“On the Concept of Lying”

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Introduction

There are all sorts of questions one can ask about lying. How can we detect when someone is lying to us? Is it ever okay to lie? Can we acquire knowledge from what other people say, even if they might be lying to us?

Answering these questions requires figuring out exactly what lying is. In other words, in order to answer these questions, we must first answer the question: what does it mean to say that somebody lied? In an attempt to answer this question, a number of philosophers (e.g., Williams 2002, Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Mahon 2008, Fallis 2009) have proposed several different definitions of lying.

Definitions of Lying

What virtually everyone agrees on is that, in order to lie, you have to say something that you believe is false (cf. Mahon 2008, section 1.2). As George Costanza put it, “it’s not a lie if you believe it.”

But this cannot be all that there is to lying. For example, actors on stage say things that they do not believe, but they are not lying. Also, when someone says sarcastically, “Joe is a fine friend,” she says something that she does not literally believe, presumably without lying.

Among philosophers, the traditional definition is that you lie if you say something you believe to be false with the intent to deceive (cf. Williams 2002, 96, Mahon 2008). For example, when Pinocchio explained why he was not in school by saying that “two big monsters … tied me in a big sack,” he intended to deceive. According to the traditional definition, it is this intent to deceive that makes Pinocchio’s statement a lie. We will call such statements that are (a) believed by the speaker to be false and (b) intended by the speaker to deceive their audience straight-forward lies.

However, while the intent to deceive may be a regular feature of lies, it is not clear that it is a necessary one. For example, what are called bald-faced lies (Sorensen 2007) are not attempts to deceive. These are cases where a speaker “goes on the record” with something even though everybody knows that it is false. Take, for instance, Thomas...

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1 “The Beard.” Liefer, C. (writer). *Seinfeld*, National Broadcasting Company 9 Feb 1995. By itself, the Costanza Doctrine only requires that a liar fail to believe that what she says is true (cf. Carson 2006, 298, Sorensen 2007, 256). However, this paper will only consider “lies” that the speaker actually believes to be false.

2 Some philosophers (e.g., Carson 2006, 284-85) think that, in addition, a lie has to be actually false. All of the “lies” that we consider in this paper meet this stronger requirement as well.

3 Dictionary definitions typically require that a lie be intended to deceive (cf. Carson 2006, 286). But there can easily be a difference between the way that a word is commonly defined and the way that it is commonly used.
Carson’s (2006, 290) example of a student who, despite having openly bragged about cheating, knows that the dean (out of fear of lawsuit) can only punish him if he confesses. Although everyone, including the dean, knows that the student cheated, the student denies any wrongdoing when questioned by the dean. This seems to be an instance of lying, yet the student clearly is not intending to deceive anyone.

In the face of such purported counter-examples to the traditional definition, there are a couple of things that might be said. First, some philosophers (e.g., Mahon 2008) are inclined to just say that bald-faced lies are not really lies, that this is just a loose way of speaking. Bald-faced lies are not really lies in the same way that decoy ducks are not really ducks. If such philosophers are right, the traditional definition may be just fine. A second line of response (e.g., Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007, Fallis 2009) is to allow that bald-faced lies really are lies and to offer some alternate definition that rules in bald-faced lies as well as lies that are intended to deceive, but that still rules out acting and sarcasm.

The most notable attempt along these lines comes from Thomas Carson (2006). The basic idea is as follows: You lie if you warrant the truth of something that you believe to be false. And you warrant the truth if you implicitly promise, or offer a guarantee, that what you say is true. Pinocchio is offering such a guarantee, but an actor on stage is not.

Carson (2006, 296) recognizes, though, that one can be mistaken about whether one is or is not warranting the truth of her claim. For example, imagine a busy politician who is running for President and who is giving a series of satellite interviews. This politician might easily get confused and believe that he is giving a comedic interview on Saturday Night Live when he is really appearing on The Evening News. Thus, when he tells an anecdote about his opponent having “broken wind” during a meeting with foreign dignitaries, he thinks that it is just a joke and does not expect to be taken seriously. In other words, he does not believe that he is warranting the truth of what he says. However, according to Carson, since the audience of The Evening News (quite reasonably) takes the politician seriously, he is, in fact, warranting the truth of claims that he believes to be false. (Carson endorses a concept of ‘warrant’ whereby whether one is actually warranting is independent of whether one intends to be warranting or whether one believes that one is warranting.) But since Carson (2006, 298) does not think that such cases should be categorized as genuine instances of lying, he includes an additional condition in his definition. In order to lie, it must also be the case that the speaker does not believe that she is not warranting the truth of what she says. Thus, this mixed-up politician is not lying according to Carson’s full definition.

