

## Chapter 10

# Political Bald-Faced Lies are Performative

## Utterances

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### Introduction

There are *lies*, and there are *bald-faced lies*. It's a lie when the husband says to his wife he hasn't smoked when, in fact, he has smoked and he believes that he has. But this lie is not *bald-faced* if there is no direct evidence that the husband has smoked. In the case of a bald-faced lie, there is direct evidence available for the falsity of the utterance in question. If a child has chocolate cake on their face, but they say 'I didn't have chocolate cake', that's a bald-faced lie. Bald-faced lies are utterances of *obvious falsehoods* for which there is directly available evidence (Lynch 2021).

Working with this definition of bald-faced lies, I am going to focus on *political* bald-faced lies (PBs), although some of my claims will also apply to bald-faced lies in general. PBs are particularly interesting because PBs such as 'Russia acts in self-defence in Ukraine', often *pass for truth*. That is, certain groups of people behave as if the PBs were true, and as if there were no direct evidence for their falsity.

How can this phenomenon be explained? I argue that to explain how PBs pass for truth we need to take PBs to be *performative utterances* whose goal is to bring about a state of affairs in virtue of making the utterance. We will see that my performative view of PBs is to be preferred over various other views such as *the deception view* (Lackey 2013), *the value-signaling view* (Stanley 2012), and *the contempt for truth view* (Lynch 2021). I will argue that these alternative views fail to adequately account for PBs' passing-for-truth role.

Here is how I will proceed: in section 1, I will present Lynch's definition of PBs in more detail. In section 2, I will present my performative view of PBs. In section 3, I will critically discuss already existing views of (political) bald-faced lies in the light of my own view.

### 1. Defining PBs

To understand PBs' passing-for-truth role, we need first to understand what bald-faced lies are. According to Lynch (2021, 12), bald-faced lies are obvious falsehoods that are overt, straight-faced, public utterances of a proposition that flies in the face of a recognized matter of fact.

A good example that Lynch gives is this: you have had chocolate cake, and you visibly have chocolate cake on your face, but you deny that you had chocolate cake. And so, according to Lynch, bald-faced lies involve the utterance of a proposition which meets the following conditions:

- (i) It [the proposition] is false or straightforwardly entails a proposition that is false, and which is such that,

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter has been included in the volume in place of the talk originally given by the author on July 27, 2020, as part of the *Truth 20/20* online conference.

- (ii) there is direct overwhelming evidence for that proposition's falsity.
- (iii) that evidence is available and obvious.

Lynch calls propositions that fulfill (i)-(iii) *obvious falsehoods*. The chocolate cake case satisfies (i). It is false that you have not eaten chocolate cake just in case you have eaten chocolate cake. As to (ii), if you have chocolate cake on your face, then there is direct overwhelming evidence that the proposition that you have not eaten chocolate cake is false.<sup>2</sup> To address (iii), *seeing* chocolate cake on your face is sufficient for the evidence that you have eaten chocolate cake to be available and obvious. For Lynch, the utterance of such obvious falsehoods as 'I haven't eaten chocolate cake' (while you have chocolate cake on your face) is a *bald-faced lie* just when,

- (iv) The speaker believes it to be false.

So, unless we have good reasons to believe that the person who had chocolate cake does not *believe* that they had chocolate cake, say, in the case of an *Alzheimer* patient, (iv) is satisfied, too.<sup>3</sup>

According to Lynch, what makes a bald-faced lie a *political* bald-faced lie is *context*: PBs are utterances of obvious falsehoods that are uttered in the context of public discourse by a politician or their representative. Such contexts include appearances on television, social media or political rallies. Moreover, utterances like 'I won the election' (by Donald Trump, who clearly lost the 2020 presidential elections) are assertions of a special kind. Not everyone is able to make utterances of obvious falsehoods publicly and overtly. Only people who have *power* can do that. Here are some examples Lynch offers:

- A political leader denying that he ever said what many people heard him say on television, in political ads he paid for, and during speeches.
- A political spokesperson asserting that one crowd was larger than another in direct contradiction of highly trusted and publicly available photographic evidence.
- The president asserting that a clearly-modified weather map displayed on national television had not been modified.

So, Lynch thinks that PBs can demonstrate the *degree of power* that a politician has. Unlike a child, (who makes the bald-faced lie that they had no chocolate cake) the president might get away with denying that he said things that *millions of people* heard him say on television.

In fact, the demonstration of power is a feature that distinguishes PBs from non-political bald-faced lies. But the point I'd like to stress here is that the ultimate goal of a PB is not to demonstrate power, but to *move the crowds*. So, what's at stake is the *use* of power/how power is put into play to do something instead of just merely demonstrating *that* one has power. And I think for making sense of this role of PBs we need to take them to be *performative utterances*. Just as the performative 'I do' is both an act of getting married and also a description of getting married, PBs like 'I won the election' are attempts of bringing about the state of affairs of having won the

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are exceptions here as when someone is angry at you and throws a cake at you to punish you. In such a case, having cake on your face wouldn't count as direct evidence for having *eaten* cake.

<sup>3</sup> Now, one might wonder whether the speaker must also have an *intention to deceive*. But, according to Lynch, an intention to deceive is not a requirement on bald-faced lies. This view has also been advocated by e.g., Carson (2006), Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), Saul (2012), Fallis (2013), and Stokke (2013). And I agree. When I will critically discuss existing views of PBs, I will argue that PB's primary role is not to deceive. And so, if I am right, then an *intention to deceive* is irrelevant to the primary role of PBs.

election in virtue of saying it. And sometimes PB are successful—not in bringing about the said states of affairs but in *passing for truth*. That is, sometimes the crowds behave as if the PBs are true, like in the case of the storming of Capitol Hill upon the former US-president’s Tweet that he won the election. And this passing-for-truth role of PBs needs to be explained.

As we will later see, Lynch says that one demonstrates power by expressing *contempt for truth*. But as I will argue the view that PBs merely express the speaker’s contempt for truth is insufficient for explaining PB’s passing-for-truth role. In part, this is so because the contempt for truth view is not addressing the question of how PBs are essentially *other-directed*. I will now present my performative view that does address that question among many.

