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Lying and Politeness

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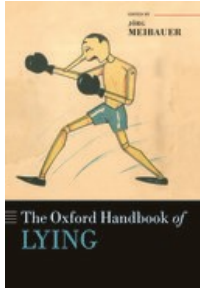
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CHAPTER

29 Lying and Politeness

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Abstract

This chapter presents a brief overview of different types of lying behavior in relation to politeness and face-threat/face-enhancement. Although white (or prosocial) lies are most frequently discussed in this respect, a variety of behaviors, ranging from withholding information to outright malicious stating of falsehood, are also discussed. An important distinction is drawn between white lies and real lies, whereby the former's politeness lies in one's willingness to say something untrue even though it may (but need not) be transparent to all that one does not mean it. This paves the way for analyzing white lies as a socially constituted type of speech act, unlike real lies, which cannot be so analyzed. A crucial claim made in this chapter is that the same behavior can have contrary connotations for different participants or in different contexts, making the association between lying and im/politeness context-dependent through and through.

Keywords: [white lies](#), [face-threat](#), [face-enhancement](#), [speaker's intention](#), [context dependence](#)

Subject: [Pragmatics](#), [Linguistics](#)

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29.1 Introduction

GIVEN that lying is universally proscribed as morally reprehensible, it may seem odd to find lying discussed as anything but such in manuals about politeness and manners. However, as Bavelas has pithily remarked, “there are many situations requiring ‘tact’ when it would be unkind to be honest but dishonest to be kind” (Bavelas 1983: 132). The relationship between lying and politeness, that is, is more complex than a simple opposition between the two might suggest. The purpose of this chapter is to probe this complex relationship and explore how it may be cast in pragmatic and politeness theory terms.

Presaging Lakoff's (1973) setting up of an opposition between the Rules of clarity (captured in Grice's maxims; Grice 1975) and the Rules of politeness (proposed in her own work),¹ in the excerpt below English

sociologist Harriet Martineau saw speaking the truth (“sincerity”) and being “kind” as contrary ideals toward which different nations will gravitate.

The conversation of almost every nation has its characteristics, like that of smaller societies ... In one country, less regard is paid to truth in particulars, to circumstantial accuracy, than in another. One nation has more sincerity; another more kindness in speech.

Martineau (1989 [1838]: 224)

p. 383 While Martineau’s observation is best taken as a statement about cultural relativism than an endorsement of any inherent opposition between sincerity and politeness—indeed, her own view was that “manners are inseparable from morals, or, at least, cease to have meaning when separated” (Martineau 1989: 222)—for the author of *L’art de plaire dans la conversation*, the 1688 treatise on civility that is the topic of the next excerpt, there is significant margin for various permutations between the two, even in one and the same culture.

Words should please the ear, should conform to the ideas they express, and should be natural without baseness ... Lying is defined as speech which does not conform to the thought. The world hates liars as it hates tigers and panthers. This sounds uncompromising enough, but the author has some modifications to add. Captives in time of war, he declares, ambassadors in diplomatic negotiations, and lovers in praise of their mistresses need not always adhere to the truth ... Moreover, a man may be perfectly sincere without saying all he thinks ... Harmless exaggeration may be used to amuse the company, but there should be no real lies.

Mason (1935: 264–5)

Identifying three phenomena that remain central to discussions of politeness and lying to this day—social or “white” lies, being economical with the truth, and banter—he allows that in these cases, one may depart from the truth; yet, “there should be no *real* lies” (Mason 1935: 265; emphasis added). In this way, the anonymous seventeenth-century author draws a distinction that can be as hard to defend in theory as it is common to implement in practice: that between “real lying,” which is always morally reprehensible, and a host of neighboring notions that are viewed as more or less necessary to maintain a harmonious social existence.

29.2 “White” lies

As the two opening excerpts suggest, the prime example of lies told in the service of politeness are social or “white” lies.² When we tell a friend that we like her new haircut when in fact we do not, turn down an invitation falsely claiming to have a prior commitment, or tell our host that we like the food he cooked for us although in reality we find it barely palatable, we say something we do not believe to be true to avoid hurting our interlocutor’s feelings and, potentially also in the long run, our relationship. We thus sacrifice truth in the name of interpersonal harmony; and while different cultures or people may vary in their degrees of engaging in this practice, equivalent terms can be found in many, if not most languages, testifying to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon.³

p. 384 According to Bok’s often-cited definition, white lies are falsehoods “not meant to injure anyone and of little moral import” (Bok 1999: 58). As Bok herself observed, the practice of sparing another’s feelings is in some cases so routine that one who does not abide by it “might well give the impression of an indifference he [sic] did not possess” (Bok 1999: 58). Others have also noted that white lies are so pervasive as to potentially constitute a “particular sort of communicative competence” (Camden et al. 1984: 321) and Brown and

