



Lies we don't say: Figurative language, commitment, and deniability

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ABSTRACT

A theory of lies should be able to explain, first, what makes lies special among the variety of deceptive uses of language and, second, why we don't consider figurative speakers to be lying even if they seem to be putting forward something they believe to be false. Here I contend that a commitment-based account can meet both aims without compromising with a too narrow conception of lies. The result is an approach that can accommodate the irregular results of experimental analysis, and that answers to the challenge posed by insincere implicatures in general, and lies via figurative language in particular.

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There are many different ways in which we can deceive someone. For instance, in the aftermath of a significant argument, I may strategically pack my belongings and leave my suitcases prominently displayed at the entrance of our apartment to make you believe that I'm leaving for good, despite lacking any genuine intention to do so. That would be a way of deceiving you without using language. Now, there are also different ways in which we can verbally deceive someone. For example, if you were to observe the suitcases and ask "Are you leaving me?", I could respond using any of the following utterances.

- (1) Yes, I'm leaving for good.
- (2) I have already packed.
- (3) No, I left the suitcases at the door just for decoration, if you will.

In the three cases my intention is to deceive you and, more specifically, to deceive you regarding the same matter: I aim to make you believe that I intend to depart. With the first utterance, I said to you that I'm leaving; with the second, I implicated that to you; with the third, I ironically communicated it to you.

One of the aims of a theory of lies is to explain what differentiates lies from other deceptive cases. Say-based theories consider that among the various ways in which we can deceive others, only when we *say* something we believe to be false are we lying. Consequently, this perspective excludes non-linguistic deceptive acts; now, it also excludes cases in which the speaker intends to deceive the hearer using insincere implicatures –as in (2)— or figurative language –as the irony in (3). Alternatively, commitment-based approaches contend that a speaker lies when, in a linguistic act of communication, she

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commits herself to a content she believes to be false. The scope of these accounts varies depending on the particular notion of commitment they endorse.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the ongoing discussion. I will advocate for a commitment-based approach to lies, adopting a broad scope. Specifically, I will argue that there is no compelling reason to exclude insincere implicatures from the definition of lies. I will focus on this issue in Section 2. Prior to that, I will address another aspect of the debate, as I believe it is relevant for this discussion: the distinction between lies and figurative language.

In fact, while lies are part of the broader category of deceptive language use, they also share a fundamental characteristic with ironies, metaphors, and other figurative phenomena: in all of these cases, the speaker puts forward a content that she believes to be false. A comprehensive theory of lies should be able to differentiate lies from figurative phenomena as well.

The say-based accounts have a straightforward answer to this: the liar *says*, whereas the speaker speaking figuratively does not. In Section 1, I will contend that lies and figurative phenomena can be distinguished more accurately in terms of the speaker's commitment. This approach offers several advantages, including avoiding a narrow understanding of lies and providing a flexible framework for examining insincere implicatures.

I have good reasons to begin from this distinction. Eventually, I will argue that instances of deceptive ironies, deceptive metaphors, or deceptive hyperbola provide evidence to support the classification of insincere implicatures as lies. Therefore, it is important to clarify the boundary between lies and figurative language and examine the areas where they intersect and differ. This step will also help us clarify fundamental notions that will be central to our further investigations.

1. Lies and figurative language

A first notable characteristic of lies is that they are insincere speech acts: the speaker puts forward something she believes to be false.¹ Nevertheless, the speaker's insincerity does not seem to be sufficient to tell lies apart from figurative uses of language. An ironic speaker might utter "Tom is a great friend" while believing that it is false that Tom is a great friend, but that does not mean that she is lying. Similarly, a farmer who utters "We've had tomatoes coming out of our ears" does not believe that they had tomatoes coming from their ears; but she did not lie, she just spoke metaphorically. The same goes for hyperbolic uses of language: when we claim "I went to millions of concerts in my life" we might not believe that it's true that we went to millions of concerts, but we are nonetheless not lying.

A proper characterization of lies must be able to distinguish them from figurative uses of language. Say-based theories have a straightforward answer to this issue: the liar *says* (Horn, 2017; Saul, 2012), asserts (Adler, 1997; Chisholm and Feehan, 1977; Fried, 1978; Stokke, 2013; Viebahn, 2017), or states (Carson, 2006) that which she believes to be false—and the ironic, metaphoric, or hyperbolic speaker does not. The divergence on the terminology employed reveals some difference among these accounts, but one thing seems certain:

The illocutionary definition of say or assert relevant for characterizing lies must be narrowly defined enough to eliminate non-literal locutions in which no assertion is directly made: irony, sarcasm, banter, pretense, tall tales, (non-conventionalized) metaphor, and so on. (Horn, 2017, p. 30, p. 30)

There is an interesting debate when we try to define what it is that the liar does with that which she believes to be false—whether she *says*, *asserts*, or *states* it, and what exactly that linguistic act stands for. However, since at this point I'm concerned with the difference between lying and using figurative language, what is important now is that whatever the liar does with that which she believes to be false, is something different from what she does when she speaks figuratively. I will use the term "saying."