## 2. The Performative View of PBs

On the performative view, PBs have the features below, which are each necessary and jointly sufficient for characterizing the primary role of PBs, that is, their passing-for-truth role:

- (1) PBs are utterances of *obvious falsehoods*<sup>4</sup>,
- (2) they are *performative acts*, that are
  - (2a) *group-directed*,
  - (2b) *linked to political power*,
  - (2c) *public*,
- and
- (2d) *tend to have perlocutionary effect*<sup>5</sup>.

(1), (2), and (2a-c) are each necessary for PBs to pass for truth, but they are *not* jointly sufficient. In order to provide necessary and sufficient criteria for PBs’ passing for truth, we also need to take (2d) on board.

To begin with, (1) is explained by Lynch’s definition given earlier. So, I won’t say more about it here. As to (2), PBs are performatives in a stronger sense than in the sense of *asserting*.<sup>6</sup> Asserting is the act of claiming that something *is* the case, and assertion is typically subject to a variety of norms such as *only assert what you believe to be true*. But this norm is not good enough to correctly characterize the primary role of PBs, since the very idea of a bald-faced lie encompasses that the utterer believes their utterance to be false (see Lynch’s definition of bald-faced lies in section 1).

Given this, it’s natural to assume that PBs have essentially some other role than simply asserting that something *is* the case. As I see it, PBs are serious and conscious *attempts of making a lie pass for truth*. The performative verb at issue is ‘making’ or ‘attempting to make’ if we take into account that the making acts aren’t always successful. When the Russian president says ‘there

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<sup>4</sup> Note that *political bullshit* can share many of the features of PBs, certainly (1), and (2b), but one might argue that political bullshit certainly does not satisfy (2). More particularly, one might say that bullshitting is not a performative act in the sense of this paper because the bullshitter doesn’t need to be aware of the truth and is in fact indifferent towards the truth (see Frankfurt (2005) on indifference). In the case of PBs, however, the liar is not indifferent towards the truth, but is trying to change what *passes for truth*. Thanks to Drew Johnson for challenging me to clarify this point. The concrete details of the differences between PBs and political bullshit have to be worked out in a different paper.

<sup>5</sup> The ‘tend’ is important here, since *the act of attempting to make a lie pass for truth* is different from the performative act of *convincing*: you can’t convince without your act having perlocutionary effect, but you can attempt to make a lie pass for truth without it actually passing for truth. Only once the lie is successful have you *convinced*.

<sup>6</sup> Since ‘asserting’ is a performative verb, it is worthwhile to clarify this.

is no war in Ukraine’, he knows that it is not true, but he tries to *make* it pass for truth. His utterance is more than a mere assertion because it’s an act that is supposed to help him in his overall goals and objectives as a politician. His bald-faced lie is an act of trying to bring about a desired result such as *people stopping to demonstrate against the Russian invasion of Ukraine*.

At this point, one might want to know what kind of act (attempting) making a lie pass for truth exactly is. The answer is that the act of making a lie pass for truth or attempting to do so is like *requesting* and *commanding* in two respects. First, I can perform a request or issue a command via grammatically distinct utterances. To begin with requesting, I don’t need to say ‘I request that you pass me the salt’, but I can kindly ask you ‘could you please pass the salt?’, and nevertheless I am making a request.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way, attempting to make a lie pass for truth takes many different locutions. The locution is the utterance of any obvious falsehood relevant to politics such as ‘there are no Russian soldiers in Ukraine’, but different PBs are unified via the performative of attempting to make the given lie pass for truth. In other words, the performative act is performed by the utterance of an obvious falsehood, just as the request is performed by the locution ‘could you please pass the salt?’. As to commanding, I can command my nephew to wash his hands via saying ‘wash your hands’. I don’t need to say ‘I command you to wash your hands’ (nor does this explicit way of issuing the command seem natural). However, I am still issuing a command. In the same way, the politician does not say ‘Hereby I make it that there are no Russian soldiers in Ukraine’, but instead says ‘there are no Russian soldiers in Ukraine’ and the said act of attempting to make the lie pass for truth is still performed.

Secondly, like in the case of requesting and commanding, the politician can perform different making attempts on different occasions. There is no one specific context or specific nature to a making act. Just as I can command my nephew to do different things such as washing his hands, or eating his soup or going to bed, the politician’s attempt of making a lie pass for truth can be done in many different contexts, e.g., contexts of being elected, being held accountable for what they have previously done or said, contexts of interviews, etc. And on one occasion they might attempt to make it pass for truth that they won the election, on the other occasion they might try to make it pass for truth that they are not invading a sovereign country, and that they are not committing a genocide, etc.<sup>8, 9</sup>

As to (2a), PBs are also like commanding and requesting because they are *directed towards others*. You can’t command or request without commanding *someone* or requesting something

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<sup>7</sup> See Austin (1970) for more on this distinction.

<sup>8</sup> Before moving on to (2a), here is a note on non-political bald-faced lies inspired by the editors: While they also satisfy (1), it’s not clear they satisfy (2). If a child denies that they had chocolate cake, although they have chocolate cake on their face, it is not clear that the child is performing the act of making their lie pass for truth. It will depend on the kind of awareness the child has of the truth, but also on whether the child is just trying to avoid punishment and/or embarrassment. And while the latter could also be the case for PBs, it seems that given the awareness of truth in the case of PBs such as ‘there are no Syrian mercenaries deployed in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh’ the making-pass-for-truth role of PBs is more salient than in the case of non-political PBs. The Azerbaijani president knows exactly that he has illegally deployed Syrian fighters in the South Caucasus. And while avoiding punishment/embarrassment can also be a PB’s role, his speech certainly is an attempt of making the crowds behave as if the fighters were not deployed given the awareness of truth and his political power.

