) believed-false implicatures should be classified as lies (Meibauer, 2005, 2011, 2014).

## Insincerity

In speech act theory, sincerity is often understood as a relation between the mental state expressed by a speech act and the speaker’s actual mental state. If I assert *that walruses are mammals*, I express a belief in the proposition that walruses are mammals. Whether I am sincere depends on whether *I believe* that walruses are mammals. My sincerity, then, is independent on whether the proposition is *actually true* – whether walruses actually are mammals. Sincerity is measured against the mind, not against the world.

We might nonetheless have the intuition that, if an insincere assertion turns out to be true, it cannot be a genuine lie (cf. Carson, 2006, 2010; Saul, 2012). Accordingly, two criteria have been proposed in addition to INSINCERITY:

- (FALSITY)             $p$  is false.
- (KNOWLEDGE)      S knows that  $p$  is false.

The idea that lying requires FALSITY or KNOWLEDGE in addition to INSINCERITY has encountered opposition in scholarly work. First, it goes against empirical evidence: laypeople classify assertions that are insincere but true as lies (Coleman & Kay, 1981; Hardin, 2010; Wiegmann et al., 2016). Second, many feel that lying is a

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<sup>4</sup> Viebahn (2021) concludes that we should abandon STATEMENT, but his proposed alternative raises more difficulties (Marsili & Löhr, 2022; Pepp, 2022). Marsili & Löhr (2022) instead suggest that an ‘inflated’ Gricean notion of saying can square these examples with the SAYING condition (cf. Dyner, 2016, p. 202; Garmendia, 2023; Güngör, 2024).

matter of the speaker's subjective intentions and attitudes: if in making a statement you think you are lying, then you are lying. Just as genuine mistakes are not lies, then, insincere statements are not redeemed from their mendacity if, unbeknownst to their speakers, they turn out to be true.<sup>5</sup>

In the literature on lying, discussion of insincerity typically takes a fundamental dichotomy for granted. It is assumed that any given speaker believes that what they assert is either true or false. However, our confidence towards what we say does not always fit these sharp categories. Sometimes we lean towards one pole (belief) or the other (disbelief), but haven't settled on either; at other times we are simply uncertain. These intermediate states, called *credences* or *graded beliefs*, are quite common in our ordinary life, and a good theory of lying and insincerity should account for them (Isenberg, 1964, p. 468; Meibauer, 2014, p. 223).

The following example (cf. Carson, 2010, pp. 212–221) shows how credences complicate the standard 'dichotomic' picture. Suppose George is a political leader that affirms (3) during a press conference. The bracketed propositions (a), (b), and (c) indicate George's degree of confidence in his utterance, in three possible scenarios.

- (3) Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.
  - a) [It is *certainly false* that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.]
  - b) [It is *probably false* that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.]
  - c) [It is *uncertain* whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.]

Scenario (a) is a clear-cut case of lying: George believes that (1) is certainly false, so he satisfies the INSINCERITY condition. For scenarios (b) and (c), however, INSINCERITY doesn't offer a clear verdict. In both cases, George neither simply believes that the statement is true, nor simply believes that the statement is false.

An easy way to improve the traditional formulation of INSINCERITY is to move belief under the scope of its negation (see e.g. Carson, 2006; Sorensen, 2007, p. 256; 2011, p. 407; Fallis, 2013).

(DISBELIEF) S does not believe *p* to be true.

The DISBELIEF formulation of INSINCERITY only requires that the speaker lacks a belief in the truth of the proposition (instead of requiring that they positively believe in its falsity). But this revision might overreach. First, there are cases of plain uncertainty, like (c). It is unclear that they are lies. Second, DISBELIEF classifies

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<sup>5</sup> More complex arguments are discussed in the literature; the interested reader can start by consulting Horn (2017), Marsili (2021a), and Wiegmann (2023).

‘bullshitting’ as lying. This term, introduced by Frankfurt (1986) in the specialist literature on deceptive communication, refers (broadly) to assertions whose veracity the speaker has not even assessed, but which the speaker goes on to assert for some other reason (e.g. to impress or appease the audience). Some authors think that bullshitting is better classified as misleading rather than lying (Saul, 2012, p. 20; Meibauer, 2014, p. 103; Stokke 2018, p. 162-170; but cf. Falkenberg, 1988, p. 93; Carson, 2010, pp. 61–62).