Levinson incorporated them into their politeness model as a special case of the positive politeness strategy of avoiding disagreement in order to eschew damage to the hearer's positive face, i.e., his desire to be liked and approved of (Brown and Levinson 1987: 115–16). Quantitative measures support these claims: when Turner et al. (1975) asked subjects to rate the truthfulness of their own statements in casual conversation, only 38.5% of statements were rated as completely honest, suggesting that a good two thirds of everyday conversation consist of various degrees of falsehoods—a point masterfully driven home in the 2009 comedy *The Invention of Lying*.⁴

29.2.1 Are white lies lies?

But if white lies are so common, are they still lies? To answer this question, we must first define lying. Typically, definitions of lying have included some combination of the following: stating something which is false, stating something that the speaker believes to be false, having the intention of deceiving the hearer, or believing that the hearer will be deceived by the speaker's utterance (see Mahon 2015 and the references therein). However, there is no agreement as to whether all of these are required or equally important for lying. Moreover, rejecting the possibility of a checklist definition of lying, Coleman and Kay (1981) proposed to define lying as a prototypically structured category, a move also adopted by Sweetser (1987) and Chen et al. (2013).

While the possibility of gradations and cultural variability afforded by the latter type of definition is certainly welcome when discussing lies that may be acceptable, or even required socially, for the purposes of this chapter, the definition of Saul (2012: 29) seems more apt. According to this,

If the speaker is not the victim of linguistic error/malapropism or using metaphor, or irony, then they lie iff (1) they say that P; (2) they believe P to be false; (3) they take themselves to be in a warranting context

p. 385 where a warranting context is one where sincerity is expected (as opposed to, e.g., being in a play, or telling a joke). This definition has the advantage of not only excluding floutings of Gricean Quality⁵ such as metaphorical and ironic utterances that do not normally qualify as “lying” but of also managing to draw a fine line between lying and misleading, where only the former is tied to “what is said,” that is, roughly, to the conventional meaning of the words uttered.⁶

This is of particular importance when discussing the relationship between lying and politeness because white lies *can* indeed be *recognized* as such, without that subtracting from their politeness (Coleman and Kay 1981: 29; Chen et al. 2013: 380). As one participant in Bryant's (2008) study noted, “it gets expected sometimes that you're gonna get lied to. Like sometimes you ask a question wanting one answer and when you get that answer you're happy. Even if it's completely wrong you're like, ok that's all I wanted to hear” (Bryant 2008: 36). In other words, to capture the ‘lie’ in white lie, what we need is a definition that makes lying a matter of what one says rather than what one means. Saul's definition offers precisely that.

That white lies are recognizable as being untrue without this being detrimental to their politeness is highlighted by the existence of conventionalized markers of their untruthfulness, such as the use of high pitch in Tzeltal described by Brown and Levinson (1978). Brown and Levinson (1978: 172) report that in this Mayan language,

there is a highly conventionalized use of high pitch or falsetto, which marks polite or formal interchanges, operating as a kind of giant hedge on everything that is said ... Use of it seems to release the speaker from responsibility for believing the truth of what he utters so that the presence of this falsetto in an otherwise normal conversation may well mark the presence of a social lie.

Highlighting this highly conventional aspect of white lies, Bok also affirms that “the justification for continuing to use such accepted formulations is that they deceive no one, except possibly those unfamiliar with the language” (Bok 1999: 58).

At least some white lies, then, are lies only in name, without the speaker’s having the intention of deceiving the addressee, or even expecting that the addressee will be deceived. Given this possibility, white lies do not qualify as lies under approaches that require that the speaker have the intention that the addressee believe the false statement (e.g., Isenberg 1964: 473); nor do they qualify as lies under a different set of approaches that require that lies be morally wrong (e.g., Grotius 1925 [1625]: §616–17).

p. 386 In sum, whether white lies are considered to be lies or not depends on one’s definition of lying. If we follow everyday usage and classify them as ‘lies’—albeit ‘white’ ones—what we need is a definition such as the one by Saul (2012: 20) cited above, that ties lying to what is said by the speaker’s utterance and not necessarily the intention behind it.