<sup>9</sup> Also, one could understand the act of making a lie pass for truth in the literal sense of commanding. So, when the Russian president says that Russia is acting in self-defence, he is *commanding* certain groups of people to behave as if the lie is true. I think that this is an interesting proposal, which I’d like to pursue in a subsequent paper by undertaking a closer and more elaborate examination of the act of commanding in the domain of PBs.

from *someone*. In the same way, making a lie pass for truth or attempting to do so is an act that is directed towards others. Like in the case of commanding and requesting, the point of a PB is to convince others to behave according to the performed act, however, PBs are special insofar as the associated act is always *group-directed*, whereas commanding and requesting can be directed towards individuals, too. The goal of a politician is to move the crowds, to have a following, to have people vote for them, etc. PBs are also special in the sense that they primarily are directed towards those who share the liar's *interests*. White supremacists storming Capitol Hill share the former US-presidents' interests (whatever these might be), and therefore they take the PB to be an opportunity to act in a way that is consistent with their overall interests and motivations. This is one of the main reasons why PBs pass for truth when they do and why they are motivating when they are.

Of course, politicians are aware that they're going to attract those crowds that already share their interests and motivations, and politicians tend to exploit this. For example, the former US-president knew that his followers were dissatisfied about him not being reelected. He knew that they wanted him to win the election. So, when he tweeted that he won the election, he knew it would resonate with those who wanted him to win. He knew that it would leave an effect on the crowds. He might not have known what exactly would happen, namely that the crowds would storm Capitol Hill and that people would get killed, but he knew that there would be a serious reaction. To evoke such a reaction is exactly why PBs are made.

Sometimes PBs aren't actually successful because there are *outside-the-bubble factors* that don't allow PBs to pass for truth. Such factors could be interactions with other people who aren't part of the bubble. A liberal wife, for example, might tell their supremacist husband not to behave according to the PB in question. Or a certain PB might not pass for truth because other PBs get more public attention (maybe there is more *media* attention to other lies) or some PBs are so badly received by those who are not part of the bubble that those in the bubble just give up on certain PBs such as 'I won the election'. Those in the bubble might also just shift gears to new PBs in anticipation of the new elections.

As to (2b) PBs are also necessarily linked to political power in a way in which commanding and requesting aren't. Commanding and requesting can be done by politicians, but the associated utterances performing those acts aren't necessarily linked to political power. Of course, politicians can make *political* commands and requests besides those of the form 'wash your hands' or 'could you please pass me the salt?'. And those would be linked to political power. But this is different in the case of PBs. First, they're *only* done in the context of politics, and second, only powerful politicians can allow themselves to perform them. In other words, PBs pass for truth if the liar has sufficient political power to convince the crowds to act according to the PB. As Lynch says (22; original italics):

given sufficient power, the political bald-face liar can bring into being not the truth of what he says, *but its passing for truth*. In short, he can make people *treat what he says as true*—to treat it, in other words, as a goal of inquiry, an answer to a question.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> And although Lynch (also 2014) is the one who points this out, we will see that his *contempt for truth view* cannot account for the passing-for-truth role of PBs. In particular, we will see that self-expressions, like contempt for truth, are not directly linked to convincing others of doing anything. They're expressions of states of mind that are simply done for the sake of self-expression.

Putting the point about inquiry aside, to have sufficient power is to be able to move the crowds or as Lynch says, to *make* people treat what one says as true. If a child utters an obvious falsehood, they will either be corrected or laughed at, to say the least, but if a charismatic politician makes a PB they might eventually attract people who behave according to the lie.

Now, to have such kinds of political power can mean to already have been elected or to have demonstrated political power in some other way, say, as the secretary of state or the foreign minister or what have you. The point is that part of PBs' influencing the crowds is that there is a pattern of achieving one's goal by making a PB. A politician that has been successful once might be successful again, and in effect make PBs part of their campaigning strategy to continue to be successful.

As to (2c), we can explain the criterion by distinguishing PBs from performative verbs such as 'promising'. Unlike promising, the act of *making a lie pass for truth* must be public to be felicitous. You can always promise to yourself. That is, you can't fail to promise even when no one is around. However, PBs misfire if they are not uttered on television, social media or some other public platform. So, PBs are more like 'I do'. 'I do' misfires if there is no authorized third party marrying you, and someone you're getting married to (see Austin 1970). In the same way, more than mere utterance of the sentence is required in order for the PB to be felicitous.<sup>11</sup> This is partly why PBs only *tend* to have perlocutionary effect, but don't always do.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking of (2d), to say that PBs tend to have perlocutionary effect is to say that they can move others to act in a certain way. Just like when I scream 'fire' in the case of there being fire, and thereby convince people to leave the building, the politician's speech act has a similar effect on the crowds when they are *convinced* to act according to the politician's PBs. What sort of perlocutionary effect PBs have in a given case depends on what the crowds take to be an appropriate response. It could be different ways of being moved to act according to the lie. But since we're in the political sphere, the most plausible effects are being convinced/moved to *reelect*, *protest*, *continue following their candidate on social media*, *arguing with those for whom the PB doesn't pass for truth*, etc. In any case, what's at stake is being motivated to act in accordance with the PB, and not in opposition to it. Indeed, given the appropriate context of political leadership, I can motivate you by saying 'Russia acts in self-defence', or by saying that 'COVID-19 is a hoax'. I'm motivating you to treat what I say as true and to act accordingly. In the former case, I motivate you to act upon the lie in form of stopping to demonstrate against the Russian

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<sup>11</sup> Now there might be a difference between the way in which a PB is a performative and 'I do' is, one that can be understood in terms of the *explicit/implicit* distinction that Austin (1970) introduces and criticizes. On this distinction, 'I do' would be an *explicit* performative, while a PB would rather be an *implicit* performative, since a PB is not saying 'I make it so and so'. For, example, when the president says that the map had never been modified he doesn't explicitly say 'Hereby, I make it that the map has never been modified', or 'I make it so that I haven't said [so and so]'. But since Austin himself is critical about whether there really is such a distinction in the case of performatives like 'I do' vs. 'Yes', I will not further engage in this debate here.

