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Lying as a Parallax Stance

In this paper, an attempt is made to look at the phenomenon of lying from a dynamic perspective. First a few classic definitions of lying are considered and found to be inadequate due to the methodological assumption characteristic of the static style of thinking which postulates that lying is a stable mental entity that is formed in mind and afterwards projected into discourse with the help of linguistic signs. An alternative approach to lying, which is underpinned with the dynamic style of thinking, posits that lying is a discourse formation which emerges in the joint effort of communicants and is contextually sensitive and labile. It is shown that lying is a specific form of stance, the latter being treated in the spirit of J. Du Bois as a linguistically articulated form of social action whose meaning is construed within the broader scope of language, interaction, and sociocultural value. Rather than catalogue the features of lying, the dynamic approach focuses on the general structure of evaluative, positioning and alignment processes which organize the enactment of lying in discourse. These processes are further brought together in the parallax model of lying, parallax being interpreted after S. Žižek as an apparent change in the nature of the object resulting from the change of the observer's viewpoint.

Keywords: lying, dynamic approach, stance, parallax.

Introduction

The research history of lying goes back to ancient times, yet to date there is no agreement among scholars on what lying is, how it is done, and what part language and interaction play in the process.

Most of the attempts to capture the essence of lying have been underpinned with the representational theory of mind (Rorty, 1979), which considers knowledge to be mental representation, cognitive mirroring of the mind-external world. Accordingly, language is viewed as a means of symbolic manifestation of complete thought which is ready to be 'packed' into words. This type of rationality, known as classic, is static in its very essence. It focuses on the general and constant features of objects modelled in keeping with the binary opposition principle. When viewed in this light, lying presents itself as the weak member of the opposition "truth :: lying", its characteristics being the mirror reversal of the features of truth.

The dynamic style of thinking, which emerged in the last third of the XXth century as an alternative to the representational theory of mind, revolutionized the scientific worldview which had been dominant for millennia. The radical change was initiated by exact sciences. The theory of relativity and quantum physics demonstrated that the laws of Newtonian physics work only in the 'sterile' environment of a stable equilibrium. Such environment can hardly be found in real life; therefore, natural objects' behavior usually differs from the one predicted by theories which model their ideal states.

This is especially true of such an object as natural communication which is unfolding "within an ever-changing, multilayer grid of life processes" (Bogusławska-Tafelska, et al. 2010: 22). This makes it an appropriate object of ecolinguistic study, where language is treated broadly, as "activity in which wordings play a part" (Cowley 2011: 3). This umbrella definition enables a researcher to bring together a number of related concepts, namely, 'discourse', 'conversing', 'dialogue', 'distributed language', 'situated language use,' 'languaging', etc. Viewing language in contexts of ecological engagement calls for "joining the efforts of specialists of divergent disciplines in building models across the lines of divergent methodologies" (Bogusławska-Tafelska 2011: 10).

Being a widespread communication practice, lying shares all the complexities inherent in natural communication. As we engage in lying, we think, talk, use our body (gestures, gaze, voice, etc.), use texts and technological means (telephones, computers, etc.). Taking into account the important role that all these diverse 'embodiments' play in enacting lying, its study obviously calls for the ecological approach.

The complexities of lying are further enhanced due to its 'concealed strategic nature' (Habermas 1990). In simpler words, lying seeks to fulfill a hidden agenda of the speaker, and thus is a variety of incooperative social action. As such, lying presents a considerable challenge for researchers who endeavor to model it.

This paper attempts to meet this challenge by suggesting a labile model of lying, the latter being viewed as a variety of stance. Drawing on the interactional model of 'the stance triangle' suggested by John Du Bois, I suggest a dynamic parallax model of lying. I start with laying some groundwork by exposing the drawbacks of the feature models of lying. This sets the stage for characterizing lying as a complex act of stance-taking. Then I articulate a number of issues connected with the concept of parallax, after which I go on to characterizing lying as a parallax stance. At this point I should note that the proposed model has been built deductively and thus is in need for further empirical testing.

1. Feature model of lying

Characteristics of lying are manifold and complex; all of them have been challenged from different quarters; for recent overviews see, for instance (Fallis, 2010; Mahon, 2009). Some of these characteristics are considered below.

Let us start with such feature as *the verbal form* of lying. Although most scholars hold that lying is enacted only by a verbal statement, some claim that acting in an intentionally deceptive way (for example, pretending

to be leaving but instead of that hiding and staying behind) counts for lying, too. Some even hold that just remaining silent in certain situations may be considered a lie.

Another important feature of lying is believed to be *the falsity of the proposition.* Although most researchers adhere to the opinion that a lying utterance harbors a false proposition, some hold that it is also possible to lie by making an utterance underpinned with a true proposition, as long as the speaker is motivated by a deceptive intention.