29.2.2 White lies as a type of speech act

Given the above discussion, it would seem that the politeness of a white lie emanates first and foremost from the speaker’s willingness to utter it, rather than her intention to get the hearer to believe it—although if challenged, the speaker is, of course, supposed to insist that she meant it, thereby further strengthening the politeness of her remark. This strengthening effect is due to the fact that once the untruthfulness has been uncovered, politeness is the only possible basis left for the speaker’s remark. The relevant reasoning by the addressee would seem to be as follows: “you are so kind to be willing to go out of your way to lie in order to make me feel good”—which, incidentally, builds the speaker’s politeness out of her willingness to sacrifice truthfulness, thereby acknowledging truthfulness as a standard otherwise governing speech. This is in line with Lakoff’s (1973) prediction that politeness and truthfulness stand in opposition to each other and that interactants will oscillate between the two, depending on the setting. As several researchers have pointed out, white lies are more acceptable in contexts where informativity expectations are low and an utterance that is a white lie in one type of setting may count as a real lie in another (Sweetser 1987; Walper and Valtin 1992; Lee and Ross 1997; Perkins and Turiel 2007).

If the above analysis is correct, we may distinguish between two types of intention that a potential lie comes with: the first, a classic Gricean reflexive intention (or *r*-intention for short; Grice 1957), is necessary to invest the speaker’s utterance with meaning and is intended to be recognized and fulfilled in its recognition. Potential lies, however, come with a second ‘lying’ intention and that is not a Gricean *r*-intention at all but rather one that must remain hidden in order to be fulfilled. It is precisely in how they handle this second ‘lying’ intention that white lies differ from real lies: in real lies, this intention must not be recognized or it fails; but in white lies, it is permissible for it to be recognized and, in fact, the politeness of the speaker’s utterance may be strengthened if it is.

In virtue of encompassing this second intention, lying cannot be a speech act on a par with promising, requesting, threatening, complaining, etc. In the cases of these acts, the speaker’s intent to promise, request, threaten, complain, etc. *must* be recognized by the addressee for the act to count as a promise, a request, a threat, or a complaint, respectively.⁷ However, in lying, the speaker’s intent to lie must precisely *not* be recognized for the lie to be successful.⁸ On the other hand, white lies are potentially recognizable without this canceling out their point—to show consideration for the other’s feelings. This means that, contrary to real lies, white lies *can* be a type of speech act, which agrees with the existence of conventionalized means for their performance (see Brown and Levinson’s analysis of Tzeltal high pitch in 29.2.1, and the following example, of Persian *taarof*).

A highly ritualized use of white lies is the Persian practice of *taarof*. Miller et al. (2014) describe *taarof* as a linguistic practice involving “figurative language and extreme ‘self-lowering’ referring expressions” commenting that “these commonly used non-literal terms can make it seem that *taarof* comprises a collection of lies” (Miller et al. 2014: 15). However, they hasten to add, “the critically important level of meaning of *taarof* exchanges is not in the literal meanings of the words. It is rather in the nature of the conversational exchange, particularly how the interactants view their status in relation to each other and how this relates to the wants that drive the interaction” (Miller et al. 2014: 3). To native speakers, *taarof* functions as a token of goodwill and respect, a strategic move to achieve particular perlocutionary goals, or an indication of the speaker’s good manners and upbringing (Miller et al. 2014: 19)—indeed, members of lower socioeconomic classes and villagers are thought not to be able to use *taarof* (Beeman 1986: 197).

Izadi (2015: 86) furnishes the following example of *taarof*. Two close friends in their late twenties, Ali and Reza, are returning home from an evening out.⁹



p. 388 Ali’s invitation in line 1 is clearly ostensible: it is not meant for Reza to accept, and both Ali and Reza know that. As Eslami (2005: 464) notes, such ostensible invitations are “solicited by context”; Ali is more or less obliged to issue this invitation and Reza to reject it. Nevertheless, this exchange is not pointless. As Koutlaki (1997: 119) points out, “the fact that a speaker takes the trouble to use a socially enjoined formula indicates her intention to accord respect to her interlocutor and takes on therefore a phatic function.”

Taarof is a rather extreme example of a highly conventionalized use of white lies. As a widely recognized social practice, it involves the use of formulae such as “may I sacrifice for you” in line 6 and “I am your slave” in line 10 of the example above (but can also be realized in less conventionalized ways; Miller et al. 2014: 20), is frequent at particular moments during the interaction (especially with respect to offers/invitations, requests/orders, thanking, complimenting, greeting and leave-taking; Miller et al. 2014: 16) and shows gender and age stratification (Miller et al. 2014: 26 ff.). In all of these ways, *taarof* resembles more institutionalized types of speech acts found in a variety of cultures (see, e.g., Yang’s 2008 discussion of ritual refusals in Chinese).