<sup>12</sup> A note on non-political bald-faced lies inspired by the editors: (2a)–(2c) are certainly not essential features of non-political bald-faced lies. The lie that one has not have chocolate cake while one has chocolate cake on their face can be either directed towards individuals or groups. And that lie is also certainly not linked to political power when done by a child. It might be linked to political power if done by a politician, but that would presumably *already* make it a PB. Non-political bald-faced lies are also not necessarily public utterances. One might say to themselves that one won the election, while there is available evidence that one has not and one knows that one has not. So, while we would have a bald-faced lie here, the lie would not be a PB since it would not be uttered in a political context such as on TV, on social media or elsewhere.

invasion of Ukraine, for example, whereas in the latter case I motivate you in the form of protesting vaccinations.

And just in the case of screaming ‘fire’, different people might react differently (one person might panic and be paralyzed, the other might try to leave the building, yet the other might try to extinguish the fire) in the political case, too, one person might vote, protest, the other might show hostile behavior towards those who are not moved to act according to the PBs. And so, there is no one way of acting according to the PB. But there is a clear way in which one can exhibit behavior *in accordance with* a PB vs. exhibit behavior *in contradiction to* the PB. The opposite of reelecting would be not electing, the opposite of protesting election fraud would be not to protest, the opposite of rooting for the candidate would be not to root for them, and so on.

In any case, what’s relevant is that the crowds *behave as if* the PB is true. Whether they actually *believe* the PBs is a different question. Belief is a complex psychological state that might be far removed from motivations to act, as Hume famously claimed (see e.g., Hume 1739/2007).

Further, even if the crowds don’t actually have to *believe* the PBs, PBs can’t just be seen to be *pretendings*. On a pretense view, when the Azerbaijani president claims that ancient Armenian churches and monasteries aren’t really Armenian but Caucasian Albanian, he is just playing a game. He is not making a serious lie, but he is engaging in hypothetical scenarios, here, the scenario of denying the Armenian origin of ancient churches and monasteries.

The problem with this view is that it doesn’t explain the *serious harm* that PBs can cause. PBs have direct effects on the crowds, in a way in which games usually don’t have. For example, there is a lot of hate in Azerbaijan towards Armenia and Armenians resulting from Anti-Armenian policies and campaigns implemented by the Azerbaijani government. And these effects need explaining.

A similar point about the seriousness of bald-faced lies has been made by Sorensen (2007), who wonders whether bald-faced lies are *pretendings to assert*. But he disagrees. He says (256),

Bald-faced liars will clarify the assertive status of their remarks. [X] will assure [Y] that he is dead serious. There will be no nod or wink to show that this is a game.

Indeed, when the former president of the US tweeted ‘I won the election’ he didn’t add to it a smiley face to indicate pretense. Nor did he write ‘LOL’ or ‘HAHA’. As a result, when Capitol Hill was stormed people were *killed*—the storming wasn’t just a play, as the PB wasn’t just a pretending to assert. The PB was a serious performative utterance.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, it is worthwhile to note that PBs aren’t just *invitations* either. According to Carson (2010), bald-faced liars *invite* their audience to trust and rely on the lie even if everyone knows that the utterance is a bald-faced lie. And in defense of this view, Carson (*ibid.*, 35) emphasizes that ‘the fact that the bald-faced liar has no hope of getting others to trust him does not make it impossible for him to invite them to trust him.’

The problem with this view is that it doesn’t capture the serious harm that can be done by PBs. Pace Carson, I think that the liar has *lots* of hope that others will trust him and rely on their PB,

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<sup>13</sup> One might wonder how the performative view relates to Sorensen’s own view, according to which, one is making a PB because one doesn’t want *the truth to be on record*. His example here is a bald-faced lie about the killing of an Iraqi soldier. According to Sorensen, one is lying in order for the truth not to be on record or rather for *the lie to be on record*. As to how my view relates to this, note that this view can simply be converted into mine: one is making the PB to make it pass for truth. Note that the other way doesn’t work: my view cannot be converted into Sorensen’s because the view that one wants to *erase* the truth, via changing what *passes for truth*, is bolder than the view that one doesn’t want the truth to be on record. Thanks to Chris Heffer for challenging me to clarify this.

and that's exactly why they make the lie. Typically, a politician must *ensure* that we take them seriously and ensuring this requires more than just issuing an invitation. It requires an active attempt to make the PB pass for truth. And this is exactly why I think that invitations are too weak to explain how PBs pass for truth. As Carson himself says, I can issue an invitation to you even if both of us know that you're not going to accept. For example, I can invite you to a party even if both of us know that you're not going. So, inviting is not good enough to explain the passing-for-truth role of PBs because it doesn't guarantee an *uptake*.<sup>14</sup>

The same point about uptake can be made with respect to *authorization*. As Sorensen says (255),

A speaker can assert p without *authorizing* the hearer to assume p.<sup>15</sup>

For example, I can say that authorities are useless without authorizing you to *assume* it. Parents do this with their children. That is, they make certain assertions and say at the same time that the child should not assume what they just asserted. They do this just because they know that their assertions are problematic. Similarly, in the case of PBs, people aren't just authorized to do certain things, but they are *motivated* to do them. When I authorize the US-troops to advance in Afghanistan, I give them the permission to advance in Afghanistan. But I don't thereby motivate them to do it. They might think that it is too dangerous to advance even if I gave them the permission to do so. Or they might think that my permission suggests that it is not too dangerous and thus they might be motivated to do it. In any case, what's required for moving the crowds is not just the permission to advance but rather being *convinced* to act with respect to the authorization or permission.<sup>16,17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Note that Carson's view that the bald-faced liar *intends* to warrant the truth of what they say doesn't explain how PBs pass for truth either. This is a view that Carson presents as a response to Sorensen (2007) who objects that *warranting* doesn't work in the case of bald-faced lies because they are obvious falsehood. Everyone knows that the utterance in question is not true. But I disagree with Sorensen. I think that *trying* to warrant the truth of a PB is exactly what's going on in the case of a PB. Unfortunately, this is not a response that Carson himself provides. Instead, he talks of *intending* to warrant. But, just as invitations, intents are too weak to explain how PBs pass for truth. PBs must be seen as proper acts in order for us to explain their perlocutionary effects. Thanks to Bill Lycan for challenging me to clarify this.

<sup>15</sup> For a defense of the view that asserting does involve authorization see, e.g., Shapiro (2018).