The next characteristic of lying, which is mentioned by many scholars, is *the knowledge of the speaker* that the proposition is false. Although most researchers hold that lying calls for the speaker to know about the falsity of the proposition, others contend that making untruthful statements to others with the intention to deceive is not lying if what one says happens to be true.

Another parameter of lying as *the speaker's intention to deceive.* Though many scholars claim that in order to be called lying, the utterance should be motivated by a deceptive intention, some hold that the latter is an optional feature, and that making an utterance underpinned with a false proposition, under some circumstances, is to be considered lying, whether or not it is motivated by the intention to inform.

The liar's intention is not an elementary thing, either, so there is lack of consensus on the compositional structure of the general deceptive intention (and whether or not each of the sub-intentions is obligatory). Thus, although most researchers hold that lying requires an intention to deceive *about the contents of one's untruthful statement*, some hold that lying also requires an intention to deceive *about one's belief in the truth of one's untruthful statement*. According to them, when one lies, one intends not only that others believe that what one says is true, but also that they believe that one believes that what one says is true. Some (Simpson, 1992) go even further, and hold that lying requires a third intention to deceive – an intention *that others believe that one intends that they believe that one believes that what one says is true*.

Then there comes a requirement that *the one duped should only be the addressee.* Although most scholars hold that in order to lie, one must be addressing the dupe, some others claim that it is possible to lie to eavesdroppers.

This list can be continued, but there is hardly any need to do so in order to see that the whole enterprise of elaborating the definition of lying by extending the number of its features is doomed to failure since people are highly creative in devising ways of deceiving others with the help of words. An endeavor to formalize lying in this way amounts to an attempt to capture the essence of human nature by making a checklist.

There are grounds to believe that the key to understanding the essence of lying is contained not in elaborating its static model, but in revising the epistemological procedure of its analysis, in particular, considering the possibility of constructing a dynamic model.

2. Lying as stance-taking

In the light of the dynamic approach, lying is not something one has, i.e. not a mental representation, but something one does, i.e. enactment. Social actors can enact lying only jointly, producing and interpreting it in a context of interaction.

In search for theoretical instruments needed to account for the enactment of lying, some interesting parallels with the content of poststructuralist terms 'doing identity', 'positioning', and 'stance-taking' can be drawn. These terms help focus attention on dynamic aspects of communicative encounters, in contrast to the way in which the terms 'speech act,' 'self,' 'role', etc. serve to highlight formal, static and ritualistic aspects (Davies and Harré, 1990: 44).

Viewed at a dynamic angle, lying comes out as a variety of stance-taking. In a most general way, the latter can be defined as "situated, interactional process actively engaged in by language users communicating with each other" (Palander-Collin, 2008: 361).

Lying is a complex stance-act, encompassing multiple facets of stance-taking at once. Below I explore these facets using Du Bois' model of the emerging stance (Du Bois, 2007) as a basis. In modelling the process of stance-taking, Du Bois attempts to answer three questions: (1) who is the stancetaker; (2) what is the object of stance; (3) what stance is the stancetaker responding to (ibid.: 146-152). In more general terms, Du Bois links these questions about stance to the notions of stance subject, stance object, and alignment.

The subjects of the stance-act of lying. In the stance-act of lying, the first and the third questions turn out to be inextricably linked since lying is in fact a 'counterstance'. In other words, lying becomes a psychological fact only in case there is somebody who sees through it. The

presence of such person – let us call him a shrewd observer – is an obligatory characteristic of the situation of lying. Conversely, if a lie goes down with the dupe, it means that for him no lying has taken place, hence, from his point of view, communication is cooperative. The status of a shrewd observer can be ascribed to the addressee, a bystander or an eavesdropper; it can even be attributed at the meta-discourse level, for example, to the reader of a work of fiction who can see that a certain character is lying to another character. The shrewd observer can even coincide with the speaker who is telling a lie, reflecting on it.

Hence, the stance-act of lying is inherently dialogic, and that is why Russian linguist N.D. Arutyunova calls lying 'a second-replica phenomenon' (Арутюнова, 1999: 662). The 'second replica' is an agreed term which does not actually presuppose that it has a verbal form. It can be a response to one's own thought, irrespective of whether it is put into words or not, the opinion of another communicant (worded or not), etc.

The object of the stance-act of lying is not elementary, either: by ascertaining a lie, the shrewd observer is evaluating not only the truth value of the proposition (false), but also the sincerity of the speaker (insincere), and even the situation on the whole. In addition, by ascertaining lying, the shrewd observer may express not only rational, but also emotional evaluation of the situation (it is usually negative, though there may be exceptions, for instance, white lie, Afro-American bargaining).