However, white lies are not always as clearly signposted in terms of where they occur in the exchange and the form that they take and a number of researchers have highlighted the existence of a continuum of cases from the most innocuous white lie to the most malicious black one. Indeed Bok’s objection to white lies (or, at least, to their over-use) centers precisely upon the existence of this continuum, which she considers to be a slippery slope that threatens to erode “honesty and trust more generally” (1999: 60). While it may be up to the addressee to determine whether the speech act of social lying or, conversely, real lying has occurred, the acceptability of the recognition of the speaker’s lying intention (i.e., the extent to which her goals would be served if her lying intention were recognized) furnishes an (additional) criterion by which to distinguish theoretically between the two types of situation.

29.2.3 Social motivations for white lies

Researchers who have investigated white lies have uncovered a range of motivations, some more harmful than others. According to Turner et al. (1975), the five major motivations for white lies in descending order of frequency are: (1) saving face; (2) avoiding tension or conflict; (3) guiding social interaction; (4) affecting interpersonal relationships; and (5) achieving interpersonal power. A different classification scheme is proposed by Hample (1980) who argued that motivations for social lies fall into four categories in descending order of frequency as follows: (1) those that benefit self, (2) those that benefit others in the interaction, (3) those that benefit the relationship, and (4) miscellaneous motivations. Combining these two classifications, Camden et al. (1984) proposed a 4x3 matrix with one dimension representing the motivation or expected reward from the lie and the other the intended beneficiary. The four major reward categories are (1) basic rewards (e.g., money, material goods), (2) affiliation rewards (e.g., interaction initiation, leave-taking), (3) self-esteem rewards (e.g., saving face), and (4) other rewards (e.g., dissonance reduction, humor), while intended beneficiaries may be (1) the liar, (2) the addressee, or (3) a third (potentially non-present) party (Camden et al. 1984: 312).

However, Bryant (2008) has argued that none of these schemes adequately capture the perspectives of the participants themselves. What is needed for that is an open-ended classification scheme, as afforded by a combined focus group and in-depth interview methodology, during which a series of themes emerging from the in-depth interviews are further probed through a semi-structured research protocol used to stimulate discussion among a group. Adopting such a methodology in her study, Bryant (2008) was led to propose the classification shown in Table 29.1.¹⁰

An important discovery enabled by Bryant's interview methodology is the existence of what her informants called "gray" lies (Bryant 2008: 36–7). These are lies in which the various factors (intention, consequences, beneficiary, etc.) are at odds with each other, making it impossible to classify them unambiguously as either "black" or "white." Take the case of a vegetarian asking her friend if the meal they just ate contained any meat products and the friend assuring her that it did not, despite knowing that it did. Since the question was asked after the fact when nothing could be done to repair the situation, a positive answer would have only saddened or angered the questioner. Hence the falsehood in this case can be said to benefit the addressee, yet the lie is more consequential than an innocuous, white one, making that label inappropriate in this case.

The existence of gray lies supports Bok's view that the line between real and white lies is not as clear-cut as some would have us believe. Several commentators have pointed out that, in the end, whether a lie is harmful or not depends on the recipient of the lie and how they feel about it. As Knapp and Comadena note, "what is a vicious, harmful lie for one person may be an act of loving concern for another ... Lies can only 'be' as they are perceived by specific involved people" (Knapp and Comadena 1979: 271). Bok (1999: 60) concurs: "what the liar perceives as harmless or even beneficial may not be so in the eyes of the deceived." A definition that does not advocate either way regarding the harmfulness or not of a lie, such as the one provided by Saul (2012: 29; see section 29.2.1) seems preferable in this respect.