<sup>16</sup> As to non-political bald-faced lies, they can satisfy (2d). But the effect will rather be negative than positive, given that non-political bald-faced lies certainly don't satisfy (2a)–(2c). A child making the bald-faced lie that they did not have chocolate cake while having some on their face will be laughed at to say the least. The lie will typically not pass for truth even if done by an adult because of the lack of (2a)–(2c) in the non-political case. This is different in the case of PBs, since these do satisfy the said criteria (including (2) itself). Thanks to the editors for asking about non-political bald-faced lies.

<sup>17</sup> The editors of this volume asked whether *all lies* are attempts of making the given lie pass for truth. The answer is: 'in a sense *yes*, in a sense *no*'. What's distinctive about the performative involved with the PB is that the attempting to make the lie pass for truth is not supposed to be achieved via deceiving or intending to deceive but via the utterance itself, whereas in the case of other lies one might wonder whether saying they're attempts of making the lie pass for truth is just another way of saying that lies require an *intention to deceive*. But my project starts from the assumption that in the case of PBs there is no apparent intention to deceive, or at least one way in which PBs are different from other lies is the lack of an intention to deceive. Now, one could deny that lies in general require an intention to deceive (as some do), but this would have first to be argued for properly before one could claim that there is nothing distinctive about PBs. And even if that were the case, I wouldn't mind taking all kinds of lies on board. The more the performative view can cover the better.

### 3. Contrasts with Other Views

Prominent accounts of PBs include the *deception view*, the *value-signaling view*, and the *contempt for truth view*. The goal of this section is to show that, unlike the performative view, they fail to account for the passing-for-truth role of PBs. In particular, we will see that the deception view and the value-signaling view fail to account for the obvious falsehood criterion on PBs, and so are not even in a position to account for their passing-for-truth role. The contempt for truth view, on the other hand, *satisfies* the obvious falsehood criterion on PBs, but fails to explain their passing-for-truth role for other reasons.

#### 3.1. The Incompatibility of Other Views with Obviousness

##### 3.1.1. The Deception View

How does the performative view compare to the deception view? The deception view treats bald-faced lies on a par with standard lies, which are traditionally seen as instances of deception. A virtue of doing this is being able to give a *unified* account of all kinds of lies. According to the most traditional view of lying (see, e.g., Mahon 2016),

to lie is to make a believed-false statement with the *intention to deceive*.

So, if person X says to person Y that X has not smoked today with the intention to deceive Y about the fact that X has done so, and if X believes the proposition ‘X has not smoked today’ is false, then X has lied to Y. So, in the case of PBs, we would have to say that if X says during an interview that X has not said p with the intention to deceive the other into falsely believing p, and if X believes the proposition ‘X has not said p’ is false, then X has lied.

Now, let’s see whether deceiving can account for our key examples. Take the example of tweeting ‘I won the election’. As we have seen, according to the performative view, the former president was attempting to make it pass for truth that he won the election. But what would the deception view say? On the deception view, he would be trying to deceive others into falsely believing that he won the election. But why would this view be correct if the president is uttering an *obvious* falsehood?

If I can successfully deceive you by stating an *obvious falsehood*, then there is probably not directly available evidence for my utterance’s being false. But since the opposite is the case for bald-faced lies *as per definition*, the deception view must be given up. Whereas the performative view takes the obvious falsehood criterion on PBs as a starting point for the performative view, the traditional deception view can’t even get off the ground: deception or intending to deceive suggests that there is something to deceive about in the case of an obvious falsehood such as a PB.

In turn, if a given utterance is *not* an obvious falsehood, then the deception view makes more sense. If we take into account the epistemic bubbles and echo chambers that the president’s followers are part of<sup>18</sup>, then ‘I won the election’ isn’t obviously false to its intended audience. So, then, it is reasonable to think that the former president’s followers indeed are deceived in the sense of being swayed by conspiracy theories about election fraud, and by occupying an information space that is intended to feed them the lies they like to hear.<sup>19</sup> But once we assume that the said utterances *is* a PB, then we also need to admit that the deception view clashes with the obvious falsehood criterion. If there is overwhelming evidence that the president is lying – evidence that is available to everyone – then something other than deception must be at issue. And given that in

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<sup>18</sup> For a recent proposal on how to distinguish between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers see, e.g., (Nguyen 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to the editors of this volume for pressing this point.

this particular example, we have more reasons to assume that the said utterance *is* a PB than it's not<sup>20</sup>, we also have reasons to reject the deception view.

Now, there is a *revised* version of the deception view. Jennifer Lackey (2013) argues that bald-faced lies are not attempts to deceive in the classical sense but are deceptive in a broader sense. Here is then her revised view of the *deception view*:

A is *deceptive* to B with respect to whether p if A aims to *conceal information* from B regarding whether p.

So, according to Lackey, a person is deceptive just when she aims at concealing relevant information regarding proposition p. To illustrate her view, Lackey gives an example of hiding her puppy's training pads in her house to conceal from a visitor that her puppy is not trained.

But one might ask: Does this view do better than the traditional deception view? It doesn't seem so. Even if we put the deception view just in terms of *aiming to conceal* rather than intentionally trying to bring about a false belief in someone, it's not compatible with the obvious falsehood criterion on PBs. The obvious falsehood criterion suggests that there is indeed not much to conceal when the president, for example, denies an utterance everyone heard him make on television, such as 'you grab them by the pussy'. Since there is video evidence seen by thousands, if not millions, of people that he actually said what he later denies, the natural explanation of the role of the PB is that he is trying to have his lie *pass for truth*. His goal is to get people to behave as if he never said (for example) that you grab them by the pussy so he can be reelected as the president of the United States.

The same point can be made using Lackey's *Dean case* (adopted from Carson 2006). This is the case in which a student has been caught for having cheated four times in one semester. And, 'all of the conclusive evidence [...] is passed on to the Dean of Academic Affairs' (Lackey, 238). In other words, the student knows that the Dean knows that the student has cheated, and so we have a bald-faced lie here, according to Lackey. But to be punished, the student has to make a confession. However, when the student is called in, they don't make the confession. Instead, they make the bald-faced lie that they did not cheat on the exam.