1.1. Locutionary content and what is said

There is quite a literature on the notion of what is said. Most contemporary discussion acknowledges as a point of departure Grice's distinction between what is said by a speaker and what she implicates by doing so, and I will build my analysis upon this classic distinction myself. I will rely on Grice's theory of conversation (Grice, 1967a/1989, 1967b/1989), and I will leverage some basic distinctions put forward by Critical Pragmatics (Korta and Perry, 2007, 2011, 2013).²

Most of the discord regarding what is said arises from the pressures that theoretical analysis has put on this notion. In fact, "there seems to be a notion of saying that matters to ordinary speakers which, despite the enormous literature on saying and related notions, has not yet been captured" (Saul, 2012, p. viii). A promising answer to this problem has been offered by Critical Pragmatics (Korta and Perry, 2011): the distinction between the locutionary content of an utterance and what is said

¹ There exists some debate on whether what the liar says must also *be* false—in addition to the speaker's believing it to be false. According to authors defending this stronger position (Carson, 2006; Coleman and Kay, 1981; Turri and Turri, 2015), when we say something that we believe is false but is actually true, then we do not lie. That is not a debate I intend to enter here. For the sake of the argument, in what follows I will assume that the liar believes what she communicates to be false; whoever advocates for the stronger idea on the untruthfulness of the liar can feel free to add a stronger clause to that condition.

² See Vignolo (2023) for an analysis of the notion of what is said required by say-based accounts of lying. He examines Saul's (2012) and Stokke's (2018) proposals and favors a conventions-based notion of what is said inspired by Korta and Perry (2007) and Devitt (2021).

by that utterance offers a fine-grained machinery to analyze phenomena on the limits of what is said, as cases of figurative language appear to be.

Distancing themselves from traditional accounts which defend that utterances have one single kind of content –apart from presuppositions and implicatures–, Korta and Perry (2007, 2011) maintain that utterances systematically have a variety of contents or truth-conditions, which vary in incrementality. For instance, the minimal (utterance-bound) content of Martha's utterance.

(4) John is at the library

is

C_{min}4: That whomever the speaker of (4) is referring to by “John” is at whatever library the speaker of (4) is referring to by “the library” at the time of utterance (4).

This is the content determined by the rules of English and the fact that (4) has been produced. Anyone who understands English and hears (4) will grasp **C_{min}4** –even if he saw the utterance written on a blackboard, with no clue about who wrote it and when. If we add facts about the identity of the speaker, we obtain the speaker-bound content of the utterance:

C_{spk}4: That whomever Martha is referring to by “John” is at whatever library Martha is referring to by “the library” at the time of utterance (4).

Among the different contents of an utterance, the locutionary content captures what has been typically called “the proposition expressed” by an utterance, or “the content” of an utterance. Basically, it is the content obtained after disambiguations and fixing references. Thus, if we know whom the speaker was referring to, which library she has in mind, and when the utterance was uttered, then we shall be able to grasp the locutionary content of utterance (4):

C_{loc}4: That John is at the library on May 27th, 2023, at 4:10 p.m.

The locutionary content departs from what is said in that it does not have the forensic connotations usually attributed to the latter: the speaker is committed to the truth of what she says, since “one is responsible for the way one's remarks are taken by reasonably competent listeners” (Korta and Perry, 2011, p. 116). The locutionary content, on the other hand, is a theoretical tool, and it is therefore free of the “everyday needs of folk psychology, folk linguistics, and attribution of responsibility” (Korta and Perry, 2011, p. 115) that shape the ordinary notion of saying. Commitments and responsibilities are central in any communicative act, and it is precisely in this aspect that the difference between saying something you believe is false and using figurative language relies.

1.2. Commitments and responsibilities

There are many accounts of commitments in the literature (Alston, 2000; Morency et al., 2008; for a review, see de Brabanter and Dendale, 2008). I am most sympathetic with Marsili's (2021) account, and I will be using his terminology –instead of adding to the already multifarious forms of talking about the same thing. However, Marsili (2021) is focused on analyzing lies on the explicit level –no presuppositions, no implicatures– and, thus, his approach to commitments is formulated in these terms too: he defines assertoric commitments. According to Marsili, assertoric commitments have two normative dimensions: accountability and discursive responsibility (Marsili, 2021, pp. 3259–3261).

As I am interested in analyzing linguistic acts that go beyond what is explicitly communicated with an utterance, I will use a slightly more general characterization of these two dimensions of commitments. But the general idea comes from –and, I believe, is compatible with– his insights.

Normative dimensions of commitment

ACCOUNTABILITY: when a speaker commits herself to the truth of a content of her utterance, she becomes liable to be criticized/reproached/blamed/confronted if such a content turns out to be false.

DISCURSIVE RESPONSIBILITY: when a speaker commits herself to the truth of a content of her utterance, she is expected to a) not contradict herself, and b) justify the truth of the content she has committed to, if challenged.

These two elements are essential to the speaker's commitment: whenever a speaker commits herself to the truth of a content, she becomes accountable and discursively responsible for it; and, the other way around: if a speaker is accountable and discursively responsible for a content, then she is committed to that content. Thus, checking these two dimensions will be a good test when we are trying to elucidate whether a speaker has committed herself to a certain content or not. Anyhow, commitments are not an all-or-nothing element of utterances: they are gradual, in the sense that a speaker can be more or less committed to a content. For instance, a speaker who promises or swears is usually taken to be more committed to the locutionary content of her utterance than a speaker who plainly says or suggests that locutionary content. See Marsili (2021, pp. 3262–3263) for an interesting analysis of how a speaker's (assertoric) commitment can be reinforced (by using some performative verbs, for example) or mitigated (by using some modifiers, for instance).

This approach to commitments will allow us to better understand the difference between the locutionary content of an utterance and what a speaker says when uttering it. And, what is more important at this point, it will help us to shed some light on the difference between saying something one believes to be false and speaking figuratively.