29.2.4 The acquisition of white lies

An important area of research in recent years has been the acquisition of white lies by children. Studies have shown that children as young as three are capable of telling white lies (Talwar and Lee 2002b; Talwar et al. 2007), although they do so less frequently than older ones (Bussey 1999: 1343). Children’s ability to tell white lies appears to develop parallel to their mastering an adult-like definition of lying. The earliest component of

p. 390

this definition, already present in preschoolers, is factual falsity, followed by a grasp of the speaker’s belief that they are making a false statement and their intention to deceive (Strichartz and Burton 1990; Lee and Ross 1997: 269–70). Mirroring this ability to think about the mental states of others, school-age children become increasingly able to infer and consider the needs and wants of others, enabling them to shift their focus from their own perspective to that of the addressee (Walper and Valtin 1992: 249). This ability develops rapidly as children enter school years (Talwar et al. 2007: 9). As Heyman and Lee remark, “by the time they reach age seven, [children] tend to view a concern for the feelings of others as a central factor that motivates lie telling in politeness situations” (Heyman and Lee 2012: 169).

p. 391

Table 29.1 Categorization of lies (reproduced from Bryant 2008: 32)

| Types of lies | Factors | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| | Intention | Consequences | Beneficiary | Truthfulness | Acceptability |
| Real lies | Malicious | Serious | Self-serving | Complete fabrication | Unacceptable |
| | Deliberate | Direct | Egotistical | Blatant untruth | Not justified |
| | Deceptive | | | Zero truth | |
| | Deceitful | | | | |
| White lies | Benign | Trivial | Altruistic | Partial truth | Acceptable |
| | Pure | Meaningless | Other-focused | Half truth | Justified |
| | | Harmless | Protecting | Bending the truth | Expected |
| | | | Helpful | Stretching the truth | Common |
| Gray lies | | | | | |
| Ambiguous gray lies | Ambiguous intention | Ambiguous consequences | Ambiguous beneficiary | Ambiguous level of truth | Open to interpretation |
| Justifiable gray lies | Malicious | Direct | Self-serving | Complete fabrication | Justified acceptable |

Another impressive finding of this line of research is the context-dependence of white-lie-telling behavior. From a young age, children appear to be able to discriminate between situations that call for the truth and those that call for a white lie and favor prosocial lying over truth-telling in the latter (Walper and Valtin 1992; Bussey 1999). Finally, although white lies tend to be viewed more positively than other types of lies by children across the board, differences emerge cross-culturally in how the lies are justified. In Western contexts, white lies are justified primarily with respect to their effect on the recipient's emotional well-being, while in East Asian contexts emphasis is placed on the social implications for the recipient, which is consistent with the former cultures' greater emphasis on autonomy and the latter's on societal interdependence (Heyman and Lee 2012: 169). All in all, the results of research on the acquisition of white lies by children furnish a strong argument in support of the universality of this behavior, as well as the existence of a consistent developmental path for its acquisition.

29.3 Beyond grayscale: blue, red, yellow, and green lies

While the intersection of lying and politeness most readily calls to mind social/white lies, other types of lying behavior are also related to politeness and self-presentational concerns. A cursory look into the relevant literature reveals a whole 'rainbow' of lies, including "blue," "red," "yellow," and even "green" lies. Of these, blue lies are probably the best established. A blue lie is a lie told to benefit a collective (Fu et al. 2008), the term purportedly originating from the use of false statements by police to control a subject, protect the force, or ensure the success of the government's legal case against a defendant (Klockars 1984; Barnes 1994). The degree to which blue lies are condoned by society seems to be culturally determined. Research with children suggests that in societies where strong collectivist ideals are enshrined from an early age through both practice and moral education curricula, such as the People's Republic of China, children tend to favor lying to protect the group and may not even consider such statements to be lies (Fu et al. 2008).¹¹ The opposite tendency was observed among North American children, who not only eschewed lying for a collective but also endorsed lying to benefit an individual (a friend or oneself; Fu et al. 2007). As with white lies, these tendencies increase with age: by age eleven, nearly a third (29.7%) of Chinese children were prepared to lie to benefit the group. However, these tendencies were not unchecked: as Sweet et al. (2010) found, Chinese children judged lying to conceal their group's cheating against another group harshly, even more so than American children, suggesting that it is really only lying for the greater good that is culturally condoned.

Blue lies are akin to another type of lying behavior emanating from an emphasis on collectivist norms, modesty-related lying in public. This is common especially in East Asian contexts, possibly because in these contexts, "publicly calling attention to one's accomplishments violates norms about maintaining harmony within one's social group" (Heyman and Lee 2012: 170). Researchers found that Chinese and Japanese children judged lying in such cases more favorably than truthfully acknowledging one's prosocial acts. However, this behavior is again tempered by context: in contrast to American children, who thought of it as bragging, Chinese children did not find it inappropriate to disclose successful performance to poorly performing peers, since they viewed it as an implicit offer of help. This finding further highlights the context-dependence of cultural norms about lying.

