

## *Book Discussion*

# *Bending and Stretching the Definition of Lying*

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*One of the recent trends in dealing with the concept of lying has been to argue that the idea that one needs to deceive someone in order to lie has been accepted too hastily. In *Lying and Insincerity* Stokke shares this opinion and proposes a definition of lying based on the notion of common ground that includes bald-faced lies. Additionally, he rejects the idea that lying can be accomplished with pragmatic means such as conversational implicatures and proposes a formal distinction between lying and misleading. In this review, I present the content of Stokke's book and critically discuss the two points mentioned above.*

**Keywords:** Lying, misleading, implicature, common ground, pretence.

Andreas Stokke's book *Lying and Insincerity* (2018) is a valuable addition to the debate about lying and deception that proliferated in the last decade or so.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I will briefly present the content of the book and then I will lay out my thoughts on some topics about which I disagree with the author. This disagreement should be read as a praise of the engaging content and presentation of the book. First of all, a few preliminaries about the general discussion about lying are in order.

An analysis of lying can be focused on the moral or on the conceptual dimension of the phenomenon. The first approach deals with the moral (un)acceptability of lying and considers questions like the following: are all lies bad, are some lies worse than others, is misleading

<sup>1</sup> Another important one is the book *Lying: Language, Knowledge, Ethics, and Politics*, a collection of essays edited by Eliot Michaelson and Andreas Stokke, published also in 2018 by Oxford University Press.

better than lying? The second approach tries to provide a theoretical definition of lying and focuses on the features that differentiate it from similar phenomena, such as deception, misleading or bullshit. It could seem that the moral approach is normative in its nature and that the conceptual one is purely descriptive, but the strength of this kind of distinction should not be overestimated. In his book, Stokke focused on the nature of insincere speech, including the attitudes that lie behind them, and does not venture into the moral dimension of the discussion.

Having said that, we can briefly present the structure of *Lying and Insincerity*. The book is divided in two main parts: Language and Attitudes. Chapters 1–5 are devoted to questions of language, and chapters 6–10 to matters of attitudes that may lie behind insincere speech. As the author points out, insincere speech resides at the intersection between language and attitudes, which results in the two parts of the book being interrelated. More specifically, but still very generally, we can say that in the first part of the book Stokke defends the idea that the intention to deceive the addressee is not crucial for lying and proposes a distinction between lying and deception based on formal aspects of language, while in the second part he defends the idea that in order to lie one must only be insincere on a shallow, that is, conscious, level and analyses the connection between insincere attitudes and the phenomenon of bullshitting.

In Chapter 1, Stokke defends the idea that the intention to deceive the addressee should not be included in the definition of lying because it excludes cases that we would, according to the author, intuitively consider as instances of lying. That leads him to the conclusion that lies cannot be generally understood as a species of deception, even though lying is often aimed at deceiving its victims. Stokke endorses the position that lies are insincere assertions, in the sense that a lie is a statement that, although does not need to be false, has to be disbelieved by the speaker. As the author notes in the Introduction, “(t)he main challenge for a view of lying as insincere assertion is to spell out what it is to assert something in a way that is broad enough to capture the nature of lying and narrow enough so as not to obscure the distinction between lying and other kinds of insincere speech” (Stokke 2018: 6). As all definitions, a definition of lying should not be too narrow nor too broad, but as we shall see, the nature of lying it should capture is still a matter of debate. In the chapter, Stokke presents the following definition of lying: “A lies to B if and only if there is a proposition such that

- (L1) A says that  $p$  to B, and
- (L2) A proposes to make it common ground that  $p$ , and
- (L3) A believes that  $p$  is false.” (31)

According to this definition, a lie is an insincere assertion. In the following chapters he defends this definition and explains the key concepts it is built on.

One important task is to define what an assertion is. In Chapter 2 Stokke presents a Gricean view of assertions, which he then rejects as inadequate. According to Stokke, the Gricean proposal is “bound to fall foul of particular facts concerning bald-faced lies, and concerning the way such a definition must locate lying in relation to the saying-meaning distinction” (38). In Chapter 3, he proposes his preferred notion of assertion, one based on Stalnaker’s notion of common ground. According to the author, common ground information is information that is accepted for the purpose of the conversation. Using this notion, Stokke presents lies as saying something and thereby proposing that it becomes part of the common ground between speaker and hearer. Chapter 4 is devoted to the notion of what is said, and Chapter 5 to the difference between lying and misleading. The author argues for a notion of what is said that is sensitive to questions under discussion, i.e. the topic of the conversation, while being constrained by linguistic meaning. His main reason for characterizing lying in terms of assertion is to differentiate lying from non-linguistic forms of deception and insincerity. The classic contrast between lying and merely misleading is the contrast between asserting disbelieved information and conversationally implicating such information by asserting something believed to be true.