Don Fallis (2009) thinks that something along the lines of Carson’s definition is correct, but that the definition, even with the additional condition, is susceptible to two sorts of counter-examples. The first counter-example is a simple variation on the case of the mixed-up politician discussed above. This time, the politician gets confused and believes that he is giving a serious interview on The Evening News when he is really appearing on Saturday Night Live. Thus, when he tells an extremely unfavorable
anecdote about his opponent (that he believe to be untrue), he believes that he is warranting the truth of what he says. However, since the audience of Saturday Night Live (quite reasonably) assumes that the politician is joking, he is not, in fact, warranting the truth of a claim that he believes to be false. Thus, this mixed-up politician is not lying according to Carson’s definition.

Fallis (2009, 48), however, takes this second mixed-up politician case to be a genuine instance of lying. Regardless of what his audience happens to be expecting, the mixed-up politician believes that he is warranting the truth of a claim that is false. And this seems to be sufficient for lying. (Fallis is attracted to the Augustinian view that “a person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself.”) Call these sorts of statements (where the speaker is not in a warranting situation, but believes that he is and says something that he believes to be false) confused lies. If such confused lies are genuine lies, then they are counter-examples to Carson’s definition.

A second potential counter-example to Carson’s definition addresses the necessity of warranting at all. Presumably, when you warrant the truth of your claim, you take responsibility for the truth (or, at least, the defensibility) of what you are saying. However, it seems that you can seriously assert something without taking much responsibility for its truth. In particular, one could avoid taking responsibility by adding a proviso that defeats one’s warrant. For example, you might say “p, but I am really bad with dates and times,” or “p, but I hope that you will not believe me.” Call these sorts of statements proviso lies. According to Carson’s definition, these cases are not lies, since the speaker is adding a proviso that undermines any warrant of truth. Fallis (2009, 49-50), however, is inclined to think that one is lying even if one explicitly disavows responsibility for the truth of what one says, so proviso lies should be seen as problematic for Carson’s definition.

So, the traditional definition of lying runs up against the potential problem that bald-faced lies are genuine, full-fledged lies, and the most notable, revised definition able to accommodate bald-faced lies has to deal with two potential counter-examples. We come, then, to another crossroads in our pursuit of an accurate definition of lying, with two options before us. On the one hand, we can preserve Carson’s definition and simply reject the intuitions that confused lies and proviso lies really are genuine instances of lying. On the other hand, we can try to come up with a new definition that includes these purported counter-examples as genuine instances of lying.

Fallis pursues the second alternative by appealing to Paul Grice’s work on norms of conversation. According to Grice (1989, 26-30), there are several social norms that govern everyday conversations. For example, you should “not say what you believe to be false,” you should “not say that for which you lack adequate evidence,” you should “make your contribution as informative as is required,” you should “avoid ambiguity,” etc. These norms exist in order to allow us to communicate effectively. Fallis (2009, 34) suggests that you lie if (a) you say p, (b) you believe that p is false, and (c) you believe that the first of these norms of conversation is in force. Unlike Carson’s definition, this
definition says that the mixed-up politician who mistakenly believes that he is warranting the truth of what he says, and the person who disavows responsibility for the truth of what he says, are both lying when they say things that they believe to be false.

The following chart provides a case by case breakdown of theoretical commitments for the various definitions under consideration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Straight-Forward Truth</th>
<th>Straight-Forward Lie</th>
<th>Bald-Faced Lie</th>
<th>Proviso Lie</th>
<th>Confused Lie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Definition</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (?)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fallis</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Folk Intuitions**

In order to decide which of the various definitions of lying that have been proposed is correct, we first have to determine whether the purported counter-examples really are instances of lying. The standard way to do this is to appeal to the intuitions of competent speakers of the language. However, we usually appeal to the intuitions of a very small, and potentially biased, sample of competent speakers. In particular, we appeal to the intuitions of a few over-educated philosophers. This is problematic for a number of reasons. Among them is the fact that some of these philosophers have a significant stake in what the “correct” intuitions are (because they have a professional stake in what the correct definition is).

In order to get around this sort of problem, experimental philosophers have begun to study the way relevant concepts are used in everyday language by ordinary people (i.e., speakers untainted by any theoretical commitments or formal, academic training; such individuals are standardly referred to as “the folk”). Following this tradition, we designed an experiment to distinguish between three of the main definitions of lying that have been proposed (viz., the traditional definition, the Carson definition, and the Fallis definition) by consulting folk intuitions. In particular, we wanted to find out whether such individuals consider the three types of purported counter-examples presented above to be genuine instances of lying. That is, we wanted to find out whether the folk categorize as lies (i) bald-faced lies, (ii) proviso lies, and (iii) confused lies.

