

# What is Lying?

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**Abstract:** In order to lie, you have to say something that you believe to be false. But lying is not simply saying what you believe to be false. Philosophers have made several suggestions for what the additional condition might be. For example, it has been suggested that the liar has to *intend to deceive* (Augustine 395, Bok 1978, Mahon 2006), that she has to believe that she will deceive (Chisholm and Feehan 1977), or that she has to *warrant the truth* of what she says (Carson 2006). In this paper, I argue that none of the existing definitions of lying identify a *necessary* condition on lying. I claim that lying is saying what you believe to be false when you believe that the following norm of conversation is in effect: “*Do not say what you believe to be false*” (Grice 1989, 27). And I argue that this definition handles all of the counter-examples to the existing definitions.

*It's not a lie if you believe it.*  
– George Costanza

## 1. Introduction

Many ethicists (e.g., Augustine 1952, Aquinas 1922, Kant 1959, Bok 1978, Adler 1997) have studied the morality of lying. Most notably, Immanuel Kant (1959) argued that it is always wrong to lie by asking us to imagine what would happen if everybody lied when it was to their advantage. More recently, Sissela Bok (1978) argued that it is wrong to lie more often than we think because we often underestimate the personal and social costs of lying. Before we can even ask whether it is wrong to lie, however, we first need to know what it means for something to be a lie (cf. Carson 2006, 284).

Pretty much everybody agrees with George Costanza that, in order to lie, you have to say something that you believe to be false. But lying is not simply saying

something that you believe to be false. For example, if you say “I am the Prince of Denmark” while performing a play, you are not lying. Similarly, if you say “I am the Prince of Denmark” and follow this statement with a wink to indicate that you are not to be taken seriously, you are not lying. So, there must be some additional condition that lies must meet.

Several definitions of lying have been put forward in the philosophical literature. In this paper, I argue that each of these definitions is unsuccessful because there are cases of lying that do not meet the proposed additional condition. Finally, I put forward a new definition of lying that handles all of the counter-examples to the existing definitions.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Intending to Deceive

The most common definition among philosophers (e.g., Augustine 1952, 56, Bok 1978, 13, Williams 2002, 96, Mahon 2006, 618) is that lying is saying something that you believe to be false *with the intent to deceive*.<sup>2</sup> This definition correctly rules out statements that are followed with a wink or that are part of a play. In such cases, the speaker does not intend to deceive his audience.

(Below I argue that an intention to deceive is not necessary for lying. But it is worth noting that, as it stands, this definition is also not sufficient for lying. For example, suppose that I say in theatrical tone that “I am the Prince of Denmark” in order to

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<sup>1</sup> The presumption here is that we can find necessary and sufficient conditions for *lying* by consulting our intuitions about specific cases (in the same way that epistemologists, for example, often presume that we can find necessary and sufficient conditions for *knowing* by consulting our intuitions about specific cases). There are, of course, some serious objections to this methodology of *conceptual analysis* (cf. Stich and Weinberg 2001). But space is too limited for me to enter into that debate here.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to philosophers, social scientists (e.g., Barnes 1994, 11, Ekman 1997, 334) also typically include this requirement in their definitions of lying. It is also part of most dictionary definitions of lying (cf. Carson 2006, 286). But it should be noted that Augustine (1952, 60) was not completely sure whether this condition was necessary for lying.

convince someone that I am an actor. Although I have made a statement that I believe to be false with the intent to deceive, I have not lied.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as Bernard Williams (2002, 96) points out, the proposed additional condition is really that you intend to deceive your listeners with respect to the very statement that you make.)