1.3. *Saying and making as if to say*

One way of communicating something is to make an utterance whose locutionary content matches the belief we intend to communicate. Thus, if Martha wants to communicate to the hearer that John is at the library, she can do so by uttering.

(4) John is at the library.

If things go as planned, the hearer will understand that Martha intends him to believe that she believes that John is at the library now –**C_{loc}4**. If the hearer goes to the library to find John and realizes that he is not there, he might confront Martha, and ask why she said John was at the library when he is actually not there. Moreover, Martha is expected not to contradict **C_{loc}4** in what follows (it wouldn't be rational for her to continue the conversation by claiming that John is not at the library, or that John is at the zoo, or that she doesn't know where John is), and to be able to offer some sort of justification for the truth of **C_{loc}4** (it would be awkward for her to add that she has actually no reason to believe that John is at the library). Thus, Martha is discursively responsible for that content.

When uttering (4), Martha committed herself to **C_{loc}4**. That is why we say that Martha *said* that locutionary content: saying amounts to committing oneself to the locutionary content of an utterance, basically. In many cases, the locutionary content of an utterance and what is said by the speaker by uttering such an utterance coincide. That is why many authors ultimately equate *the* content of an utterance with what is said by that utterance. The distinction is crucial though, as it will prove in what follows.

Things are significantly different when we speak figuratively. Let us recall the three examples mentioned above.

(5) Tom is a great friend. [IRONY]

(6) We've had tomatoes coming out of our ears. [METAPHOR]

(7) I went to millions of concerts in my life. [HYPERBOLE]

If the hearer understands that the speaker is being ironic when uttering (5), he will not take her to be committed to its locutionary content –that Tom is a great friend. On the one hand, he won't confront her if he gets to know that she hates Tom –he won't take her accountable for that content. On the other hand, he won't expect that she won't further say anything that contradicts that Tom is a great friend, and he won't ask her why she believes that Tom is a great friend –he won't expect that the speaker is discursively responsible for that content. A hearer who understands the irony, understands that the speaker, even if she uttered (5), did not commit herself to the locutionary content of that utterance.

Similarly, a hearer who understands the metaphor in (6) will not confront the speaker because she does not have tomatoes in her ears, and a hearer who understands the hyperbole in (7) will not feel fooled if the speaker went to less than a million concerts. These speakers are neither accountable nor discursively responsible for the locutionary contents of their utterances –they did not commit to those contents when uttering (6) and (7).

Speakers speaking figuratively do not commit themselves to the locutionary contents of their utterances –they don't expect hearers to believe that they believe in their truth. Instead, they expect hearers to realize that they are speaking figuratively, and to grasp what it is that they actually intend to communicate: that Tom is not a great friend, that we had a pretty good crop, and that I went to lots of concerts –or something along these lines.

It is because speakers speaking figuratively do not commit themselves to the locutionary contents of their utterances that we consider that they did not *say* those locutionary contents –saying implies committing. When we use figurative language, we use the locutionary content of our utterance in order to convey what we actually intend to communicate. When we use a locutionary content in this way, I will say that the speaker *makes as if to say*³ that locutionary content. Making as if to say is using a locutionary content, without committing yourself to it, in order to communicate something else.

This is, in sum, the basic difference between figurative and literal uses of language, and this is also how the difference between lies and figurative phenomena is explained. A speaker speaking figuratively does not commit herself to the locutionary content of her utterance, thus we don't consider her to have lied even if she believes that locutionary content to be false. On the other hand, a speaker speaking literally does commit herself to the locutionary content of her utterance, and so she takes responsibility for believing in its truth. If she believes that this locutionary content is actually false, we take her to have lied, because she was indeed committed to that content. A speaker who lies and a speaker speaking figuratively are similar in that they both believe the locutionary content of their utterance to be false; but they are different in that the liar is committed to that content, whereas the figurative speaker is not. This picture points to commitments as the distinguishing element of lies. According to this commitment-based characterization of lying, then:

³ I'm adopting Grice's terminology here (Grice, 1967a/1989, p. 34). There is not a consensus among pragmatic theories regarding the analysis of different figurative phenomena. I have defended a neo-Gricean approach to irony in previous works (Garmendia, 2010, Garmendia, 2011, Garmendia, 2015, Garmendia, 2018), and I'm going to stick to a Gricean view on figurative language here as well. In any case, the arguments and ideas I am articulating also apply to the main different accounts on non-literal uses of language.

A speaker lies iff

- (i) She makes an utterance (u).
- (ii) By (i) she commits herself to the truth of a content she believes is false.

We lie when we commit ourselves to something we believe is false, therefore we lie when we say something we believe is false, because we are committed to what we say –saying something you believe is false is one way of lying. But, from that, it does not follow that only when we say do we lie. If there are other ways in which a speaker commits herself to a content, apart from that of saying a locutionary content, then there might be other ways of lying as well. By framing lies in terms of commitment, we can avoid a narrow interpretation of lying and establish a flexible framework for analyzing insincere implicatures.

2. Lying with implicatures

Speakers usually convey more than what they say. When uttering a sentence, speakers communicate implicatures too.⁴ Just as a speaker can believe what she says to be false, she can certainly believe what she implicates to be false. The question at issue here is whether a speaker who implicates something she believes to be false is lying or not.