If the intuitions of competent speakers were not a pretty good guide to how words are commonly used, we would have a lot of trouble communicating with each other (cf. Jackson 1998). Also, it would be very surprising for humans to develop terms like ‘knowledge’ and ‘lying’ if these terms were not getting at important phenomena in the real world (cf. Austin 1956, 8).

Interestingly, some empirical work already exists, which supports the hypothesis that people often classify bald-faced lies as lies. Coleman and Kay (1981), for example, asked subjects to read several short vignettes and then to rate on a seven-point scale whether a statement made by the main character was a lie. One of the vignettes involved a statement that (a) was false, (b) was believed by the speaker to be false, and (c) was intended by the speaker to deceive (i.e., a straight-forward lie), while the rest of the vignettes involved statements that lacked one or more of these three properties. Subjects did not rate statements that lacked property (c) as high as they did straight-forward lies (6.96), but such statements (i.e., bald-faced lies) were rated well above the midline (5.16). By contrast, statements that lacked property (b) were rated well below the midline (3.48).

In another study, Taylor, Lussier, and Maring (2003) present data that also suggest people often classify bald-faced lies as lies. Subjects (aged 4 to 7) were read several short vignettes and then asked whether the main character was lying or pretending. In the lying vignettes, the main character made a statement that she believed to be false with the intent to deceive. The pretending vignettes were exactly like the lying vignettes except that the intent to deceive was removed. For example, a story was changed so that everyone in the story was aware that the main character was not telling the truth. The children correctly identified all of the lying vignettes as involving lying. Interestingly, the children also identified many of the pretending vignettes as involving lying. And when the experiment was repeated using adults instead of children, experimenters got exactly the same results. That is, adults also identified pretending vignettes as instances involving lying. Although it was not the purpose of the study, since the pretending vignettes did not have the prototypical features of pretending (e.g., taking on a role to have fun), the psychologists had arguably created stories that involve bald-faced lying rather than pretending. When the experiment was repeated using pretending vignettes that did have such features, the children and the adults were perfect at distinguishing lying from pretending.

The three definitions of lying discussed above make different empirical predictions about the intuitions of the folk. If the traditional definition is correct that lying requires intending to deceive, we should expect the folk to deny that bald-faced lies are lies. If Carson’s definition is correct that lying requires actually warranting the truth of what one says, we should expect the folk to deny that proviso lies are lies and to deny that confused lies are lies. If Fallis’ definition is correct, we should expect the folk to think that bald-faced lies, proviso lies, and confused lies are all lies. We tested these predictions of the three definitions in two sets of experiments. Experiment 1 tested (i) the traditional philosophical definition’s prediction regarding bald-faced lies and (ii) Carson’s and Fallis’ predictions regarding proviso lies. Experiment 2 tested Carson’s and Fallis’ predictions regarding confused lies.

Some Caveats

Before describing the experiments, we want to acknowledge some important points. First, it is possible that none of these three definitions is entirely or perfectly
accurate. In fact, there may not be any single, concise list of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that precisely captures how the term ‘lie’ is used. Lying may be a “prototype” or “exemplar” concept rather than a “definitional” concept. That is, there may simply be a prototypical instance of lying, with other cases falling closer to or further from this prototype. But even if we cannot precisely capture actual usage with a concise definition, we can still try to find the concise definition that comes closest to capturing actual usage.

Second, while only one of the definitions will come closest to capturing actual usage, there are other factors that are important to consider when evaluating the definition of a concept. In particular, each of these three definitions arguably gets at something that is ethically and epistemically important. For example, people make utterances that are intended to deceive; and it is typically wrong to make such utterances for the reasons that it is wrong to deceive people (cf. Williams 2002, 93). Also, people make utterances that warrant the truth of something that they believe to be false; and it is typically wrong to make such utterances for essentially the reasons that it is wrong to make promises that one does not intend to keep (cf. Carson 2006, 292). Finally, people make utterances that violate the social norm “Do not say what you believe to be false;” and it is typically wrong to make such utterances for essentially the reasons that it is wrong to violate social norms (cf. Fallis 2009, 36-37). Thus, there may be philosophical use for each of these definitions aside from capturing actual usage. Even so, it is still useful to know what we typically mean when we use the term ‘lying’.