In the second part of the book the author explores the relationship between what is communicated and the speaker’s attitudes. He shows this relation using the notion of bullshit, which is used to illustrate the point that insincerity is a more complex phenomenon than communicating what one believes to be false. Sometimes people communicate certain contents while being indifferent toward their relation with the truth. He argues for a shallow view of insincerity according to which insincerity is a matter of speaking without a conscious intention to communicate something one assents to, that is, an utterance is insincere when it is not consciously intended to communicate something the speaker assents to.

Chapter 6 opens the discussion about the ways in which people sometimes speak while being indifferent towards what they say that extends to Chapter 7. In the next two chapters, Stokke defends a shallow conception of insincerity. According to this view, whether or not one speaks insincerely depends on his or her conscious state of mind, not on unconscious beliefs, hopes or desires. The final chapter of the book, Chapter 10, explores the way in which we use various linguistic forms other than simple utterances of declarative sentences to communicate our attitudes in language. According to Stokke, even though non-declarative utterances can be insincere, they cannot be used to tell lies.

After having briefly presented the content of the ten chapters, I will proceed to comment specific topics Stokke deals with, concentrating mainly on the first part of the book. The first one is related to his endorsement of a non-deceptionist account of lying. The second one is his formal distinction between lying and misleading,

The notion of lying provided by Stokke rejects some features that lies are traditionally supposed to have, while arguing for the necessity of others. There is no philosophically accepted definition of lying, but following Mahon (2016) we can identify four necessary conditions for an expression to be considered a lie in the traditional sense. The first condition is the statement condition, according to which lying requires a person to make a statement. The second is the untruthfulness condition, that states that lying requires that the person believes the statement to be false. The third is the addressee condition, that is the idea that lying requires that the untruthful statement be made to another person. According to the last condition, lying requires that the person intends the other person to believe the untruthful statement to be true. This condition is labeled as the intention to deceive the addressee condition. If all the conditions are satisfied, we are faced with a lie in the traditional sense: a statement that is believed to be false made to another person with the intention that they believe that statement to be true.

Recently, various authors have challenged the fourth condition (see Carson 2006, Sorensen 2007 and Fallis 2009), claiming that lying does not necessarily involve an intention to deceive the addressee. Stokke adhered to this current in the debate in his previous work (see Stokke 2013) and explicates his position even further in this book.

Following Carson (2006), he presents The Cheating Student example, which should provide to the reader a clear example of a lie made without an intention to deceive. The example goes as follows.

“A student accused of cheating on an exam is called to the Dean’s office. The student knows that the Dean knows that she did in fact cheat. But as it is also well known that the Dean will not punish someone unless they explicitly admit their guilt, the student says,

(1) I didn’t cheat

Although the student says something she believes to be false, she does not intend to deceive the Dean. Even so, the student is lying.” (Stokke 2018: 17, 18)

This is a classic example of what Sorensen (2007) has labeled bald-faced lies. Stokke seems to presuppose that this idea will be accepted at face value by the reader. In the pages that follow after the example, Stokke defends his position on the basis of intuitions and on what he considers to be a standard sense of the word “lie”. Here are some examples of the constructions he uses: “It is highly counterintuitive to insist that the student in Carson’s example did not lie to the Dean” (19); “(...) the insistence that the student did not lie that relies on a non-standard sense of the word.”(21); (...) in such cases, this statement is still intuitively a lie” (28); (...) the student’s utterance is still clearly a lie” (29).

I would like to suggest that in order to include this kind of cases in the definition of lying, i.e. exclude from it the intention to deceive the addressee condition, empirical data regarding people’s attitudes that would support this position should be provided, or the position should be backed up by arguments. Without any of these elements, readers

who share the author's intuitions will be convinced that bald faced lies are in fact lies, but those who do not share them could remain unconvinced by the examples alone.

Stokke returns to this particular example later on and explains it using his preferred notion of "common ground". Following Stalnaker (2002), he does not view common ground in terms of a believed proposition, but he proposes to view it as a proposition accepted for the purpose of the conversation (or believed to be accepted as such, or even just believed to be available). Applying this notion to lying we should say that "to lie is to say something one believes to be false and thereby propose that it be accepted by the participants and commonly believed to be accepted" (Stokke 2018: 52). Again, this view points to the idea that the intention to install false beliefs in the hearer is not necessary for lying. What is important for Stokke is that this notion allows something to be part of the common ground even when it is believed to be false. This is needed to allow bald faced lies in the definition of lying.

It could be objected that this notion of acceptance is too weak. The hearer would accept the speaker's proposition that  $p$  every time he understands it and is aware of the fact that the speaker wants to make it common ground that  $p$ . But knowing what the expressed proposition means and recognizing the intention of the speaker does not mean allowing it into the common ground. It yet has to become information that will be jointly used in the conversation.