The claim that believed falsehoods communicated via implicatures are indeed lies does not have many supporters.⁵ Meibauer defends this position (2005, 2011, 2023). In disagreement with his view we find most of the theories on lies (Adler, 1997; Chisholm and Feehan, 1977; Dynel, 2011; Fallis, 2009; Horn, 2017; Saul, 2012; Stokke, 2013⁶). The disagreement affects cases such as the following:

John and Mary have recently started going together. Valentino is Mary's ex-boyfriend. One evening John asks Mary, "Have you seen Valentino this week?" Mary answers, "Valentino's been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks." Valentino has in fact been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks, but it is also the case that Mary had a date with Valentino the night before. Did Mary lie? (Coleman and Kay, 1981, p. 31)

An insightful contribution to this debate could come from experimental works: do speakers commonly consider this sort of case a lie? However, results from experimental analysis do not seem to be conclusive in this regard. Weissman and Terkourafi (2019) claim that people do not take insincere implicatures (i.e., implicatures that the speaker believes to be false), on the whole, to be lies. On the contrary, Wiegmann and Willemssen (2017) and Hardin (2010) claim that insincere implicatures are ordinarily also regarded as lies. See Wiegmann and Meibauer (2019) for a detailed review of empirical studies on this issue.

Say-based theories of lies can hardly accommodate these irregular findings. According to the saying-view, the distinction between lies and other deceptive uses of language is clear-cut: if the speaker said (explicitly communicated) that what she believes to be false, then she lied; otherwise, she did not. It is difficult to reconcile this perspective on lies with the growing evidence that at least some implicatures are intuitively perceived as lies.

From a commitment-based position, the answer to this issue will depend on the notion of commitment we adopt. To put it simply, our theory will classify insincere implicatures as lies in the extent in which it takes speakers to be committed to their implicatures.⁷ When adopting this stance, there are two specific matters that a theory needs to address: the deniability of insincere implicatures, and the case of figurative lies.

2.1. Deniability

If speakers were committed to their implicatures, that would mean, according to our definition of commitment, that the speaker is accountable for her implicatures and that she is discursively responsible for them. Let's set aside discursive responsibility for the moment and focus on accountability, as this feature is more problematic when dealing with implicatures. In fact, there is one characteristic of implicatures that seems to run against the claim that the speaker is accountable for them: implicatures are cancelable and, thus, they are deniable too.

Implicatures are cancelable (Grice, 1967a/1989, p. 39; 1967b/1989, pp. 44–46) and, so, the speaker lying via implicatures can take advantage of this feature and exploit deniability (Adler, 1997, p. 442; Wiegmann and Meibauer, 2019, p. 7; Mazzarella et al., 2018, p. 16). Deniability means that a speaker who has uttered something true and thereby implicated something she

⁴ Speakers also communicate presuppositions, but I'm going to limit my analysis to implicatures here. For an account of presuppositional lies, see Viebahn (2020).

⁵ Some accounts acknowledge that sometimes speakers lie by conventionally implicating something they believe is false (Viebahn, 2020; Stokke, 2017), but they deny that a speaker can lie via conversational implicatures. I will focus on particularized conversational implicatures (PCI), as they are the most controversial ones regarding lies. From now on, whenever I'm talking about implicatures I will be referring to PCIs.

⁶ Vincent and Castelfranchi (1981) call this sort of case "indirect lies," but they take this category to be a subgroup of deception different from that of lying.

⁷ Experimental findings are not conclusive regarding this issue either. Bonalumi et al. claim that their "results suggest that audiences take speakers to be committed to 'what is meant' rather than 'what is said'" (2020: 382), while Mazzarella et al. claim that their "results show that implicating is taken to be less committal than saying and presupposing" (2018, p. 23). See Meibauer (2023) for an extended discussion of these findings.

believes to be false (as in Mary's example) can later, if confronted, deny that she actually intended to communicate such an implicature.⁸ That is to say: if John got to know that Mary actually met Valentino the day before, and so confronted her, asking why she lied to him, Mary could answer that she didn't tell him that she had not met Valentino—she just said that he had been sick for two weeks.

It seems, then, that Mary is not accountable for her implicature: she can defend herself from the hearer's criticism or blame in a way in which a speaker who says something she believes to be false cannot. Therefore, it would seem that Mary is not committed to her implicature.

Let's consider another example of an insincere implicature already classic when debating this issue:

The Story of the Mate and the Captain

A captain and his mate have a long-term quarrel. The mate drinks more rum than is good for him, and the captain is determined not to tolerate this behaviour any longer. When the mate is drunk again, the captain writes into the logbook: Today, 11th October, the mate is drunk. When the mate reads this entry during his next watch, he is first getting angry, then, after a short moment of reflection, he writes into the logbook: Today, 14th October, the captain is not drunk. (Meibauer, 2005, p. 1380)

The mate has said (written) that today the captain is not drunk, and he has thereby implicated that the captain is often drunk. That is to say, he has said something true and implicated something false. Implicatures being cancelable, if the captain read the logbook and confronted the mate, the latter could deny that he intended to implicate such an implicature. It seems then that the mate is not accountable for his implicature, neither committed to it.

To have a clearer picture of how deniability differentiates to what extent we are accountable for what we say and what we implicate, let us consider an example with two possible answers to the same question:

Megan is on a diet, and she has a strict meal-plan that dictates what she should eat for lunch each day of the week. Paul knows that. Today is Tuesday. According to the plan, Megan should have had broccoli for lunch, but she actually had spaghetti carbonara.

Paul: What did you have for lunch today?

Megan: (8) I had broccoli for lunch.

(9) Tuesday is broccoli day.