**Experiment 1**

The first experiment was designed to test whether the folk classified two of the proposed counter-examples as genuine instances of lying. In particular, we wanted to see whether bald-faced lies (suggested counter-examples to the traditional definition) and proviso lies (suggested counter-examples to Carson’s definition) were considered, pre-theoretically, to be the same as straight-forward cases of lying.

**Method**

**Participants**

To test these predictions, we recruited 216 undergraduates from introductory philosophy classes at the University of Arizona (110 female, mean age = 18.94; 103 male, mean age 19.25; 3 did not respond). Participation was entirely voluntary (no payment or course credit was given to participants) and with informed consent.

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6 In a similar vein, robins and cardinals are fairly representative of our ‘bird’ prototype, whereas emus and penguins are not.

7 And, Carson argues, it is wrong to make an insincere promise even if it is clear to everyone that one is not going to keep it.

8 Twenty-two were eliminated from the study either for failing to identify ordinary cases of lying as lies, or for identifying instances of straight-forwardly true statements as lies.
Materials

Six vignettes were created, each with a distinct storyline, but all with the same essential structure. Each vignette was written in four different versions: (a) a straight-forward lie, (b) a straight-forward truth, (c) a falsehood appended by a proviso, and (d) a bald-faced lie. [See Appendix A for examples of each version.]

Each survey included all four versions, counterbalanced for order effects, with each version being taken from a different vignette. The “straight-forward lie” and “straight-forward truth” versions were used as qualifying questions. Ratings for “straight-forward lie” also established a baseline against which to compare ratings for “proviso” and “bald-faced” versions. Surveys also included a demographic and personality measure.9

Procedure

Participants were first presented with a personality measure and a standard demographic survey. The final question in the demographic survey asked participants to estimate how many lies they tell in the average week. (This question was included to prime subjects towards thinking about their concept of ‘lying’.) Participants were then presented with a series of vignettes depicting (in varying order) straight-forward lies, straight-forward truths, proviso cases, and bald-faced lies. After each vignette, participants were asked whether the person in the story had lied. Participants provided their answer by filling in a circle on a 7-point Likert scale (1=“Definitely did not lie”, 4=“Not Sure”, 7=“Definitely Lied”). Participants were also asked if the person in the story had done something wrong by saying what he or she had said. (This question was included to test whether the moral valence of the agent’s motivations would impact participants’ judgments of whether the statement was a lie as has been observed with other concepts, cf. Knobe 2003.)

Results

More than 98% of participants rated bald-faced lies at or above 5 (i.e., on the affirmative end of the Lie/Not Lie spectrum), with nearly 94% rating such cases at ceiling (7, or “Definitely a Lie”). The mean score for bald-faced lies was 6.88.

9 The Ten-Item Personality Index (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann 2003).
Similarly, more than 90% of participants rated proviso cases at 5 or higher on the 7-point scale, with 68.5% rating them at ceiling. The mean score for proviso cases was 6.34 out of 7.

Ratings for both bald-faced and proviso cases were significantly similar to the ratings for straight-forward lies. In fact, there were weak, but significant, correlations between straight-forward cases and bald-face cases ($r = .277 (214)$, $p$ (one-tailed) <.0001) and between straight-forward cases and proviso cases ($r = .171 (213)$, $p$ (one-tailed) <.01).
Looking at the ratings for the moral question, we find that all of the cases that were rated as lies were also judged to be morally wrong.

**Discussion**

**Bald-faced Lies**

The results are unambiguously problematic for the traditional definition of lying. Recall that the traditional definition maintains that one lies when one says something that one believes to be false with the intent to deceive. Bald-faced lies, however, are falsehoods one tells without intending to deceive one’s audience. (Indeed, since all parties in bald-faced cases know that the audience knows the facts of the matter, there can be neither deception nor intended deception with respect to the matter.) Contrary to the prediction of the traditional definition, the folk rate such bald-faced lies almost exactly the same as ordinary, straight-forward lies. Thus, the traditional requirement that one is lying only if she is intending to deceive seems mistaken.
A defender of the traditional view might contend that our bald-faced cases did not entirely eliminate the possibility that the protagonist intended to deceive. They might argue, further, that the lingering possibility that the agent was attempting to deceive was driving the participants’ judgments of those cases as lies. We do not find this objection particularly convincing. At the very least, our cases presented subjects with instances in which it is not altogether clear that the protagonist is attempting deceive. As such, we should have found a significant minority who did not interpret the protagonists as intending to deceive; and, if participants were utilizing the traditional definition, we should have found a significant minority who did not rate bald-faced lies as lies. We did not. In order for this objection to carry, it would have to have been the case that 98% of participants judged that the protagonists were attempting deception. Given the design (and variety) of our vignettes—in which all parties knew or had solid physical evidence that the protagonist’s claim was false—this strikes us as highly unlikely.