Returning to the cheating student case, the student wants it to be common ground that she did not cheat. That is, she does not intend for anyone to really believe it, but she wants it to be accepted for the purpose of the conversation. Still, the Dean does not have to agree to this. We can imagine different ends of the story: the Dean can refuse to accept what the student said and explain to her the repercussion of a false statement and schedule another meeting with her. In this case, the student's assertion has not become part of the common ground, on the contrary, it brought the conversation to an end. Otherwise, if the Dean accepts the assertion and goes along with it, the conversational exchange that follows could be interpreted as "pretending". That would make it similar to a play, in which none of the parties involved sincerely believe what they say, but they are pretending to do so in order to achieve some performative goal. Stokke acknowledges a similar objection and discusses Mahon's (2016) idea of "pretence". According to him, this kind of objection should be understood as maintaining that the kind of pretence involved is unserious. He rejects the objection so understood by presenting the fictional case of a trial held under a totalitarian regime (see Stokke 2018: 58). He invites us to imagine that someone is called to the stand to testify about something that is commonly known to be false, that is, to go on the stand and tell a bald-faced lie. The fact that people in real life situations had chosen to be executed rather than to do so should prove to us, Stokke claims, that such "pretence" is anything but frivolous. But this example could point

in another direction. Being on the stand and telling a bald-faced lie would carry with it the additional information of accepting the authority of those in power. This is the message they do not want to commit to. The most salient message differs from what is said and it is exactly what the person on the stand wants to convey and make part of the common ground.

The same goes for the cheating student case. In saying that she did not cheat, the student is conveying the additional information that she knows the rules and she is going to take advantage of them. I believe this to be more relevant and informative than claiming that she did not cheat while everybody knows she did. What would be the point of that if no additional information is intended? I believe that this information is calculable in Grice's sense, making it a conversational implicature. The information conveyed using conversational implicatures is exactly what the speaker wants to be part of the common ground, and she relies on the rational capacity of the hearer to reach this conclusion to bring the message across. Still, Stokke, rejects the idea that intended false implicatures should be considered lies.

At this point it is worth presenting what Stokke labels as "bald-faced false implicatures". He uses the following example to illustrate what he has in mind (55). Thelma knows that Louise knows that Thelma has been drinking. Louise asks: Are you OK to drive? And Thelma replies: I haven't been drinking. Thelma implicates that she is OK to drive. As in the case of bald-faced lies, Thelma is not trying to get Louise to believe that she is OK to drive. In this case the false implicature is derived from a bald-faced lie. It is interesting to notice that the utterance of "I haven't been drinking" is considered by Stokke a bald-faced lie, but the implicature "I am OK to drive", even though it is the most salient piece of information, is not considered to be a lie. This reflects his acceptance and strong defence of the statement condition for the definition of lying.

I believe that this position could be challenged by the introduction of the notion of default meaning in the discussion about lying and misleading. Default meanings are those arising automatically in a given situation of discourse (Jaszczolt 2005, 2010). They are the most salient or relevant meaning in a particular context. The primary content of an utterance is its most salient meaning. According to Jaszczolt, this is so even when this meaning does not bear any resemblance to the logical form derived from the syntactic structure of the uttered sentence (Jaszczolt 2016). I believe that applying the notion of default meaning to the discussion about lying would shed new light to some problematic cases.

Stokke rejects cases of falsely implicating as instances of lying, providing the following quote from Fallis (2009) to support his view: "you are not lying if you make a statement that you believe to be true. In fact, you are not lying even if you intend to deceive someone by making this statement" (44). According to Stokke, including false implica-

tures in the definition of lying “rejects one of the most fundamental distinctions we make about verbal insincerity (44.)”. Still, the goal of the authors who have tried to include false implicatures in the definition of lying (Stokke mentions Meibauer 2005 and Dynel 2011) is exactly to question the assumed distinction between lies and other forms of verbal deception. It seems that Stokke rejects the suggestion that intended false implicatures could be considered lies because they are excluded from the traditional definition, but someone who is so eager to reject the idea that an intention to deceive is necessary for lying, even though this idea has been widely defended and accepted, should not reject other approaches on the basis of their unorthodoxy. Accepting that the cheating student is in fact implicating something, and that this implicature is in fact the most salient meaning of his utterance, we could have a good explanation for the idea that the student did not lie at all: the default meaning of her utterance can be paraphrased with a true proposition.