On Lackey's view, the student's intention is to *conceal information* from the Dean, and, according to Lackey, the relevant evidence that the student is trying to conceal is an *admission of wrongdoing*. But note that this kind of evidence should not be the evidence to conceal. The *primary* evidence for the lie is the very act of cheating. So, for Lackey's view to be correct, the relevant question is whether the student is trying to conceal having cheated. And here is the problem: If we really have a bald-faced lie here and there is evidence that the student has cheated, then the evidence should be directly available, since that's what makes a lie *bald-faced*. So, if the right sort of evidence is directly available to the Dean, then aiming to conceal seems pointless.<sup>21</sup> For there to be something to conceal with respect to the cheating is to suggest that there is not enough

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<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, we do have more reasons to assume that the given example is a PB than to assume that it's not. Just think of the fact that when the former president made his Twitter post that he won the election Joe Biden was officially considered the projected winner of the 2020 elections. This directly available fact suggests that what the former president was tweeting at the time of the ongoing elections was *obviously false*.

<sup>21</sup> Fallis (2015) makes a similar point about aiming to conceal. He argues that there are various ways in which Lackey's student isn't deceptive *on her own definition of deception* (see p. 88 of his paper).

evidence available as to whether the student has cheated. But Lackey obviously denies that this is the case since the Dean has *all the evidence*.<sup>22</sup>

So, it seems that this case is better accounted for by assuming that the student's bald-faced lie is attempting to have their lie pass for truth. On the performative view, the student is trying to get the Dean to behave according to the bald-faced lie, which is dropping the charges of cheating. But it is to be expected that this will not happen. Unlike the president of an influential country such as Russia or the US, the student does not have the sufficient power to make their bald-faced lie pass for truth. So, the bald-faced lie is not successful in its passing-for-truth role, although it is still an *attempt* of making the lie pass for truth.

### 3.1.2. The Value-Signaling View

Let us now compare the performative view to the value-signaling view. According to Stanley (2012), PBs are expressions of *value-signaling*. Take the Mitt Romney campaign against Obama's handling of welfare as an example. According to this campaign, Obama was trying to undermine the work requirement on welfare. But this is false—according to Stanley, it is *obviously* false. He says:

The blatant falsehoods in Romney's campaign are possible only under conditions in which the target audience will not hold Romney accountable for false statements. Since the intended audience is not expected to believe the falsehoods, there is some *other* function of the Romney campaign's ad. The purpose of Romney's ad campaign is to win over white working class voters, by connecting with what his campaign perceives as their *values* (online; italics added).

So, according to Stanley, PBs are in the business of communicating *perceived* values, i.e., the values of a given audience. And the way this is done in the Romney case is as follows: there is scientific evidence that people connect race and poverty with willingness to work, and that when race becomes an issue people tend to go to the voting polls more often. So, the campaign is trying to use the data to connect with the white working class by suggesting that Obama is mishandling welfare—loosening the work requirement for the racial group he is part of.

Now, in evaluating the view, we can say that the value-signaling view fails our key examples. For example, retake the *pussy grabbing example*. If the president is shown a recording of him saying that you grab women by the pussy, but he later denies that he said that, it seems far from obvious that he is *value-directed*. For one, what would it mean to be value-directed in this case? Would someone who values women say 'you grab them by the pussy' in the first instance? It doesn't seem so. Therefore, it also doesn't seem correct to say that his *PB* is an expression of value-signaling. If he doesn't value women in one instance, he is not going to value them in the next instance either.

A defender of the value-signaling view might respond by arguing that values *are* expressed in this case, but they are twisted values. They might say what gets expressed here is something like *contempt* for women. So far so good.

But if this is the defender's response, then they're simply admitting that it is wrong to say that PBs express values. They express *disvalues*. And this seems to be a less controversial and

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Lackey's own example of concealing that her puppy is not trained by discarding all her puppy's training pads before a visitor comes to her house shows that she could only conceal the information in the first place because it wasn't *already available* to her visitor. If all the information were *already available* to the visitor, then there would not be a point of concealing.

straightforward alternative. It indeed seems right that if the president denies what he said about women, then he is just reemphasizing that he disvalues women.

The problem with this alternative is that it doesn't get us closer to understanding *why* he makes the PB in the first place. Why not just admit a wrongdoing? It seems that the natural explanation of the PB is that he is trying to make his PB *pass for truth*. He wants the crowds to behave as if he never said that 'you grab them by the pussy'. So, his PB is not a mere value expression but rather a political act.

Maybe, in a further defense of value-signaling, one could say this instead: When the president says he never said disrespectful things about women he does signal his values but in the distorted sense of communicating what he *thinks* his values are. When he utters the obvious falsehood in question, he basically communicates: 'hey, I am not that bad guy that you think I am. I never said those things.' But he also believes that you do grab women by the pussy, and he knows, of course, that he does not value women. So, one way in which we could perhaps make sense of value-signaling is to take his PB to be an instance of *self-deception*. So far so good.

The problem with this kind of interpretation is that it is incompatible with the obvious falsehood criterion on PBs. To see this, consider the following definition of *self-deception* offered by Deweese-Boyd (2017, x):

Minimally, self-deception involves a person who seems to acquire and maintain some false belief in the teeth of evidence to the contrary as a consequence of some motivation, and who may display behavior suggesting some awareness of the truth.

According to this definition, a subject *may* show *some* awareness of truth, but it's not necessary for the self-deception to happen. But according to our definition of PBs, there is *a lot* of awareness of truth, and not just *some*. So, the question is whether PBs can truly be seen as instances of self-deception.

In response, I don't believe that that is possible, and neither does Sorensen (2007), for instance. Sorensen himself is interested in the question of whether self-deception involves an *intention to deceive*. Here is his response to that question:

If lying entails the intent to deceive, then lying to yourself requires navigation through the dilemma of self-deception: Either you believe the deception (and so are not a deceiver) or you do not believe the deception (and so are not deceived). Bald-faced lies show that some lies do not involve the intent to deceive. Lying to yourself may be another counterexample. (ibid., 259)

Putting aside issues about the relation between self-deception and deceptive intentions, Sorensen's dilemma can be rephrased as follows: either you are fully aware of truth and therefore you aren't able to self-deceive or you aren't fully aware of truth and therefore you're able to self-deceive. So, it is fair to assume that self-deception and full awareness of truth are irreconcilable.