Proviso Lies

The results are equally problematic for Carson’s definition of lying, as we understand it. Carson claims that one lies only if one warrants the truth of something that one believes to be false. Thus, if one were to preface (or append) their falsehood with a warrant-defeating statement, as in our proviso cases, they would not fulfill Carson’s requirement for lying. However, the folk overwhelmingly rate such cases as lies. As far as the folk are concerned, one can tell a lie even when they explicitly deny that they are warranting the truth of their claim.

One might object that, in our proviso cases, the speaker’s warrant was reduced but not eliminated. Thus, the fact that participants rated them to be lies in no way undermines Carson’s definition (since they could have been doing so in virtue of the agent’s still warranting their false claim to some degree). This objection, while based on a logical possibility, does not strike us as particularly likely. Indeed, we think the burden of proof falls on the shoulders of those who would raise this objection to show (i) that the protagonists in our vignettes were still warranting the truth of their claims, and (ii) that this feature was salient in participants’ minds when judging these cases to be lies. Failing that, we see no reason to take the objection as a serious possibility.

Experiment 2

The second experiment was designed to test Carson’s and Fallis’ claims regarding confused lies. More specifically, the goal was to test whether the folk take Fallis’ proposed counter-example of the mixed-up politician to be a genuine instance of lying, and thus a genuine counter-example to Carson’s account.

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10 On the other hand, a t-test revealed significant differences between mean scores for proviso cases and cases of straight-forward lies ($t(214) = 6.354, p < .001$). This difference, although significant, taken along with the fact that both cases were rated extremely high, suggests only that the standard deviation in one or both cases is extremely narrow. That they are significantly different does not undermine the folk categorization of proviso cases as lies; they are lies, just maybe not prototypical cases of lying.
The following chart illustrates the relevant predictions tested in experiment 2:

![Theoretical Predictions Chart]

**Method**

**Participants**

Of the 216 participants in Experiment 1, 212 also participated in Experiment 2 (108 female, mean age = 18.94; 101 male, mean age = 19.1; 3 did not respond).

**Materials**

A vignette was created based on Fallis’ proposed counter-example of the mixed-up politician. In this vignette, a senator is running for President and has scheduled numerous satellite interviews for the same day. Four versions of the vignette were created, which varied along two dimensions: the first dimension varied according to what the politician believed about his situation; the second dimension varied according to the situation the senator actually was in. Paper surveys included one version each.

The four versions of the vignette were as follows: both the politician and the audience believe that it is a performance (he thinks that he is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, and he really is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*); only the politician believes that it is a performance (he thinks that he is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, but he is really appearing on *The Evening News*); only the audience believes that it is a performance (he thinks that he is appearing on *The Evening News*, but he really is appearing on *Saturday Night Live*); neither believes that it is a performance (he thinks

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11 Given the political nature of the example, we wanted to test for possible influences of political bias, so demographic measures included a question about the participant’s political affiliation (Extremely Liberal, Liberal, Slightly Liberal, Moderate, Slightly Conservative, Conservative, Extremely Conservative, None). We then varied the political valence of the falsehood being told by the senator: the senator either accused his opponent of wanting to kill newborn babies in order to promote stem cell research, or of wanting to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism. Counter to expectations, we found no evidence of political bias of any kind.
that he is appearing on *The Evening News*, and he really is appearing on *The Evening News*). [See Appendix B for the actual text.]

**Procedure**

The study was a between-subjects design, with each participant getting just one version of the vignette. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (“Definitely Did Not Lie” to “Definitely Lied”) their response to the question ‘Did the Senator lie about his opponent’s platform?’ Participants were also asked the moral question of whether the politician had done something wrong by saying what he said.

**Results**

All four versions of the vignette had a mean average above the neutral rating of 4.