Lying very often *does* involve an intention to deceive. For example, I might say with complete seriousness that “I am the Prince of Denmark” in order to impress someone that I have just met at a fancy party in Washington DC. However, as several philosophers (e.g., Siegler 1966, 129, Shibles 1988, 102, Carson 2006, 289, Sorensen 2007) have pointed out, an intention to deceive is not a *necessary* condition on lying.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Carson (2006, 290) has nice example that makes this point. A student has been accused of plagiarism. And the student knows that the dean knows that he did it. But the student also knows (based on the dean’s reputation) that he will not be punished unless he confesses. So, when the student is called into the dean’s office, he denies having plagiarized. Although the student does not expect the dean to be deceived, he is pretty clearly lying to the dean. This is what is sometimes referred to as a “bald-faced lie” (cf. Sorensen 2007).

Such cases show that lying is not always about deception. We typically lie in order to deceive other people. And we want these other people to be deceived because that serves our purposes in some way. For example, my new acquaintance will be more

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<sup>3</sup> I have only *falsely implicated* that I am an actor (cf. Adler 1997). Mark Twain (1996, 173-174) refers to this sort of deception as a “modified lie.” It may be as morally objectionable as lying (cf. Twain 1996, Adler 1997). But it is not lying.

<sup>4</sup> Although intending to deceive is not necessary for lying, it should be noted that *deceptive lying* is certainly an important category of lying. (In fact, philosophers, including epistemologists (e.g., Graham 1997, 230, O’Brien 2007) as well as ethicists, seem to be primarily interested in this category of lying. Kant, for example, was clearly concerned with cases of lying that have the potential to destroy trust.) But before we can say what it means for something to be a deceptive lie, we first need to know what it means for something to be a lie.

impressed with me (or so I believe) if she is deceived about my being royalty. But, as the plagiarist case shows, lies can sometimes serve useful purposes even when they do not deceive (cf. Carson 2006, 295).

### **3. Believing that You will Deceive**

An influential alternative definition was suggested by Roderick Chisholm and Thomas Feehan (1977, 152). They claim that lying is saying something that you believe to be false when:

- You believe that your listeners are justified in believing that you believe what you say.
- You believe that your listeners are justified in believing that you intend them to believe that you believe what you say.

(Strictly speaking, Chisholm and Feehan's definition does not require that you believe that you will deceive your listeners. But it comes very close. Basically, you have to believe that, if you do not succeed in deceiving your listeners, it will be their fault—because they fail to believe something that they are justified in believing.)

Chisholm and Feehan's definition correctly rules out statements that are followed with a wink or that are part of a play. In such cases, the speaker does not believe that his audience is justified in believing that he believes what he says.

However, the two additional conditions suggested by Chisholm and Feehan are not necessary conditions on lying. For example, when I seriously say that "I am the Prince of Denmark," I do not necessarily think that my new acquaintance is justified in

believing that I am the Prince of Denmark or that I believe that I am. She may very well be suspicious of strange men at fancy parties who claim to be royalty. Even so, I am clearly lying to her.

But we can easily get around this particular problem by replacing “are justified in believing” with “have been given a reason to believe” in Chisholm and Feehan’s definition. For example, even if it is not enough to convince her that I am royalty, my new acquaintance does have some evidence that I believe that I am the Prince of Denmark. But even with this revision, these two conditions are still not necessary conditions on lying.

The fact that someone says something is usually some evidence that he believes it. But there are exceptions. For example, the fact that an actor on stage says “I am the Prince of Denmark” gives us no reason to believe that he really believes that he is the Prince of Denmark. In addition, there are *lies* that give us no reason to believe that the liar believes what she says. For example, in the plagiarist case, the student knows that the dean has no reason to believe that the student believes what he says.<sup>5</sup> Everybody involved in this situation knows that everybody is just going through the motions. Nevertheless, the student has clearly *asserted* his innocence and, thus, lied to the dean. Similarly, when someone who is known to be an inveterate liar makes a statement, there is no reason for anyone to believe that she believes that the statement is true. But presumably, such an individual can still lie. As Carson (2006, 292) points out, “Chisholm and Feehan’s definition has the very odd and unacceptable result that a person who is notoriously dishonest couldn’t tell lies to those he knows distrust him.”