According to the Urban Dictionary,¹¹ a "red lie" is "a statement told with complete awareness that the other person knows the statement to be false. This type of lie is often told and accepted to avoid the fallout that might occur from dealing with reality."¹² This definition is reminiscent of what are more often called bald-faced lies, that is, "lies that assert what is false while speaker and hearer both understand that the speaker does not believe what s/he asserts" (Meibauer 2014a: 127).¹³ The existence of bald-faced lies has prompted some philosophers to remove deception from their definitions of lying, a result some (Fallis 2015a) are more happy with than others (Lackey 2013). On a different analysis, Meibauer (2014a) argues that bald-faced lies

are not lies at all, but rather acts of verbal aggression since, by acting untruthfully and dishonestly, the speaker is blatantly opting out of the Cooperative Principle, thereby openly showing disrespect for the hearer. As Meibauer (2014a: 128) concludes, “the specific act involved is an insult, albeit of a special kind.” Interestingly, this makes bald-faced lies as face-threatening as real lies (albeit for different reasons), while it simultaneously distinguishes them from white lies, which are used precisely to *avoid* face-threat or even to *enhance* the addressee’s face (cf. Brown and Levinson’s classifying white lies under positive politeness; section 29.2.1).

p. 393 A “yellow lie”, on the other hand, is “a cowardly lie told to cover up embarrassment.”¹⁴ Thus defined, yellow lies are a type of lie told to protect the speaker’s, rather than the hearer’s face, and are associated with self-politeness by Chen et al. (2013: 380). Contrary to the common perception that white lies are told to avoid hurting someone else’s feelings, lies told to protect oneself were among the most common in Camden et al.’s study, accounting (on one understanding of self-interest) for some seventy-five percent of their corpus (Camden et al. 1984: 314).¹⁵ Related to this, Camden et al. propose “psychological compensation” as one of four major rationales for white lies in their corpus. As they explain,

Individuals occasionally struggle with their self-image, in the sense that they sometimes find themselves behaving or thinking in ways that are dissonant with the more positive aspects of their self image, or in ways which appear to reinforce the more negative aspects of their self image. Situations like these can instigate personal internal conflict for the individual ...which ... may be avoided or minimized by lying about the situation.

(Camden et al. 1984: 320)

This explanation calls up another notion, that of verbal “accounts” as “specific types of exculpatory claims that people offer when they attempt to reconcile their actions with countervailing social expectations” (Shulman 2009: 120). Accounts include excuses and post-hoc lies that people use to justify their actions and are often told ostensibly for collective or self-protection. Protection is one of four social loopholes identified by Shulman that generally allow violations of social norms without threatening the stability of those norms. Nevertheless, despite allowing people “the illusion of legitimately departing from social expectations when economic and social demands may make such departures inevitable,” social loopholes ultimately amount to “a form of social self-deception—a means by which social actors ignore that some cultural ideals are widely flouted” (Shulman 2009: 132–3).

The latest addition to the list of different colors of lies is “green lies.” Typically, these are claims by manufacturers that their products are environmentally friendly when in fact there is no evidence supporting this. According to one website, “the biggest problem in the green marketplace is false labeling. Almost 70% of the products surveyed had labels boasting of endorsements that were never made. Lies. Teenie weenie greenie lies. Smaller than little white lies, but lies nevertheless.”¹⁶ Being designed to benefit manufacturers (the speaker) and potentially harmful to the consumer (the addressee), green lies come closest to real lies discussed earlier.

29.4 Other forms of socially warranted untruths: euphemism and banter

The final two phenomena considered in this chapter are euphemism and banter. Euphemisms are words or phrases used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word in public and have been explicitly associated with politeness and saving the face of the speaker, the hearer, or a third party (Allan and Burridge 1991). Typical areas of euphemistic usage include death (“passing away”), lying (“not true,” “tongue in cheek”), age (“mature”), illness or disease (“disturbed,” “venereal diseases”), and bodily functions (“restroom”)—although different topics can be taboo in different languages to different degrees (e.g., Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni 2012).

Euphemisms feature in all the classic politeness theories. According to Leech, euphemism is “the practice of referring to something offensive or delicate in terms that make it sound more pleasant or becoming than it really is” (Leech 1981: 45). This makes euphemisms compatible with Leech’s Pollyanna Principle, namely the intuition “that participants in a conversation will prefer pleasant topics of conversation to unpleasant ones” (Leech 1983: 147). Lakoff (1973) mentions euphemisms as an example of her Rule 2 (Give Options), while Brown and Levinson classify them under off-record indirectness, noting at the same time the “constant pressure to create new euphemisms for truly taboo subjects, as by association the old euphemism becomes more and more polluted” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 216).