In Chapter 4 Stokke gives his definition of what is said, which is defined as the weakest answer to a question under discussion that either entails or is entailed by a minimal proposition expressed by the utterance in question, given the context. Stokke’s notion of what is said is compositional. What is said is expressed by the minimal proposition, that is, a proposition that is determined solely by the composition of the constituents of the relevant sentence. He believes that the account of what is said presented in Chapter 4 draws the line correctly between lying and other forms of misleading speech. Still, this presupposes that the distinction between what is said and what is conveyed less explicitly matches the distinction between lying and misleading. As I have noted above, if we change this formal notion of what is said with the notion of default meaning, which I believe to be more suited for assessing various communicational layers our results could be more encompassing. Using Stokke’s terminology, a default meaning could be defined as the content of an utterance that optimally responds to the question under discussion. According to the author, communication is a cooperative activity of information exchange aimed to discover how things are (see p. 81). It remains somehow unclear, at least to me, why confine the idea of “question under discussion” to a formal notion of what is said. During a regular communicational exchange speakers and hearers communicate explicitly and implicitly, creating meanings and trying to “discover how things are” jointly, mostly unaware of formal distinctions between semantics and pragmatics. What is more important, they communicate successfully, which means that the discovery of how things are can be achieved by implicit and indirect communicational means. Again, it could be objected that what is merely implicated somehow always remains uncertain. I believe that this could be put aside since, following Mercier and Sperber (2017), this “uncertainty” is a distinguishable feature of all every-day reasoning.

In short, my main point so far was questioning the adequacy of a pure formal distinction between lying and misleading since communicators are often unaware of it, and their reliance on other people's words is not exhausted by "what is said". The same goes for lying. If I form a false belief on the basis of another person's words because that person had an intention to affect negatively my epistemic condition is it really relevant if it was done with assertions or implicatures? Would I really care?

As it has been mentioned at the beginning, Stokke is not concerned with the moral aspects of lying. Still, it is important to note that the distinction between lying and misleading has important moral consequences. According to the traditional view, misleading is always better than lying. But this position should be critically assessed taking into account the fact that it was a response to a general religious condemnation of lying. What better way to evade this strong moral position than to have a narrow definition of lying? Still, the idea has been perpetuated by contemporary authors like Fricker, who claims that where what is conveyed is not explicitly asserted there is a diminution in the responsibility for the truth of what is got across incurred by the utterer (Fricker 2006). The idea that conversational implicatures can be easily denied, regardless of the plausibility of such denial certainly also helped view implicatures as a weak communicational strategy (see Pinker and Lee 2010).

I believe that a rigid distinction between semantics and pragmatics is certainly useful for a formal analysis of language and speech. Discovering the intricate interaction between implicit and explicit content we use in communication is fascinating and makes us eager to create new fine-grained distinctions, but most language users are not aware of these intricacies. They want to communicate, they want to say that someone told a lie if he or she communicated something believed to be false, regardless of the degree of expansion of the proposition expressed. They will tell the truth and lie using implicatures without a conscious effort to communicate implicitly and indirectly.

Finally, I would like to illustrate the points I tried to make using a literary example. Recall Shakespeare's Iago, a character called by many in the play "honest" but who is in fact plotting to convince Othello that his wife is having an affair. During the many dialogues between these two characters, Iago never utters an explicit lie about Desdemona's affair, he suggests and insinuates, corroding in this way Othello's belief in his wife's fatefulness. Near the end of the play, Emilia, Iago's wife, confronts her husband and asks him to explain why Othello said to her that he made him believe "his wife was false". Iago replies: "I told him what I thought, and told no more than what he found himself was apt and true" (Shakespeare 2006: 384). With his utterance Iago tries to distance himself from the belief Othello formed on the basis of his words, shifting the responsibility to Othello himself. Unconvinced by his response, Emilia asks him directly if he ever told Othello that

Desdemona “was false”. “I did”, replied Iago. Emilia concludes that he has lied: “You told a lie, an odious, damned lie”, she says (Shakespeare 2006: 384). Why would Iago admit having lied if he never said explicitly that Desdemona was not being faithful unless his insinuations do count as lies? Moreover, I believe that the audience, acquainted with Iago’s malicious plans through his monologues, would not say that Iago is lying only on the rare occasions in which he is using an explicit lie and that he is not lying when he is “merely misleading”. The subtleties of his deception are what makes his character interesting, but he is universally considered to be a liar, which would be contradictory if one would claim that in fact he was not lying.

To conclude, Stokke presents his ideas clearly, backing them up with a multitude of examples useful for testing the reader’s intuition about the matter at hand. Sometimes, my intuitions differ from the author’s, but this is exactly what made the book engaging. It is a book dense with concepts and theoretical questions, still, Stokke manages to make them accessible and easy to follow even for readers that are not acquainted with the ongoing debate about the discussed topics. My main concern is that the current debate about lying relies too much on a format notion of what is said that does not reflect the way people use language in their everyday lives. In my view, this makes the definition of lying too narrow. Still, many of the same authors argue for a definition that includes bald-faced lies, which makes it simultaneously too broad.<sup>2\*</sup>

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