#### 4. Warranting the Truth

In order to deal with the counter-examples to the previous definitions, Carson (2006) has essentially suggested that lying is saying something that you believe to be false when you *warrant the truth* of what you say.<sup>6</sup> And one warrants the truth of a statement when one makes the statement in a context where “one promises or guarantees, either explicitly or implicitly, that what one says is true” (Carson 2006, 294).<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to note that whether one has warranted the truth of a statement is independent of what one intends or *believes* (cf. Carson 2006, 296-298).

Carson’s definition correctly rules out statements that are followed with a wink or that are part of a play. In such cases, the speaker does not offer a guarantee that what she says is true. In addition, it rules in the statements made by the plagiarist and the inveterate liar. In such cases, the speaker clearly warrants the truth of what she says.

However, warranting the truth is not a necessary condition on lying. This can be shown by considering a simple variation on one of Carson’s (2006, 296) own examples. Suppose that a politician has been asked to give a serious speech at one banquet and a humorous speech at another banquet. However, suppose that the politician gets his dates mixed up and accidentally delivers the serious speech to the audience expecting a

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<sup>5</sup> In addition, the student knows that the dean has no reason to believe that the student intends the dean to believe that the student believes what he says. Thus, the second (as well as the first) of the two additional conditions suggested by Chisholm and Feehan is not necessary for lying.

<sup>6</sup> Carson (2006, 298) does think there are some other necessary conditions on lying. But these complications can be safely ignored for our purposes here. My only concern here is whether warranting the truth is itself a necessary condition.

<sup>7</sup> Several philosophers (e.g., Peirce 1934, Brandom 1983, Watson 2004) have characterized the *asserting* along similar lines. In asserting *p*, we take on a certain responsibility with respect to *p*. We do not take on the responsibility of actually making *p* true (cf. Carson 2006, 294). But we do make a “commitment to the defensibility of *p*” (Watson 2004, 68).

humorous speech.<sup>8</sup> Given that he believes that his audience expects a serious speech, my strong intuition is that the politician *is* lying if he makes statements that he believes to be false.<sup>9</sup> However, since this is a context where his audience actually expects a humorous speech, the politician does not (according to Carson's definition) warrant the truth of his statements.<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to Carson's definition of lying, the politician is not lying.

### **5. Believing that You are Warranting the Truth**

In the mixed-up politician case, what the politician *believed* that he was doing seems to be a critical factor in our judgment that he was lying. This suggests a possible modification of Carson's definition. That is, it might be suggested that lying is saying something that you believe to be false when you *believe* that you warrant the truth of what you say. Such a definition is right in line with Saint Augustine's claim 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."<sup>11</sup>

This definition still correctly rules out statements that are followed with a wink or that are part of a play. In such cases, the speaker does not believe that she is offering a guarantee that what she says is true. In addition, it rules in the statements made by the

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<sup>8</sup> Carson (2006, 297-298) uses the case where the politician accidentally delivers the humorous speech to an audience expecting a serious speech to show that warranting the truth of something that you believe to be false is not quite *sufficient* for lying.

<sup>9</sup> We actually do not have to rely on intuitions about cases where a speaker unknowingly fails to warrant the truth of a statement in order to see that warranting the truth of a statement is not necessary for lying. In the next section, I give a more mundane counter-example to Carson's definition.

<sup>10</sup> The politician *believes* that he is warranting the truth of what he says. But he is wrong (cf. Carson 2006, 297).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine's specific point was that the speaker has to believe that what she is saying is false and not that it actually has to be false. But it seems that the point applies more generally. Although it is ultimately unsuccessful, a virtue of Chisholm and Feehan's definition is that it does cash things out solely in terms of what the speaker believes. Peter Graham (1997) makes an analogous point with respect to defining *testimony*.

plagiarist, the inveterate liar, and the mixed-up politician. In such cases, the speaker clearly believes that she is warranting the truth of what she says.