Yet, despite being sometimes slated as “the opposite of straight talk,”¹⁷ euphemisms do not amount to lying; nor do the closely related phenomena of political correctness, which covers expressions used to avoid the negative connotations of alternative terms for what are often controversial topics (disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.), and ‘unspeak’ (Poole 2006), which refers to expressions that pack a whole worldview into them, rhetorically aiming to lure the addressee into agreeing with the speaker’s point of view. Euphemism, political correctness, and unspeak *cannot* in fact constitute lying because, in all three cases, the referential meaning of the terms used is transparent, making their potential for deception nil. Nevertheless, the corresponding terms do shed a (positive or negative) light on their contents through connotation, and that is why they are often felt to be attempts to manipulate the belief state of the hearer, as real lies also do.

A more debatable case is that of withholding information or “being economical with the truth,” which refers to stating something true, yet less informative than is required, while doing nothing to prevent the potential implicature from Quantity, that the more \downarrow informative statement does not hold, from arising.¹⁸ A prominent example of this is former US President Bill Clinton’s statement that he “did not have sexual relations with that woman” referring to his association with White House aide Monica Lewinski—a statement that was true under a narrower definition of sexual relations than what is usually understood by that term—at the same time implying that the informationally stronger interpretation did not hold.¹⁹ This type of scalar reasoning (Horn 1984) is felt to be closer to lying, since, although the speaker is not strictly speaking stating something false, she does seem to have an intention to mislead, and can indeed be successful in doing so. It is no wonder, then, that “being economical with the truth” has itself become a euphemism for “lying,” and can, in this sense, be as face-threatening as the real thing.

Finally, *banter* is defined by Leech as saying something which is “(1) obviously untrue and (2) obviously impolite to [the] h[earer]” in order to show solidarity with him (Leech 1983:144). Banter can, in this sense, be considered the opposite of white lies: like white lies, it consists of saying something false but in contrast to them, its ‘surface’ goal is now to threaten rather than to enhance the hearer’s face. Of course, ultimately, the goal is to show solidarity with the addressee, and in this sense, the goal is again an affiliative one. Moreover, in both cases, and unlike the case of real lies, the untruthfulness is potentially recognizable by the addressee. However, in the case of banter, the untruthfulness is not only potentially recognizable but

must be recognized for the implicature of solidarity to be generated. Indeed, research shows that, the more likely a statement is to reflect reality, the less likely it is to be understood as banter, even between close friends (Vergis 2015; cf. Labov 1972 on factual falsity as a precondition for ritual insults). This is unlike white lies, which may well go undetected and still achieve the goal of showing consideration for the addressee. Both banter and white lies, then, adopt untruthfulness to get to affiliative goals, but they follow opposite paths getting there.

29.5 Conclusion

p. 396

This chapter has presented a brief overview of different types of lying behavior in relation to politeness and face-threat/face-enhancement. Although white (or social) lies are the most frequently discussed aspect in this respect, a variety of behaviors, ranging from withholding information to outright malicious stating of falsehood, turned out to serve an equally wide variety of social goals. These goals include protecting one's own face and avoiding threat to, or even enhancing, another's face (all goals that are typically associated with politeness) but also downright threatening another's face, resulting in intentional impoliteness or rudeness.

An important distinction has been drawn between white lies and real lies, arguing that the former's politeness lies in one's willingness to say (in the locutionary sense of 'saying') something untrue even though it may (but need not) be transparent to all that one does not mean it. The fact that one's insincerity may be transparent in the case of white lies (what I have called the recognizability of the speaker's lying intention), along with the existence of conventionalized linguistic markers of white lies, paves the way for analyzing white lies as a socially constituted type of speech act, unlike real lies, which cannot be so analyzed. Nevertheless, precisely because the speaker's lying intention is only potentially recognizable in white lies—that is, the speaker's intention to lie *may* but does not *need to* be recognized for a white lie to occur—white and real lies may be hard to distinguish in practice and whether a particular utterance is a white lie or not may remain debatable. In fact, a crucial claim made in this chapter is that the same behavior can have contrary connotations for different participants or in different contexts, making the association between lying and im/politeness context-dependent through and through.