![Bar Chart](image)

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<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>6.55</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

However, both versions in which the senator believed that he was appearing on *The Evening News* (i.e., both conditions in which he believed he was in a serious, non-joking context) were rated significantly higher than the versions in which he believed he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live.*\(^{12}\) That is, for the two versions in which the senator was, in fact, appearing on *The Evening News*, participants rated the version in which the senator believed he was appearing on *The Evening News* significantly higher on the ‘Lie’/‘No Lie’ scale (6.55) than the version in which he believed he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* (5.19).\(^{13}\) Similarly, for the two versions in which the senator was, in fact appearing on *Saturday Night Live*, participants rated the version in which he believed he was appearing on *The Evening News* significantly higher (6.43) than the version in which he believed he was appearing on *Saturday Night Live* (4.5).\(^{14}\) Finally, a 2x2 ANOVA revealed that the senator’s belief had a significantly greater impact on ratings than did the actual state of affairs.\(^{15}\) When we hold the senator’s belief fixed, whether he was on *Saturday Night Live* or *The Evening News* did not significantly affect ratings. But, when we hold the state of affairs fixed, whether the senator believed he was

\(^{12}\) ANOVA, \(F (1, 204) = 40.887, p < .0001.\)

\(^{13}\) \(t(101) = 3.95, p < .001.\)

\(^{14}\) \(t(107) = 5.075, p < .0001.\)

\(^{15}\) \(F (3, 208) = 14.94, p < .0001\)
on *The Evening News* had a very significant affect on participants’ rating his statement a lie.

**Did the senator lie about his opponent's platform?**

![Bar chart showing ratings for Senator Believes It's SNL and Senator Believes It's Evening News]

Like experiment 1, participants’ ratings for the moral question closely tracked their ratings for lying.

**Did the Senator do something wrong by saying what he said?**


(1="Definitely Not Wrong", 7="Definitely Wrong")

**Discussion**

Recall that, in addition to actually warranting the truth of what she says, Carson (2006, 298) also requires that the speaker not believe that she is not warranting the truth of what she says. Thus, when an agent believes that she is in a non-serious context, she is not lying according to Carson, even if she states something that she believes to be false (and even if she actually warrants the truth of what she says). On this point, Carson and Fallis agree. However, since Carson limits cases of lying to those in which the agent is, in fact, in a warranting situation, his definition rules out as lying those cases in which the agent is not warranting, even if she *believes* she is warranting, the truth of her (false) claim. This is where Fallis and Carson diverge. If Carson is right, then the folk should only judge something to be a lie both when the agent believes she is in a serious context and when, in fact, she is in a serious context. Fallis, on the other hand, takes the
Augustinian position that believing one is in a serious (i.e., warranting or norm-governed) context is sufficient for lying. If Fallis’ objection is sound, then we should find that the folk judge someone to be lying if she thinks she is in a serious context, even if, in fact, she is in a non-serious context.

Looking at the results, it seems that the internal feature of the senator’s belief is a stronger factor in folk judgments of lying than is the external feature of the situation. That is, in judging whether a given statement is a lie, the agent’s mental state (i.e., whether or not the agent believes that she is in a serious, non-joking context) is more relevant—to the folk, at least—than the fact of the matter (i.e., whether or not she really is in a serious, non-joking context). So, in one sense, the data seem to straightforwardly favor Fallis’ definition over Carson’s.

Yet, in another sense, the data from experiment 2 are problematic for all of the definitions under consideration. All of the versions of this vignette were, unexpectedly, rated above the midline. Although the overall trend favors Fallis’ definition, none of the definitions under consideration predicted that cases in which the senator believed he was appearing on Saturday Night Live would be rated as lies. However, there may be a few potential explanations for this across-the-board escalation in ratings. For instance, if the folk tend to assume that all politicians are liars, this result might merely be a consequence of utilizing politicians as characters in our vignettes. Also, there may have been some confusion as to whether the question was about the senator lying or the senator’s character (which happened to be a semi-fictional version of the senator) lying. Yet another possibility is that the claim leveled against the senator’s opponent in the Saturday Night Live skit was not extreme or funny enough to be recognized as a merely comedic line; it is possible that participants might have seen the Saturday Night Live lines as also being delivered for political effect (i.e., as delivering a genuine political message under the guise of humor). Whatever the case, it will require further research to determine whether the inflated ratings are picking out a genuine feature of our ordinary concept of lying or whether they are simply the product of other, conceptually-irrelevant, features of the probes.

General Discussion

Our experiment was designed to determine whether the ordinary usage of the concept of lying conforms to the traditional definition, the Carson definition, or the Fallis definition. However, our experiments did not rule out the possibility that folk judgments about lying might conform to some other definition of lying. As it turns out, the results of our experiments are, in fact, consistent with the folk simply judging all false statements to be lies. Aside from the cases in which the protagonist made a straightforwardly true statement, all of the cases involved a false statement, and all of those were rated as lies.