But now suppose that we don't know whether they are indeed irreconcilable. For the sake of argument, suppose that some PBs are in fact instances of self-deception even if, at first glance, it seems that they aren't. The question is this: could *all* of them be instances of self-deception? The answer is that it doesn't seem so. To better see this, consider the following *Crime case*:

Two people commit a crime together, i.e., they kill someone, and the more dominant/powerful/dishonest person says to the one less in power/more scared/more honest one: ‘ok, this never happened’ although the dead person is lying there in front of their eyes.

Is the more powerful person just engaging in self-deception? Or do they try to convince the other to behave as if the crime never happened? A natural response seems to be that the more powerful person tries to make their lie pass for truth. That is, the point of the bald-faced lie is to get the other to *cooperate* in the lie—to behave as if the killing never happened.

To think that the more powerful one is simply engaging in self-deception seems absurd. It might be true that in the given scenario the two criminals are traumatized, and that they do not want to *believe* that they killed someone. But an initial shock doesn’t suggest that they are going to take responsibility for the crime nor does it suggest that they value honesty more than their freedom. Rather, a natural view is that just because they are shocked and just because they value their freedom, the primary goal of saying ‘it never happened’ is to make sure that the other won’t speak about the crime.

### 3.2. Their Compatibility with Performativity

Now, suppose that one thinks that the passing-for-truth role is not the main role of PBs and therefore thinks that there is a grain of truth in the deception view and the value-signaling view. In this case, I have good news. The performative view is compatible with both of these alternative views of PBs. My ultimate claim is that the performative view gets the passing-for-truth role of PBs right, *and* accommodates features of these two other views as well. I’ll now explain how.

#### 3.2.1. Deception and Performativity

Although my main claim is that PBs’ main role is not to deceive or conceal information (or intend to do so), a purported deceptive component of PBs can be accounted for by (2d) as discussed in section 2. If the crowds are moved, then they will *count* as deceived, namely, in the sense of being moved to act according to the PB. While those who follow bald-faced liars presumably won’t consider themselves as deceived, those outside their community presumably will. After all, those who act on PBs *should have known better*. Since in the case of a PB, there is direct evidence available to the contrary, the crowds acting upon a PB must be in some sense blinded by the liar. And they must be blind to the truth. So, they count as deceived in this sense, although, as mentioned before, this doesn’t mean that they *believe* the PBs they act on. They might be aware of the truth and nevertheless choose to follow their ‘hero’ whose interests and motivations they share.<sup>23</sup> So, the performative view doesn’t conflict with the idea that PBs *can* be deceptive in a certain sense. But since this only happens when the attempt of making-it-pass-for-truth is successful, deception is not central to a PB: just because it is an utterance of an obvious falsehood, there are many cases in which PBs are not successful. That is, the crowds are not moved, and thus not deceived.

And as we have also seen, there are many criteria that need to be fulfilled for PBs to truly pass for truth. In particular, we have seen that besides *the interests and motivations of a group in question, the degree of the liar’s political power* is yet another relevant criterion. One example that demonstrated the importance of the two criteria was the Dean case. In the Dean case, the crowds (in this case the Dean first of all) don’t count as deceived. The Dean doesn’t share the interests and motivations of the student, nor does the student have sufficient power to make his bald-faced lie pass for truth. Indeed, the Dean does not behave according to the bald-faced lie made

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<sup>23</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify what it means to *count as deceived*.

by the student, but is instead looking for the student to admit their wrongdoing. And so even if the bald-faced lie is done for the purpose of passing for truth, the Dean cannot count as deceived.

### 3.2.2. Value-Signaling and Performativity

Note that the performative view doesn't conflict with the purported claim that PBs are instances of value-signaling either. On the performative view, one is making a PB with the attempt to have an impact on the *world* and *others*, but that doesn't mean that one couldn't also be *value*-directed at the same time. As one can signal that one values promises when one says 'I promise' (thinking one is going to fulfill the promise), one can also signal one's values when one is engaging in the act of making-a-lie-pass-for-truth. It's just that on the performative view value-signaling is not the central role of a PB. It is not central to a PB that the Romney campaign was signaling perceived values when spreading bald-faced lies about Obama. What's of primary importance is that the campaign's PBs were affecting the crowds in such a way that they would vote in favor of the liar. The PB would *pass for truth* in that sense. And even if value-signaling can help facilitate that result, my claim is that we still need to take PBs to be attempts of making-it-pass-for-truth to fully explain how PBs can have the said effects. Put differently, we must admit that value-signaling alone can't do the required explanation.

### 3.3. Compatibility with Obviousness

#### 3.3.1. The Contempt-for-Truth View

How does the performative view compare to the *contempt for truth* view? According to the contempt for truth view, PBs are

*deliberate assertions of falsehoods that express contempt for the truth and thereby demonstrate political power* (Lynch 2021, 20; original italics).<sup>24</sup>

According to Lynch, there are mainly three ways in which PBs express contempt for truth:

- contempt for social-epistemic rules,
- contempt for application of the rules to everyone,
- contempt for the idea of truth itself.

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<sup>24</sup> One might wonder whether the expressive aspect of PBs that Lynch emphasizes could also be understood in terms of *shame* or *fear*. If the president is shown a recording of what he said and he says that he never said those things, then maybe he is just *ashamed* of what he said. While this seems to be a viable option to me, Lynch has suggested to me that someone who is truly ashamed wouldn't lie but would instead acknowledge that they shouldn't have made the earlier remark. They would say: 'I was mistaken. I shouldn't have said that. Instead, what I should have said is [...]'. But bald-faced liars usually don't do this, because they are not ashamed, according to Lynch. This might explain why Lynch does not consider the shame/fear version of the expression view. He doesn't do so even in the context of his discussion of *non-political* bald-faced lies, where the shame/fear reading seems more appropriate. Lynch describes the case of the child who despite having chocolate cake on their face denies that they had chocolate cake. Lynch says (13, italics added):

the child in our example might utter the obvious falsehood not because he wants to deceive his mother but because he *equates an admission of guilt with punishment*.