Carson (2006, p. 298) considers an alternative reformulation of INSINCERITY that sets the required threshold of confidence a bit higher. Perhaps a statement is insincere only if the speaker deems it to be probably false.

(PROBABLE) S believes  $p$  to be at least probably false.

Bullshitting and cases of plain uncertainty like (c) are not lies according to PROBABLE. At the same time, moderate confidence in the falsity of the proposition is enough for lying, making (b) a lie. This matches with intuitions, but PROBABLE draws a fairly arbitrary boundary between lies and non-lies. It assumes that the degree of confidence indicated by term ‘probably’ establishes the exact threshold for mendacity. For the sake of the argument, let’s assume it stands for a credence of 0.75 (i.e., where a speaker assigns a 75% likelihood to a proposition’s being true). Now suppose that George’s confidence in (3) leans just slightly towards falsity – say he has a degree of confidence of 0.6. If a degree of confidence of 0.75 in the falsity of the proposition is enough for lying, there seems to be no reason to exclude lower-graded beliefs like 0.7, or 0.6. Presumably, these statements are also insincere and mendacious, since the speaker takes them to be more likely to be false than true.

Intuitions about these intermediate cases tend not to be particularly strong. Consequently, one might challenge the idea that there is a sharp boundary between lies and non-lies: perhaps lying is a predicate with fuzzy boundaries, which admits of degrees (Isenberg, 1964, p. 470; Marsili, 2014, 2018, 2022). We saw that, depending on the speaker’s confidence in the stated proposition, a statement can be more or less insincere; correspondingly, we’ll have more or less clear cases of lying. The more the speaker is confident that what they say is false, the clearer it is that the speaker is lying. Moving towards uncertainty, there is a graded transition from sincerity to insincerity.<sup>6</sup> The fuzzy boundary between sincerity and insincerity will fall, presumably, where the speaker starts to lean towards falsity rather than truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Krauss (2017) proposes a revision in terms of *epistemic damage* that also allows for a progressive transition from sincerity to insincerity, but this account is subject to counterexamples (Benton, 2018; Marsili, 2022).

Correspondingly, Marsili (2014, 2018, 2022) suggests a COMPARATIVE criterion for insincerity:

(COMPARATIVE) S is more confident in the falsity of  $p$  than in its truth.<sup>7</sup>

## Beyond Necessity

LYING-NEC identifies necessary conditions that aren't jointly sufficient to determine whether an utterance is a lie. This is because there is a class of statements that are believed to be false when taken literally, but which are not lies. This includes ironic statements, jokes, teasing remarks, fictions<sup>8</sup>, hyperboles, metaphors, euphemisms, and the like. For instance, if Bobby sarcastically remarks, 'What a lovely day outside!' while it's pouring it down, she says what she believes to be false without lying.

Why aren't these statements lies? According to *deceptionist* views (Isenberg, 1964; Lackey, 2013; Mahon, 2008; Primoratz, 1984), this is because lies are intended to deceive, but these statements are not. Proponents of *assertionist* views instead contend that, although the speaker is saying something, they are not genuinely asserting the believed-false proposition – what is missing is assertoric force.<sup>9</sup> Their respective solutions are to complement the definition with an additional condition – either DECEPTION or ASSERTION:

(DECEPTION) S intends to deceive A about  $p$ .

(ASSERTION) S genuinely asserts that  $p$ .<sup>10</sup>

In recent years, an impressive case has been mounted against DECEPTION, mostly on the basis of a growing number of counterexamples to this requirement (Carson,

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<sup>7</sup> Here simplified (cf. Marsili, 2014, 2018). For discussion of other graded dimensions of lying (such as truth and truthlikeness), see Marsili, 2014; Meibauer, 2014, pp. 148–152; Egré & Icard, 2018, and Pepp, n.d. For the claim that any viable reformulation of INSINCERITY should also cover mental states other than belief, such as intentions, see Marsili, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> There's an interesting subliteration on whether some fictional statements can be lies (Dixon, 2022b, 2022a; Mahon, 2019; Marsili, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> *Hybrid views*, which advocate for the addition of both DECEPTION and ASSERTION (Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Mannison, 1969; Meibauer, 2005, 2014; Simpson, 1992; Williams, 2002), constitute an influential middle ground. Endorsing neo-Gricean conceptions of assertion, which require a reflexive intention to persuade the audience, entails the acceptance of a hybrid view (because an insincere statement that is accompanied by an intention to persuade is inevitably a statement that is meant to deceive).