Now, imagine that Paul finds out that Megan actually had spaghetti carbonara, and so he confronts Megan, upset because she didn't tell him the truth. If Megan had replied to his question with (9), she could now try to exploit deniability, and claim that she did not say that she had broccoli—she just said that Tuesday is broccoli day, period. Megan wouldn't have this way out if she had answered (8) to Paul. This seems to show that we are accountable for what we say, but not for what we implicate. Nevertheless, I believe that this view on deniability is built upon a wrong conception of the cancelability of implicatures.

Cancelability does not mean that we can make bothering implicatures vanish. Cancelability is a theoretical test, which states that implicatures *might have not been* implicated if the sentence was uttered with different intentions. But a speaker that intended to implicate something cannot go backwards and eliminate or un-implicate it. The fact that the speaker could have not intended to communicate a certain implicature, does not affect the fact of whether she actually did so. It is the speaker's intentions when making an utterance which determine what the speaker says and implicates with that utterance, and a speaker cannot change those intentions afterwards. As Burton-Roberts puts it:

(...) it only makes sense to talk of an implicature being cancelled if there actually was an implicature to cancel in the first place. But, again, if there was an implicature—i.e. if she actually implemented an intention to implicate *p*—it is difficult to see in what sense the implicature could be cancelled. It could only be 'cancelled' if not intended. But in that case—since there's no such thing as an unintended implicature—there can't be any implicature to cancel. (Burton-Roberts, 2013, p. 19)

Thus a speaker, when making an utterance, either does or does not implicate such and such. And, if she does, she cannot later back up and eliminate an implicature she communicated. The hearer, on the other hand, has to recognize what it is that the speaker intended to implicate with her utterance—what it is required to suppose that the speaker intended to implicate if she was being cooperative.

⁸ Specifying the meaning of deniability is, in fact, a much more complex task than this. There exists a widespread and highly interesting debate on this topic; see, for example, García-Carpintero (2021), Mazzarella (2021) and Dinges and Zakkou (2023). I am very sympathetic with Dinges & Zakkou's distinction between deniability and untouchability, as well as with their overall perspective on the issue. For the sake of the argument, I will refrain from delving into the intricate aspects of this debate and instead adopt a very simple idea of deniability in this work. Nonetheless, if I were to align with one of the more elaborated existing definitions, that would be Dinges & Zakkou's "simplified proposal" for a definition of deniability: *Deniability*. *S* has deniability relative to the proposition that she meant to Φ if and only if: if *S* denies that she meant to Φ , then *S*'s audience does not know that she meant to Φ (Dinges and Zakkou, 2023, p. 385).

When we say that an implicature is canceled, what we really mean is that something that could be thought to be an implicature (a putative implicature) was canceled –so we understand that it never existed in the first place. Grice (1967b/1989, p. 44) stated that this can be done either contextually or explicitly. He explained that we can cancel an implicature explicitly by adding “but not *p*” or “I do not mean to imply that *p*” to our utterance, and this gives us an important clue: if by contradicting a putative implicature we cancel it, that is, we explain that we did not have the intention to communicate such an implicature in the first place, then it follows that we are expected to not contradict our implicatures –i.e., we are discursively responsible for them. If Megan, when answering Paul’s question, claims “Tuesday is broccoli day,” and with that she intends to implicate that she actually had broccoli for lunch, then she is expected to be discursively responsible for it and not contradict such an implicature, because, if she did, she would be manifesting that she didn’t intend to implicate that –and she did. Speakers are indeed discursively responsible for their implicatures.

Let us come back to accountability. We have seen that cancelability is just a way of clarifying putative implicatures. With this in mind, we see that deniability just means that we can deny that we implicated something which we actually did. At the end of the day, deniability just means that speakers who lie via implicatures can more easily deny that they lied –but with that, they will be lying about their actual intentions.⁹ It’s easier to lie about lies when they are not communicated explicitly, that’s all. Now, the issue would be to determine whether the possibility of lying about your own intentions and denying some implicatures you actually intended to communicate makes you less responsible for those implicatures. Whether the fact that you can deny some implicature makes you non-accountable for such an implicature.

My answer is that it depends. Or, to be more exact, that it is a matter of degree. And this point is linked to another essential characteristic of implicatures: apart from being cancelable, implicatures are also indeterminate (Grice, 1967a/1989, p. 40), and they can be more or less strongly communicated:

strong (vs. weak) communication: a communicated assumption (‘explicature’ or ‘implicature’) is strongly communicated when the ‘informative intention’ to make manifest that particular assumption is made highly mutually manifest; the degree of strength with which an assumption is communicated varies on a continuum through to cases of very weak communication, where there is some ‘indeterminacy’ regarding which specific assumptions within some conceptual range fall under the speaker’s informative intention. (Carston, 2002, p. 380)

This distinction between strong and weak communication results in a distinction between strong and weak implicatures. As Mazzarella (2021, p. 233, table 2) clearly and concisely details, strong implicatures are essential for comprehension, typically unique, foreseeable, and the speaker’s responsibility; whereas weak implicatures are optional for comprehension, typically part of a range, not necessarily foreseeable, and the hearer’s responsibility. Experimental analysis (Sternau et al., 2015, 2017) has shown that the strength of an implicature affects its grade of deniability: the stronger the implicature, the harder it is for the speaker to deny it.

Thus implicatures vary on strength: in certain cases an implicature is strongly required (if the conversation is going to keep with the expectations of cooperation and relevance), while in other cases it can be uncertain whether an implicature is required or not. And this gradation on the strength of implicatures affects, first, its deniability, and therefore, the speaker’s accountability and commitment.