By doing emotional and rational evaluation, the observer is said to position himself in a certain way. *Positioning* is provisionally defined as the act of situating a social actor with respect to his responsibility for doing evaluation and thus invoking sociocultural value (Du Bois, 2007: 143). The difference between the ancillary stance-acts of *evaluation* and positioning is accounted for by the fact that the first one is object-centered, while the second one is subject-centered (ibid.: 158). Thus, evaluation and positioning are 'reverse correlates': in the stance-act of lying the shrewd observer positions himself as such by evaluating – usually negatively – the truth value of the proposition, the sincerity of the speaker and / or the situation as a whole.

As an illustration, let us consider a fragment from a work of fiction where a situation of lying is depicted:

"What did you just take? Give it to me now!" I stuck out my hand, actually expecting that he would hand over whatever it was. Gary's face was deadpan. "I didn't take anything. You must be seeing things."

"Bullshit!" (Cameron, D. 2004. A Fugitive Truth. N.Y.: Avon. P.79).

In this situation both varieties of evaluation – rational and emotional – are observed. Rational evaluation is twofold: the observer (the first person narrator, who is an investigator present at the crime scene) does not believe, firstly, that the proposition of the utterance *I didn't take anything* is true; secondly, that her co-communicator (Gary) is sincere in denying that he has taken something, since the investigator saw it with her own eyes. Emotional evaluation of Gary's behavior by the observer is negative.

As this example shows, disagreement of the observer implies not only the disagreement *about something* (the object), but also the disagreement *with someone* (the other subject – the liar). This aspect of the stance-taking – how the participants relate to one another in physical and psychological perspectives – is called *alignment* (Du Bois, 2007: 144), or *footing*, in Erving Goffman's terms (Goffman, 1981: 128).

The alignment of the participants of the situation of lying is quite complex since their perspectives are divergent: the one offered by the speaker is rejected by the shrewd observer. In this, the alignment of participants in the situation of lying is different from that in a situation of truth-telling with no intention to deceive, where alignment is convergent (Du Bois, 2007: 149). Divergent alignment of participants, which is an inherent characteristic of the situation of lying, suggests that the stance of subjects in the situation of lying is of a specific nature, since the situation is characterized by the absence of the 'shared stance object' (ibid.: 159). The essence of stance in the situation of lying is best captured by the concept of parallax, which involves a change in the perspective of viewing the situation by its participants (main or secondary) or even the observers at the metalevel.

3. Lying as parallax

Parallax is treated in physics as an apparent change in the position of an object resulting from a change in the position of its observer (Webster). In the present-day humanities, parallax has come

to be considered as an "ontological" metaphor which captures the way of perceiving the world in its procedural, dynamic aspect – as an activity / process, and not as a stale result (Žižek, 2006).

In discourse, parallax phenomena could be observed, for example, in situations which call for a shift in the way a certain fragment of the world is viewed (reframing in Goffman's sense (Goffman, 1974). Joking, irony, metaphor, and lying are all instances of discourse formations of the parallax nature. Given this, lying seems to be a suitable testing ground to explore the explanatory potential of the concept of parallax for linguistic research.

Dealing with parallax, one is supposed to draw a distinction between the "first impression" and "the second impression", which is that of interpretation. This dialectics deals with the individual, subjective mode of conceptualizing the world: the hearer refuses to occupy the position offered to him by the speaker. It means that he is not an ideal – obedient and non-critical – receiver of the message, but a perceptive and personalized individual.

Lying is about seeing the situation by multiple subjects with double vision. In conceptualizing lying, it is best to put the emphasis not so much on the shift, as on the multiplicity of observational sites, the borderline between which is fuzzy to such an extent that the gap can become indistinguishable. An example here may be when the truth is used as a disguise, as when a spy, asked what he does in life, answers, 'I am a spy', only to be greeted with laughter.

Modes of parallax can be seen in different aspects of conceptualizing lying (or theorizing about it). Firstly, there is the 'ontological' parallax (Žižek, 2006) arising from the insincerity / falsity duality of lying. Then, there is the parallax of the speaker's and the observer's stances (or their counterstance), which is an inherent feature of lying. And finally, there is the methodological parallax between the static / atomistic / disembodied and dynamic / ecological / distributed approaches to considering linguistic phenomena, lying in particular.

By way of conclusion, parallax is a vivid "ontological" metaphor which captures the way of perceiving the enactment of lying in its procedural, dynamic aspect – as an activity / process, and not as a stale result. Moreover, as compared to the most popular to date models of stance-taking (such as Du Bois "stance triangle"), the parallax model allows to capture divergent stances, lying being one of them.

Lying is an undeniably complex discourse formation: it is an ensemble of the acts of evaluation, positioning and alignment of social actors in the situation of where their positions

diverge. The analysis offered here is another proof to the fact that the 'stances' which are quite commonly considered separately are but different facets of a complex act of stance-taking.

The process of their emergence is not rule-governed but is rather born in the interaction of the content of the utterance with its environment in a broad sense. Yet this seems to be the task for further research with respect to a new understanding of how cognition, communication and society interrelate.

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