There is, however, something very counter-intuitive about ‘simply uttering a false statement’ as a conception of lying. Such a conception is clearly overly inclusive. It would mean that one would be lying even if one made an honest mistake. In fact, it would mean that one would be lying even if one just made a verbal slip (e.g., “Dr.
Samuel Johnson was an entomologist"). But honest mistakes and verbal slips are clearly not lies. Thus, we think that it is highly unlikely that the folk have this conception of lying.

Moreover, there are existing empirical studies that suggest that this is not the folk conception of lying. For example, Wimmer, Gruber and Perner (1985) presented subjects with short vignettes that involved either honest mistakes or lies. They found that, while young children do judge all false statements to be lies, adults and older children do not consider honest mistakes to be lies. Further, Siegel and Peterson (1996) found that even fairly young children, under the right circumstances, can distinguish between mistakes and lies.

The results of our experiments are also consistent with the folk simply judging all statements that are believed by the speaker to be false to be lies. Aside from the cases in which the protagonist made a straightforwardly true statement, all of the cases involved a statement that the protagonist believed to be false, and all of those were rated as lies.

But once again, ‘uttering something one believes to be false’ as a conception of lying is clearly overly inclusive. For instance, actors in fictional performances recite lines that they believe are actually false. Yet we do not normally count such utterances as lies. Likewise, when we facetiously say something false as a means of implying something true, we utter a claim that we believe to be false. But that is not lying; it is just sarcasm.

There are also existing empirical studies that suggest that this is not the folk conception of lying. While young children do judge all statements that are believed by the speaker to be false to be lies, Sullivan, Winner, and Hopfield (1995) found that older children can distinguish between jokes (where the speaker says something she believes to be false) and lies. In a similar vein, several other studies found that, past a certain age, children do not consider irony or sarcasm to be lies.16

Based on this sort of evidence, we suspect that the folk utilize a more nuanced conception than simply judging all false statements, or all statements that are believed by the speaker to be false, to be lies. This needs to be more explicitly tested (which we plan to do). But for now, the data from our experiments suggest that one particular definition on offer in the philosophical literature does much better at capturing the folk conception of lying than the available alternatives. Data from experiment 1 indicate that the folk notion does not comport with the traditional definition (since bald-faced lies and straightforward lies are treated almost identically). Data from experiment 1 also suggest that the folk notion does not comport with Carson’s definition (as evidenced by their rating proviso lies and straightforward lies alike). And, finally, data from experiment 2 suggest that, contrary to Carson’s criterion that one actually warrant the truth of a claim, the folk notion of lying places greater weight on the agent’s mental state (i.e., her belief that she is in a serious, non-joking context) than on the external fact of the matter. Of all the

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16 See, for instance, Taylor Lussier, and Maring (2003, 300-301).
candidate definitions of lying discussed above, Fallis’ definition seems to comport best with the folk notion.

Moral Implications

This paper has been concerned with finding out which definition of lying is most central to, and best captures, ordinary usage. Call this the semantic project. According to our results, the feature that is most semantically relevant involves the knowing violation of the conversational norm, “Do not say things that you believe to be false.” But philosophical mysteries surrounding lies are not limited to the semantic; there are also moral considerations.\(^{17}\)

Our data suggest that the traditional definition of lying is, as the semantics go, incorrect. However, it is entirely plausible that what makes a given lie morally bad is that it is an attempt to deceive.\(^{18}\) One implication of this possibility is that bald-faced lies, lacking any deceptive intent, are not morally wrong. Yet, we found that participants rated bald-faced lies as being just as wrong (more wrong, in fact) as straight-forward lies and proviso lies. Why would they do so, if lies are wrong in virtue of the intent to deceive?

Sorensen (2007, 251) argues that the folk are simply making a mistake in their moral judgments of lies:

Strangely, we condemn these bald-faced lies more severely than disguised lies. The wrongness of lying springs from the intent to deceive -- just the feature missing in the case of bald-faced lies. ... In the end, I conclude that the apparent intensity of our disapproval of non-deceptive lies is a rhetorical illusion.

So, for example, while Carson’s cheating student has certainly done something wrong by asserting his innocence, according to Sorensen (2007, 261), “what is wrong here is the evasion of just punishment, not … the bald-faced lie.”\(^{19}\)

It may be that the main reason that lying is wrong is that lies are intended to deceive. It may even be that Sorensen is correct and that the folk are mistaken about bald-faced lies being morally bad. If so, it makes sense for moral philosophers to focus exclusively on the sorts of lies (i.e., straight-forward lies) that are captured by the traditional definition (cf. Fallis 2009, 54-55).