As I see it, here it would make sense to think of the bald-faced lie as an expression of fear/shame, but Lynch does not consider this option.

To begin with, an example for a social-epistemic rule is to believe experts over novices on, say, medical issues. To take the COVID-19-crisis as an example, if the president suggests reopening business immediately even though the scientific data suggests that people should continue to self-quarantine, then he is expressing contempt for a social-epistemic rule like *believe experts over novices*. An example of the expression of contempt for the application of the rules to everyone is when the president says that it's fine to reopen business because he wants his own business to be fully operating. An example of expressing contempt for the idea of truth itself is when the president 'conflates his ego with truth' (Lynch, *ibid.*): that is, because *he* can't provide enough ventilators for the country, he claims that the hospitals actually don't need as many as they claim. However, he is fully aware that they actually do.

In evaluating the contempt for truth view, we can charitably note that it doesn't have an apparent issue with the *obvious falsehood criterion* on PBs given that the claim that PBs are expressions of contempt for truth implies that PBs in fact violate the *truth norm of assertion*. That is, they violate the norm *to assert only truths*. And we can also charitably claim that PBs *obviously* violate this norm. If they didn't, then it would be less clear how they could be considered expressions of *contempt* for truth, rather than expressions of *praise* of truth or *indifference* towards truth.<sup>25</sup> So far so good. But one might wonder whether the contempt for truth view can make sense of the *harm* that's done by breaking the truth norm.

My response is that it can't. And here is why: Expressing contempt for truth is a form of *self-expression*. And a self-expression is a (intentional) showing of one's state of mind (e.g., Green 2007). But to show you my state of mind isn't necessarily to try convincing you of anything. For example, if I say 'I have a headache'<sup>26</sup>, I'm showing you my state of mind (intentionally), but I am not necessarily trying to convince you of the fact that I have a headache. I'm just expressing my state of mind.

In the same way, I can express contempt for truth without trying to convince you of anything. I can just show you that I *dislike* the truth. I might, of course, also intend that you act with respect to my self-expression, but this needs further support – we need to tell a story that explains how self-expressions can have the said effect. The performative view does tell such a story: When the president says that he never said what everybody heard him say, then he is trying to make his lie pass for truth for a given audience, an audience that shares his motivations and interests. And it is in this sense that an innocent avowal such as 'I hate the truth' might have the kinds of perlocutionary effects that PBs sometimes have.

### 3.3.2. Contempt and Performativity

The performative view is compatible with the view that PBs are also expressions of contempt for truth in the sense that what's at stake when politicians speak is respect for the truth norm on assertion, and if they deliberately lie, then they do seem to express contempt for truth. But as I see it, that's not central to PBs because, as I have said, it's not the *self-expressive* part of PBs that explains how and why they pass for truth when they do. On the performative view, the president doesn't only express contempt for social-epistemic rules, as Lynch has it, when he utters 'I won the election', but he also actively attempts to *move* the crowds, that is, he wants them to *act* according to the lie that he won the election. Similarly, he doesn't only express contempt for the

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Lynch explicitly says: [PBs are] assertions that overtly break a basic norm or rule of assertion for the purpose of expressing contempt for truth and, ultimately, demonstrating power. (*ibid.*, 19)

<sup>26</sup> See also Bar-On (e.g., 2004), who calls such utterances as 'I have a headache' or 'I'm thinking of Venice' *avowals*, i.e., utterances that ascribe states of mind.

application of the rules to everyone, as Lynch has it, but he also attempts to actively *break* them. If him saying that he won the election passes for truth, then he seems to have successfully *broken* the relevant rules.

Finally, it doesn't seem that it's just contempt for the idea of truth itself that is expressed by a PB, but a PB is also the active attempt to *erase* the truth. Such an attempt mainly consists in trying to change what *passes for truth*. And sometimes such attempts are successful. The former president's utterance that he won the election was successful in passing for truth when the crowds stormed Capitol Hill. And *that's* what needs explaining—explaining why and how PBs pass for truth.

Relatedly, an anonymous reviewer has pointed out that 'it does seem like expressing contempt, while a form of self-expression can itself have perlocutionary effects.' Their example is this: If the radio-host expresses contempt for the listener's views, it can have the effect of making the listener turn off the show. While, this seems right, note that the case is twisted: the host doesn't simply express themselves, that is, simply express their contempt for truth, but they are *other-directed*, that is, they express contempt for the *listener's* view. This is what makes the listener turn off the radio. And other-directedness is not part of Lynch's account. When Lynch talks about contempt for truth, he puts emphasis on the relation between *the speaker and truth*, and there is no talk of other-directedness. This is a stated feature of the performative view. So maybe all we need to add to Lynch's account is other-directedness to get perlocutionary effect. But the issue seems to be more complicated. In the example it's not clear whether the radio-host is lying or not. All we know is that they express contempt for the listener's view. Now, suppose the radio-host is lying, then the example can be explained in terms of performativity: there is an attempt to make the lie pass for truth. However, since the listener doesn't share the *liar's interests and motivations*, they turn off the radio. So, my claim is that if we have a lie in this example, then there is more to explaining why the lie doesn't pass for truth than simply adding other-directedness to Lynch's account. It's best to remind oneself of the components discussed in the context of the performative view (see section 2). As we have seen, sharing the liar's interests and motivations is just one of the stated features of the performative view in the context of explaining why PBs pass for truth when they do. So, while contempt and performativity are compatible, that doesn't mean that contempt can take over.

#### 4. Conclusion

Summing up, I have argued that PBs are not only obviously false, where the speaker *knows so*, but an important feature of PBs is that they're acts of *attempting to make a lie pass for truth*. Taking PBs to be performative utterances in this sense makes sense of why and how PBs can have the effects that they sometimes have.<sup>27</sup>

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