Let’s get back to the examples of insincere implicatures. The mate wrote down that the captain is not drunk today, which is true. The captain read this entry in the logbook, and confronted the mate, as he believed the mate was intending to implicate that he, the captain, is often drunk. To that, the mate replies that he had no intention to implicate anything of that sort, and that he was just intending to say what he said: that the captain is not drunk today. I believe the captain would have good reason to treat the mate’s answer with suspicion. In fact, why would the mate write down in the logbook that the captain is not drunk today? Logbooks are intended to gather the relevant information of the day, and the mate’s utterance seems to break this norm. Noting that the captain is not drunk, without intending to communicate anything else, seems, at least, irrelevant. Nevertheless, the mate could defend himself, for example, claiming that he just intended to praise the captain for his flawless behavior and so wanted to leave proof of his sobriety. I cannot guess whether the captain would buy such an awkward explanation, but let us give him the benefit of the doubt and accept that it might work as an excuse.

Thus the mate intended to implicate that the captain is often drunk, but he did not implicate that very strongly. Therefore, he can now try to exploit deniability and make the captain believe that he actually had no intention to implicate that. That shows that the mate is not easily accountable for his implicature and, therefore, that he is not (very) committed to it.

However, sometimes implicatures are more strongly communicated, and the picture changes significantly in these cases. The other two examples of insincere implicatures mentioned above show more strongly communicated implicatures. This might be, in part, because both utterances are replies to direct questions. John asked Mary whether she had seen Valentino last week, thus interpreting Mary’s utterance as an answer to this question seems to require the implicature that she did not meet Valentino *because* he has been sick for two weeks. If Mary was not intending to implicate that, John could easily question the relevance of her utterance as an answer to his question. The same goes for the broccoli example: Paul asked Megan what she had for lunch today (Tuesday), thus Megan’s utterance seems to require the implicature that she had broccoli, *because* Tuesday is broccoli day. Expectations of relevance and cooperation strongly suggest that these implicatures are required. Therefore, if the hearers discovered that the implicatures are false (that Mary met Valentino and that Megan did not eat

⁹ I have defended a similar idea for irony (Garmendia, 2013, pp. 231–232).

broccoli), they would most probably feel fooled; and, if they confronted the speakers, neither Mary nor Megan would have an easy way out. The stronger the implicature, the harder it gets for the speaker to deny it –thus she seems to be more accountable for it, more committed to it.

The following may be an even clearer example of a very strongly communicated implicature:

June has two children, Sam (5) and Max (15). While June is in the backyard, Max catches Sam sneaking into his room with the cookie jar. Max reprehends his brother –their mother doesn't let them eat cookies between meals— and takes the jar from him. Max hides in his room and eats all the cookies himself, and then leaves the empty jar back in the kitchen. When June sees the jar, she calls Max, and asks him: Who ate the cookies?

(10) I saw Sam sneaking into his room with the jar.

Max did not say that Sam ate the cookies, but he very strongly implicated it. So strongly, that he couldn't possibly deny it if he eventually wanted to –if his mother discovered the truth and confronted him for having lied, for example. It is hard to imagine a way in which Max could defend that he uttered (10) as a reply to his mother's question without the intention to implicate that it was his brother who presumably ate the cookies. Max is accountable for that implicature, and he is committed to it.

Implicatures vary in strength, and deniability for implicatures varies accordingly. Therefore, speakers are more or less accountable for their implicatures depending on how deniable their implicatures are. Ultimately, this would affect speakers' commitments too: depending on the degree to which a speaker is accountable for an implicature she will be more or less committed to such implicature.¹⁰

Now, even if we accept that commitment varies in degree, and that speakers are (more or less) committed to their implicatures, it could be argued that commitment to an implicature is never comparable to, or it does not count to the same degree as, our commitment to what we say.¹¹ In the next section, I will argue that speakers are committed to certain implicatures just as much as they are to what they say. I believe that instances of figurative language will make a good case here.

2.2. Figurative lies

Figurative language is special, in a way, regarding the issue we are concerned with. In fact, when we are calling into doubt whether the speaker is committed to her implicatures, in the cases in which a speaker speaks literally, the question amounts to wondering whether it is possible that the speaker commits herself just to the locutionary content of her utterance, and not also to what she implicates by uttering it. But, as I have noted in Section 1, speakers speaking figuratively do not commit themselves to the locutionary content of their utterances –that is why we say that they don't say those contents, but they make as if to say them. The question, then, would be: if figurative speakers are not committed to the locutionary contents of their utterances, what are they committed to –what do they communicate—, if not their implicatures?

To put it differently: when dealing with our previous examples, I have argued that in some cases it is difficult to see how a speaker could deny that she intended to implicate such and such, because these implicatures seemed strongly required. Anyhow, it could be argued that it might be difficult, *but not impossible*. That is to say, it could be argued that in implicatures there is always a chink for deniability, and that this affects the speaker's accountability and her commitment. In what follows I will argue that figurative language is a proof that in some cases deniability is not only difficult, but impossible.

Testing for accountability will give us proof of that. Let us consider some examples in which a speaker figuratively implicates something she believes is false, and check whether the speaker has the slightest trace of deniability in those cases.