\(^{17}\) Of course, if one takes the stance that lies are morally wrong simply in virtue of being lies, then the semantically-central feature will also serve as the morally-central; but few maintain such a position. Even Kant (2002 [1785]), who argued that lying is always morally wrong, argued so not simply on the ground that they are lies, but from the fact that lies are told with the intention to deceive (and from the inherent irrationality of universalizing a maxim allowing assertions that are intended to deceive).

\(^{18}\) Indeed, we suspect that the initial plausibility and persistent popularity of the traditional definition, to some extent, can be chalked up to the centrality of moral concerns in considering the phenomenon of ‘lying’.

\(^{19}\) Sorensen (2007, 262) does also suggest that bald-faced lies might be considered morally contemptible, not because they are lies, but because they are symptoms of other moral failures.
However, the results of our experiments do indicate that the folk conception of lying is much broader than the traditional definition. And even though they are not all intended to deceive, many of the statements in this larger category share other morally problematic features. For example, bald-faced lies, as well as straight-forward lies, are akin to insincere promises. Also, proviso lies and confused lies, as well as bald-faced lies and straight-forward lies, involve the intentional violation of an important social norm. Thus, before it is concluded that the traditional definition completely captures the moral wrongness of lying, we need a greater understanding of the moral status of these other features. Also, further empirical investigation is needed to determine exactly which of these features the folk are reacting to in their moral evaluations of lies.

In any event, whatever features turn out to be most relevant to the moral evaluation of a lie, it will inevitably be of relevance whether the speaker has violated the social norm prohibiting statements that one believes to be false. Given that it seems to be the defining feature of lying, we think that the philosophical literature needs to give more attention to this social norm, even if intentionally violating this norm is not the central feature that makes lying wrong. After all, violating this norm seems to be what makes an utterance a lie.
Appendix A

A. Straight-forward lie
Charlie has a gambling addiction, so he often sneaks away from work to bet on horses. He has just come home after spending another thousand dollars at the racetrack. As he enters the house, his wife Natalie says to him, “I tried calling you at work today, but no one could find you. You didn’t skip out of work to go gambling again, did you?” Since Charlie knows that his wife doesn’t approve and will likely leave him if she finds out he’s been betting again, he responds, “No, Honey, I wasn’t gambling.”

B. Straight-forward truth
Andre has a mother with Alzheimer’s, so he often sneaks away from work to check on her. He has just come home after spending another afternoon at the nursing home. As he enters the house, his wife Martina says to him, “I tried calling you at work today, but no one could find you. You didn’t skip out of work to go see your mother, did you?” Although Andre knows that his wife doesn’t appreciate it when he visits his mother without her, he responds, “Yeah, Honey, I went to go see Mother without you.”

C. Proviso
Maria is a jogger. She jogs every day, usually with her boyfriend Jason. Maria has just finished a quick jog on the park’s newest running trail. As she enters the house, her boyfriend Jason says, “Did you just go running without me?” Maria remembers just then that she and Jason had made specific plans to go jogging on the new trail today. She responds, “Admittedly, I wouldn’t tell you if I did; but, no, I didn’t go running without you.”

D. Bald-faced lie
Aunt Jane says to Susan, "Peter was supposed to come over last Friday to clean out the attic. But he said that he had to stay home and help you with your homework. Is that true?” Susan knows that Peter actually decided to go to the baseball game on Friday instead of going to help his aunt. She also sees that Aunt Jane is holding and looking at Peter’s ticket stub from Friday’s game. Aunt Jane holds up the ticket stub and asks again, “Susan, Did Peter stay home on Friday?” Despite the evidence in Aunt Jane’s hand, Susan replies, "Yeah. Peter stayed home to help me with my homework on Friday."
Appendix B

Believes SNL, Is SNL
The life of a presidential candidate is a very busy and often hectic one. This past election, for instance, one Senator made four separate appearances via satellite in a single Saturday. One of these appearances was a fake interview with Saturday Night Live’s Amy Poehler (as Katie Couric). One of the Senator’s aides was careful to remind him that this was not the Katie Couric interview, but the fake interview with Saturday Night Live’s Amy Poehler in character as Katie Couric. In this interview, when Poehler (pretending to be Couric) asked the Senator what he felt was the greatest weakness in his opponent’s platform, the Senator responded “First of all, Katie, I’m told that he said in one speech that he wants to invade Spain in order to fight terrorism.” Now, the Senator knew that his opponent never said any such thing, but he also knew that he was appearing on Saturday Night Live and that saying it would fulfill a caricature of himself, as comedic performances are supposed to do.

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References