However, believing that you are warranting the truth is also not a necessary condition on lying. For example, suppose that a witness follows up his false testimony that “Tony was with me at the time of the murder” by saying that “Of course, you know I am really bad with dates and times.” This proviso makes it clear that the witness is not *guaranteeing* that Tony was with him at the time of the murder.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he is not (according Carson’s definition) warranting the truth of what he says.<sup>13</sup> In addition, he clearly *does not believe* that he is warranting the truth of what he says. However, if he believes that Tony was not with him at the time of the murder, it still seems pretty clear that he has lied to the jury. This case shows that you can still be lying (when you say something that you believe to be false) even if you explicitly say that you are not warranting the truth of what you say.

## **6. Believing that You Should Not Say What You Believe to be False**

In order to deal with the counter-examples to the previous definitions, my suggestion is that lying is saying something that you believe to be false when you believe that the following norm of conversation is in effect: “*Do not say what you believe to be false*” (Grice 1989, 27).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The witness may be lying about being bad with dates and times (as well about Tony’s whereabouts). But regardless of whether he actually is bad with dates and times, his merely saying that he bad with dates and times means that he is not warranting the truth of his statement about Tony’s whereabouts.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, this case is also a counter-example to Carson’s definition.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the additional condition is not simply that you believe that you are in a situation where, *all things considered*, you should not say things that you believe to be false. For example, suppose that a homicidal maniac shows up in the audience of an improvisational performance piece, demands that the performance continue, but threatens to shoot any performer who says something that she believes to be false. This is certainly a situation where the performers believe that they should not say things that they

My definition correctly rules out statements that are followed with a wink or that are part of a play. In such cases, the speaker does not believe that Grice's first maxim of quality is in effect. In addition, it rules in the statements made by the plagiarist, the inveterate liar, the mixed-up politician, and the unreliable witness. In such cases, the speaker clearly believes that she is in a situation where the aforementioned norm of conversation is in effect.

In addition, my definition is not open to the sort of counter-example considered in the previous section. For example, suppose that the witness follows up his false testimony that "Tony was with me at the time of the murder" by saying "Of course, I think that it is ok to say things that I believe are false in this sort of situation." Following his statement with this proviso is just like following his statement with a wink (to indicate that he is not to be taken seriously). Thus, this proviso makes it clear that Grice's first maxim of quality is not currently in effect. In addition, he clearly *does not believe* that Grice's first maxim of quality is currently in effect. Thus, he is not (according to my definition) lying. But this seems like exactly the right result in this case. He cannot explicitly say that he does not take himself to be subject to Grice's first maxim of quality and still be making an assertion. In fact, he is essentially saying with this proviso that he is not making an assertion. Thus, he does not seem to be lying when he says something that he believes to be false about Tony's whereabouts at the time of the murder.

Another virtue of my definition over the other proposed definitions is that it makes better sense of how fairly young children can lie. Lying seems depend on the liar having certain beliefs. But Chisholm and Feehan clearly require that the liar have fairly

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believe to be false. But, since this is a performance, the performers do not believe that Grice's first maxim of quality is in effect. Thus, the performers would not be lying if they did disobey the maniac.

complicated beliefs. Also, warranting the truth of a statement is a fairly sophisticated concept.<sup>15</sup> It is not clear that liars (especially when they are young children) will always have such sophisticated beliefs about what they are doing. But this is not a problem for my definition. The idea that you are in a situation where you should not say things that you believe to be false is a fairly straightforward one.