IRONY

Moira and Karl work at the same company. There have been some irregularities in the company's accounts, and rumor says Moira committed an embezzlement –which is true. Karl approaches Moira openly, and asks her:

¹⁰ When I claim that the gradualness of the speaker's commitment might explain why we tend to consider some but not all insincere implicatures as lies, I am not excluding the possibility that other individual or social/cultural factors may also influence our judgments in this regard (I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out). As Weigmann and Meibauer suggest, the fact that commitment to implicatures is gradual might be one of the factors that explains the irregular results obtained in experimental analysis:

To sum up, the reviewed studies suggest that people consider lying by falsely implicating to be possible, although the findings vary and sometimes contradict each other. A mediating factor that could account for this variation might be the degree to which the speaker commits herself to the content of the implicature (Weigmann and Meibauer, 2019, p. 8).

¹¹ Morency et al. seem to claim just that: "(...) hearers processing implicatures cannot seek to obtain a 100 % guarantee that speakers are actually committed to the representation they derive" (Morency et al., 2008, p. 212). I believe Horn's note can be understood in these lines as well: "it's hard to reconcile the thesis that a speaker is committed to the truth of what she implicates in the same way that she is committed to what she says (= explicitly asserts or promises)" (Horn, 2017, p. 50).

Karl: Is it true you committed an embezzlement?
 Moira: (11) Yes, and it was me who killed JFK too.

METAPHOR

A very competitive gardener, who has actually had a bad crop –but who wants to conceal this— utters: [(12)] We've had tomatoes coming out of our ears. (Saul, 2012, p. 16, p. 16)

HYPERBOLE

A very competitive gardener, who has actually had a bad crop –but who wants to conceal this— utters: (13) We've had the best crop in a million years.

In these three cases, the speakers communicate something they believe to be false, but they do not do so by saying it –instead, they implicate it via irony, metaphor, or hyperbole. As we do know how these figurative phenomena work, and we are minimally familiar with the contexts, we are able to infer that the ironic speaker implicated that she did not commit an embezzlement,¹² and both the speaker using a metaphor and the one using a hyperbole implicated that they had a very good crop. What we want to elucidate is whether the speakers can deny those implicatures in any possible way.

Karl eventually discovered that Moira did commit an embezzlement, and now he surely feels fooled. In fact, he trusted her, and defended her against their colleagues' accusations. So he confronts Moira, and blames her for not having told him the truth. Moira cannot find a lifesaver through her implicatures: she cannot deny that she intended to implicate that she did not commit the fraud, or that thinking that she did was as crazy as believing that she killed JFK. That is because denying those implicatures would entail denying that she intended to be ironic; and, if she was not intending to be ironic, then that would mean that she was actually intending to say that she killed JFK, and so committing herself to it, which is certainly implausible. Either she intended to communicate that she did not commit an embezzlement or she said that she killed JFK. And the second one is not even an option.^{13, 14}

Similarly, if I got to know that the farmer actually had a bad crop, I would confront her for having told me that she had a very good one. It seems implausible that either the metaphoric or hyperbolic speaker could deny such a determinate and strongly communicated implicature. In fact, if they were not intending to commit themselves to such an implicature, what would then be the point of uttering (12) or (13) in the first place? It is impossible that they intended to literally say that they had tomatoes coming out of their ears or that they had the best crop in a million years. The speakers did not commit themselves to the locutionary contents of their utterances and, so, it is in their implicatures where their utterances become cooperative. The speakers cannot exploit deniability and, thus, they are accountable for their implicatures as much as if they had said what they implicated.

The speaker, when using figurative language, is strongly committed to the implicatures she communicates –because she is not committed to anything else, so all the weight of her commitment settles on these implicatures. Thus, speakers who implicate something they believe to be false via figurative language do not have a way out from their responsibilities for believing in the truth of such implicatures –deniability is not an option here.¹⁵

Speakers using figurative language are committed to the implicatures of their utterances to a degree fairly equitable with the degree to which a speaker speaking literally commits herself to the locutionary content of her utterance. That is why I contend that speakers figuratively implicating false beliefs lie. In fact, “accusing a speaker of having lied is, after all, typically a high-stakes way of holding her accountable for what she has said” (Michaelson, 2016, p. 480). We also hold speakers accountable for what they have strongly implicated and, thus, considering those cases as lies offers a clearer picture of what a lie is.

3. Alternative approaches

The theories that advocate for a narrower view on lies and claim that only when we say something we believe to be false do we lie, have serious difficulties explaining cases of figurative lies. Saul is aware of this limitation:

¹² What a speaker communicates via irony is usually a group of more or less determined implicatures. However, the important thing is that it is mandatory that she implicated *something*, because her ironic utterance would be otherwise pointless. See Author (Garmendia and Korta, 2007, Garmendia, 2013).

¹³ Kapogianni (2018) tests whether different ironic strategies result in a difference in the strength of the ironic implicature –and therefore, in a difference regarding the difficulty to “cancel” such an implicature.

¹⁴ Weiner (2006) even claims that in the case of some ironic/sarcastic utterances, attempts to cancel the ironic implicature can only reinforce it. He gives the following example:

Suppose that Alice and Sarah are in a crowded train; Alice, who is obviously able-bodied, is sprawled across two seats, and Sarah is standing. Sarah says to Alice, ‘I’m curious as to whether it would be physically possible for you to make room for someone else to sit down.’ The implicature is that Alice should make room. (...) Suppose now that Sarah adds, ‘Not that you *should* make room; I’m just curious.’ This has the form of an explicit cancellation of the implicature. Nevertheless, the implicature is not cancelled. Sarah is still suggesting, even more rudely, that Alice should make room (Weiner, 2006, p. 128).