The relationship between lying and im/politeness remains largely unexplored by politeness theorists to date—witness the fact that only euphemisms are mentioned by all three of the first wave of politeness theories (Lakoff 1973, Leech 1983, and Brown and Levinson 1987), with Leech additionally covering banter and Brown and Levinson social (white) lies, while none of the more recent frameworks addresses any type of lying behavior—possibly because of the intrinsically antisocial nature of real lying, which placed it outside of what Eelen (2001: 87) called politeness theorists' "focus on polite." As politeness studies are expanding their scope to take in impoliteness, verbal aggression, and conflict, becoming "im/politeness studies" in the process, and as research into lying reveals the ever finer shades of this complex phenomenon, the cross-fertilization of these two fields can be expected to yield fascinating results in the future.

Notes

- 1 Lakoff proposed three Rules of Politeness: 1) Don't impose; 2) Give options; and 3) Be friendly (Lakoff 1973: 298).
- 2 On prosocial and white lies, see also Chapter 22 by Simone Dietz.
- 3 An indicative list includes *kidba be:d'a* (= white lie) in (Egyptian) Arabic, 圆场谎 *yuánchǎng huǎng* (= lie smoothing over a situation) in Chinese, *hvid løgn* (= white lie) in Danish, *Duruq-e-Maslahati* (= lie with good intentions) in Farsi, *pieux mensonge* (= pious lie) in French, *weiße Lüge* (= white lie) in German, *κατά συνθήκην/αθώα ψέματα* *kata sinthicin/athoa pseματα* (= lies by convention/innocent lies) in Greek, *füllentés* (= white lie) in Hungarian, *bugie innocenti* (= innocent lies)

- in Italian, *hvite løgner* (= white lies) in Norwegian, невинная ложь *nevinnnaia lozh* (= innocent lie) in Russian, *mentira* (or *mentirita*) *piadosa/bianca* (= pious/white (little) lie) in (Peninsular/Latin American) Spanish, เกรงใจ */kre:ŋ.tɕai/* (= to be (too) courteous) in Thai, *zararsız yalan* (= harmless lie) in Turkish, and سفید جھوٹ *Sufaid Jhoot* (= white lies) in Urdu.
- 4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Invention_of_Lying; accessed June 23, 2015.
- 5 The maxim of Quality enjoins conversationalists to: “Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence” (Grice 1975: 46).
- 6 The notion of “what is said” in (post-)Gricean pragmatics is notoriously thorny. While for Grice (1975), ‘saying p’ entailed ‘meaning p’, for Bach (2001) it is possible to ‘say’ something (in the locutionary sense of uttering the words) without meaning it (as in, for instance, slips of the tongue, or translating, reciting, and rehearsing). It is in the latter (Bach’s) sense that the term “what is said” is used in this chapter. For a summary of current debates around this notion, see Terkourafi (2010) and the references therein.
- 7 This holds also in uptake/hearer-based accounts of speech acts, if this sentence is rephrased to read “uptake as a promise, request, threat, complaint, etc. must occur for the act to count as a promise, a request, a threat, or a complaint, respectively.”
- 8 The argument that lies cannot be a type of illocutionary act is also defended by Reboul (1994) albeit on slightly different grounds.
- 9 See Izadi (2015) for the original in Persian and English word-per-word rendition.
- 10 Since the table summarizes the perspectives of the participants themselves, the terms used are the participants’ own and should rather be taken in their pre-theoretical sense.
- 11 Urban Dictionary is a crowd-sourced online dictionary of primarily slang words and phrases founded in 1999. At the start of 2014, it featured over seven million definitions. As with other crowd-sourced websites, definitions are submitted and rated by users, with minimal intervention by volunteer editors.
- 12 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=red+lie&defid=2174531>; accessed June 23, 2015.
- 13 On bald-faced lies, see Chapter 19 by Jörg Meibauer.
- 14 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=yellow+lie&defid=2063228>, accessed June 23, 2015.
- 15 Camden et al. (1984: 312) asked students to record the white lies they told over a period of two weeks. Twenty-four students participated in the study, contributing between nine and twenty white lies each for a total of 322 white lies analyzed.
- 16 <http://www.chuckroger.com/2010/11/12/greenwashing-green-lies/>; accessed June 23, 2015.
- 17 <http://english.stackexchange.com/questions/96684/opposite-of-straight-talk>; accessed June 23, 2015.
- 18 The implicature arises from flouting the first submaxim of Quantity (“Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)”; Grice (1975: 45).
- 19 Scholars have defended different views on whether this example constitutes lying or not; see, e.g., Moore (2000), Saul (2000), and Meibauer (2014b: 156–8), among others.