<sup>10</sup> Both views admit different formulations. Fallis (2018) offers a review of different formulations of DECEPTION; Marsili (2021b) offers a review for ASSERTION.

2006; Carson et al., 1982; Krstić, 2019; Sneddon, 2020; Sorensen, 2007, 2010, 2018, 2022).<sup>11</sup> This has prompted several authors to abandon DECEPTION in favor of ASSERTION.

The main challenge faced by assertionists, on the other hand, is to specify the difference between *merely saying* something and *genuinely asserting* a proposition. Fallis (2009) suggests that genuinely asserted statements are those subject to the Gricean Supermaxim of Quality – meaning that one can only lie, so to speak, when one’s audience expects the truth. This rules out fictional statements, but it doesn’t differentiate lying from irony (Stokke, 2013a). Linking assertoric force to the expression of a belief (Davidson, 1985, p. 88; Fallis, 2013) won’t do either, because there are speech acts that represent the speaker as believing their content, but which are neither genuinely assertoric nor lie-apt; these include suggestions, guesses, suppositions, bets, etc. (Marsili, 2021b).

The two most influential formulations of ASSERTION advanced in the literature link this concept, respectively, to the notion of *commitment* (taking responsibility for the truth of the proposition) and to the Stalnakerian notion of *common ground*:

(C-G) S proposes that *p* become part of the official common ground.

(COMMITMENT) By making the statement, S is committing to *p*.<sup>12</sup>

Both views deliver a promising criterion with which to distinguish between lies and other believed-false statements (fiction, irony, etc.). One advantage of commitment views is that they can easily accommodate the fact that speech acts that are stronger<sup>13</sup> than assertions are also lie-apt: we can lie by making promises, by solemnly swearing, or by guaranteeing something (Marsili, 2016, 2021b).<sup>14</sup> For COMMITMENT views, this is because such speech acts commit us to the truth of their propositional content. It’s not clear, by contrast, that C-G identifies all and only those speech acts that are lie-apt (Marsili, 2020).

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<sup>11</sup> For attempts to discard some of these counterexamples, see e.g. Harris, 2019; Keiser, 2016; Krstić, 2023; Lackey, 2013; for replies, see Fallis, 2015; Krstić, forthcoming; Krstić, 2022; Stokke, 2017. Empirical work, too, mostly indicates that laypeople classify non-deceptive lies as lies (Arico & Fallis, 2013; Krstić & Wiegmann, 2022; Rutschmann & Wiegmann, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> C-G is defended by Stokke (2013a, 2018). COMMITMENT has been defended under different guises by different authors (Leland, 2015; Marsili, 2014, pp. 165–170, 2018, 2020, 2021b; Reins & Wiegmann, 2021; Viebahn, 2017, p. 1377, 2021), some of whom adopt the related notion of *narrant* (Carson, 2006, 2010; Saul, 2012). Horn (2017) adopts both conditions.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the notions of *strength* and *weakness* from Searle & Vanderveken (1985).

<sup>14</sup> Marsili (2016) presents empirical evidence that this intuition is widespread. For a discussion of lying with non-assertoric speech acts, see Leonard, 1959; Falkenberg, 1988; Meibauer, 2014, p. 76; and Marsili, 2020, 2021b.

## Conclusions

Defining lying is a difficult enterprise, which has generated substantive academic discussion. While there is so far no consensus on a definition, this review showed that there is substantial support for some claims. First, lies are typically (although perhaps not always) literal statements. Second, lies are insincere, and insincerity comes in degrees – paradigmatically depending on the speaker’s confidence in the truth of what they say. Third, while most lies are meant to deceive, not all lies are. Fourth, lying requires that one assert a proposition; presumably, this requires taking responsibility for the truth of what one says.

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