¹⁵ I believe that Meibauer was referring to this very idea when he said that “(...) applying the criterion of explicit cancellability to certain cases of implicature will lead to implausible results, for instance in cases of irony or certain indirect directives” (Meibauer, 2014, p. 109).

But after much reflection, I have become convinced that it is genuinely unclear how we should treat these kinds of cases, and that the best definition will be one that avoids passing judgement on them. (Saul, 2012, p. 16, p. 16)

She admits that we would intuitively judge these sorts of cases to be lies, but acknowledging the difficulty in handling them within her definition of lies, she includes a clause explicitly excluding the cases we are concerned about: “If the speaker is not the victim of linguistic error/malapropism or using metaphor, hyperbole, or irony, then they lie iff ...” (Saul, 2012, p. 19).

So Saul is aware of the limitation, but she acknowledges it and offers a definition of lies that doesn't include errors/malapropisms/irony/metaphor/hyperbole. That's a questionable move, as she is leaving out from her definition many cases that, as she herself admits, we would commonly consider to be lies. Metaphors, irony, and other figurative cases are pervasive in our everyday talk, and a definition that excludes them starts off with a big limitation.

I believe that an approach based on the speaker's commitments can do the job: we lie when we figuratively implicate something we believe to be false, because we are committed to these implicatures as much as if we had said them. Otherwise, let us remember that we don't take figurative speakers to be lying even if they might believe that the locutionary contents of their utterances are false; we don't take them to have lied, because we don't take them to have committed themselves to those locutionary contents. But, now, those figurative speakers appear to be committed to something else –to their implicatures. When they believe these implicatures to be false, the fairest thing seems to be to call them liars.

Dissociating himself from the saying-theories, Viebahn (2017) focuses on analyzing deceptive uses of figurative language, which he aptly terms “non-literal lies”. He claims that a definition of lies must encompass these cases, and that the theories that defend a saying-view fail to do so. With that I totally agree, as I have defended throughout this work. However, Viebahn advocates for an assertion-based account. According to him, a speaker lies when she asserts something that she believes to be false; in the case on non-literal speakers, they assert something other than what they say. I believe that the distinction between literal and non-literal uses can be better articulated in terms of commitment, as I have defended in the first section of this work. Viebahn himself explains that a commitment-based account of assertions would be a good fit for his definition of lies, so my account is very much in line with his take. Nonetheless, I posit that a clearer understanding of figurative language arises from the idea that the speaker makes as if to say the locutionary or literal content of the utterance and thereby implicate the intended figurative content.

My account coincides more closely with that of Meibauer's. He mentions the case of deceptive ironies, and brings up the idea that I have tried to develop in the previous section: implicatures in figurative language are very strong –so strong that it is impossible to deny them.

For instance, if Ken ironically says to Barbie *You are a fine friend* then Ken is heavily committed to his ironical remark. To be sure, Barbie will never forget what he has conveyed. (Meibauer, 2014, p. 108)

Following this thread, Meibauer assumes that speakers are committed to the truth of their conversational implicatures in the same way as they are committed to the truth of their assertions (Meibauer, 2014, p. 108). Although there exist slight disparities between his approach and mine, the principal objective of my endeavor in this work has been to uphold a position for which he has been a pioneering and steadfast advocate of.

Meibauer's claim that a speaker can lie via implicatures has received criticisms from the majority of authors who defend a saying-account of lies. Dynel is one of the authors who critically analyzes Meibauer's ideas; however, she provides an insightful perspective by hypothesizing that implicatures generated via figurative language could be classified as lies:

It may be the case that implicatures should not be approached collectively owing to their diversity. Treating all implicatures as deception/misleading but not lying may be a sweeping generalization, and a question arises if at least some implicatures deserve to be classified as lies. A hypothesis may be put forward that implicatures anchored in figures of speech which revolve around the floutings of the first maxim of Quality (irony, metaphor, hyperbole and meiosis/litotes) may count as lies. (Dynel, 2015, p. 327)

Dynel even points at the impossibility of denying these implicatures as the possible reason why we are inclined to count them as lies: “Consequently, the emerging implicatures will be primary meanings, as defined by Jaszczolt (2009) and, prototypically, the only communicated meanings. This is why, albeit not assertions per se, such implicatures could perhaps count as lies” (Dynel, 2015, p. 328). Although formulated in a slightly different way, this is certainly one of the main arguments that I have developed and articulated in this work, attempting to substantiate the claim that we sometimes lie without saying.

4. Conclusions

When we explain lies from a pragmatic standpoint, we aim to offer a theoretical explanation that fits well with common speakers' everyday use of the term. However, existing experimental studies reveal that speakers may not always be rigorous at distinguishing lies from other deceptive uses of language. Some examples are easily classified as lies, while others are positively discarded as such; certain instances, such as insincere implicatures or figurative lies, pose challenges in classification. A comprehensive account of lies should address these problematic cases –not by deciding whether it will consider such cases lies or not, but by explaining why these cases are more challenging to classify.

In this paper, I have advocated for a commitment-based approach that can address these challenges. A speaker lies whenever, by uttering a sentence, she commits herself to a content she believes to be false. Commitment is gradual, and in

some cases, we doubt whether the speaker is indeed committed to a content. A linguistic deceptive act will result doubtful in the extent that the speaker's commitment results doubtful in that case. By adopting a gradual approach to commitment, the boundary between lies and other deceptive acts becomes less clear-cut on the theoretical level; however, this should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness, as it aligns more closely with everyday conceptions of lying.

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None.

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