Finally, yet another virtue of my definition is that it provides a straightforward analysis of Augustine's (1952, 57) example of an *altruistic lie*.<sup>16</sup> A man tells his friend that there are no bandits on a certain road even though he believes that there are. He does this because he knows that his friend does not trust him and will conclude from his statement that there *are* bandits on the road. This person is lying under my definition, because he says something that he believes to be false and he believes that Grice's first maxim of quality is in effect.<sup>17</sup> But surprisingly enough, he is not lying under the standard philosophical definition of lying. This person does not intend to deceive his friend about there being no bandits on the road.<sup>18</sup> He wants his friend to correctly believe

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<sup>15</sup> Carson (2006, 305) explicitly rejects the definition from the previous section "because there are many cases of lying in which the liar has no conscious beliefs about whether or not s/he is warranting what s/he says." Although he gives no examples, this may very well be correct. However, it is not clear that there are any cases of lying in which the liar is not aware that she should not be saying things that she believes to be false.

<sup>16</sup> The scientist that fakes her data in order to trick people into believing a theory that she believes to be true is another example of an altruistic lie (cf. O'Brien 2007, 228). This example counts as a lie on both my definition and the standard philosophical definition.

<sup>17</sup> In the same passage, Augustine also gives an example of a *deceptive truth*. A man truthfully tells his enemy that there are bandits on a certain road. He does this because he knows that his enemy does not trust him and will conclude from his statement that there are no bandits on the road. Although he does intend to deceive his enemy with his statement, this person is not lying.

<sup>18</sup> This person does intend to deceive his friend. In particular, he intends that his friend believe that he intends that his friend believe that there are no bandits on the road. But simply saying something that you believe to be false with the intent to deceive is not always a lie (recall my saying that "I am the Prince of Denmark" in order to convince someone that I am an actor).

that there *are* bandits on the road. In fact, this person does not even intend to deceive his friend about his believing that there are no bandits on the road.<sup>19</sup>

## 7. The *Homicide* Objection

I am a big fan of the television show *Homicide*. Regularly on this show, they put suspects in “the box” and try to get them to confess. A standard technique for achieving this goal is to lie to the suspect (cf. Slobogin 1997, 785-788). For example, the suspect is told that his fingerprints have been found on the murder weapon, that his DNA has been found at the crime scene, or that his partner has just given him up.

This sort of case might seem to be a counter-example to my definition of lying. The cops are pretty clearly lying to the suspect. But there does not seem to be a norm in effect that the cops should not say what they believe to be false (quite the contrary, in fact). However, I contend that the norm *is* in effect in “the box” (and that the cops believe that it is).<sup>20</sup> In other words, the cops do believe that they are in a situation where they should not say things that they believe to be false. It is just that other interests of the cops (namely, getting the suspect to confess) override this norm.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the posted speed limit is still 35 miles per hour even if I decide that it is best to rush my injured friend to the hospital at 70 miles per hour.

Everyone involved in the interrogation seems to recognize that the norm is in effect. For example, after he learns of the deception, the suspect will often complain that

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<sup>19</sup> Some definitions include an intention to deceive with respect to your believing *p* as a condition on lying in addition to an intention to deceive with respect to *p* (cf. Mahon 2006).

<sup>20</sup> The cops are clearly making use of the fact that at least the suspect believes that the norm is in effect.

<sup>21</sup> The norm is *explicitly* in effect for a witness who is testifying under oath, but the witness may have interests that outweigh the force of the norm (as well as the risk of a perjury conviction). A *white lie* is another example where Grice’s first maxim of quality is in effect, but is overridden by other interests (e.g., not offending someone) that we have.

he has been lied to. In addition, while the cops rarely have much sympathy for the suspect, they do seem to recognize that it is reasonable for him to complain. By contrast, the norm is not in effect at all if you are performing a play or if you wink to indicate that you are not to be taken seriously. If a member of the audience complained that she had been lied to, she would have to be crazy and the cast would undoubtedly think that she was crazy.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that all of the definitions of lying in the philosophical literature are open to counter-examples. In particular, there are cases of lying that are ruled out by each of these definitions. I claim that lying is simply saying something that you believe to be false when you believe that the following norm of conversation is in effect: “*Do not say what you believe to be false.*” This definition avoids the counter-examples to the existing definitions of lying.

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