Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

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How do we disagree with a bald-faced liar?

We've grown so hopelessly accustomed to journalism reduced to daily fact checking, and politics reduced to fact checking reduced to daily white noise that we forget that there is more to daily public life than endlessly correcting the record. Reality still exists behind our current mess. Cohen's congressional testimony may well have been a lie, told by a liar, coached by another liar. But the truth is still knowable, and verifiable—it's just going to take us a whole lot of manual labor to get everyone there.

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The problem

Sorensen on bald-faced lies

• Fact that speaker is lying can be common-knowledge:
  • e.g. DJT on 4 January 2019:
    I never said I was going to build a concrete wall.
  • Prima facie, we condemn those lies more severely than 'disguised' lies.
  • The wrongness of lying springs from intent to deceive; this intent is missing in bald-faced lies.
  • The apparent intensity of our disapproval of bald-faced lies is a "rhetorical illusion". (Sorensen 2007).

My view: the disapproval of bald-faced lies is not a rhetorical illusion; it is part of our disagreement with bald-faced liars.

Sorensen interprets 'intent to deceive' too narrowly.
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Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

Frankie Five Angels

Pantangelli is called in as a surprise witness in a senate hearing to testify against Michael Corleone. Frankie was under government protection and had made an agreement with government officials to tell the court of Michael’s crimes. In order to prevent this, Michael flies Frankie’s brother Vincenzo—mafioso and caretaker of Frankie’s children—over from Sicily to attend the hearings. On the day of the hearing, Frankie turns around and locks eyes with Vincenzo, which reminds him that by testifying against Michael he puts his children at risk. Subsequently, Frankie goes against agreement with government officials by claiming under oath to have no knowledge of any wrongdoings committed by Michael Corleone.
In 2003, the journalist Åsne Seierstad was shown around Iraq by a minder, Takhlef, who worked in the Information Ministry. “Everything [President Saddam Hussein] did in the past was good, and everything he will do in the future is good,” says Takhlef. “How can you be so sure of that?” asks Seierstad. Glaring, Takhlef answers, “I know it as a result of my belief in the party and his leadership.” (adapted from Sorensen 2007: 251)
A student is caught cheating on an exam. His professor fails him. The student appeals to the Dean, who has final authority to assign the grade. The Dean knows the student was cheating, but fearing lawsuits, has a firm policy of not upholding a cheating charge unless the student confesses. The student knows all of this, including the Dean’s policy. In an official proceeding, the student says to the Dean, “I didn’t cheat on the exam.” (Carson 2006: 290)
Servant Igor

If servant Igor makes the untruthful statement to unwelcome visitor Damian, “Madam is not at home,” without the intention that Damian believe it to be true that she is not home, but with the intention that Damian believe it to be true that it is inconvenient for Madam to see Damian now, something that Igor believes to be true, then... for Igor to intend that Damian believe this, it must be the case that Igor believes that this is how Damian understands “Madam is not at home.” (Mahon 2015) Shiffrin 2014: Polite untruths may be said to be examples of “falsifications but not lies,” since the person “says just what etiquette demands”
The pathological liar

A liar may have a pathetic wish to produce belief without any hope of fulfillment – this is often strong enough to cause a man to say what he knows is not true; a “pathological lie,” produced perhaps by the need to boast; a person who does not mind if others are deceived and might be pleased if they were, but is not trying very hard to make them believe what he says. (Isenberg 1964)
Bald-faced lies are a problem for some theories of assertion

Communicative intention theory:
Bald-faced lies are a problem for some theories of assertion

**Communicative intention theory:**

- $S$ asserts that $p$ iff $S$ expresses
  - (i) the belief that $p$, and
  - (ii) the intention that $H$ believe that $p$.

(see e.g. Bach and Harnish for a version; Pagin 2014 for discussion)
Bald-faced lies are a problem for some theories of lying
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- **Naïve View** A speaker $S$ lies to hearer $H$ iff $S$ asserts/says that $p$, and
  (i) $S$ believes $p$ to be false, and
  (ii) $S$ intends to deceive $H$ about $p$.

(versions of view defended by Bernard Williams 2002, Harry G. Frankfurt 2005)
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- **Disagreement in state:** $A$ and $B$ disagree about $p$ only if $A$ accepts $p$ and $B$ rejects $p$. (Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009, MacFarlane 2007).
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- **Disagreement in activity:** How can $A$ and $B$ disagree in activity as to whether $p$ when it is common ground that $p$ is not true? How can they disagree if $A$ does not have the intention to deceive?
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

Are bald-faced lies lies?

- To insist that in each case of a bald-faced lie there is an intent to deceive about \( p \);
- To insist that the examples show that an intent to deceive about \( p \) is not essential to lying by asserting/saying that \( p \).

I want to discuss a third possibility:
- To insist that bald-face lies are not lies, because they are not assertions.
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Ishani Maitra

Ishani Maitra takes real bald-faced lies as those where there is no intent to deceive wrt what is said.

She wants to rule out cases of some overt "undisguised" lies, what Sorensen (2010) calls knowledge-lies:

A speaker asserts $p$ even though

(i) he knows not-$p$,

(ii) he knows that his audience knows (i), and so on.

But he can still intend to undermine their confidence in not-$p$ by continuing to insist on $p$, which will be enough to shake another's confidence, which may be enough for deception, as in gaslighting.

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Maitra’s constitutive rule of assertion
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- **Evidence-Responsiveness Rule**: If a speaker $S$’s utterance of $U$ is not sufficiently responsive to her (total) evidence that bears on $p$, she does not assert $p$ via uttering $U$. 
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(4) $S$ and $H$ are aware of above (1)-(3).
“You lie!” are not criticisms of fiction, but of assertions
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- But imagine an actor interrupts his performance on stage. People in the audience are chatting or coughing loudly.
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• Whatever actor says when he breaks character, the audience cannot say he is finally telling the truth.
DARVO: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender.
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- The same media that is engaged in daily fact-checking is dishonest, the lying *New York Times*, crooked Media, the fake *Washington Post*, Trump’s go-to insults when talking about the press.
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar
— Are bald-faced lies lies?
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Contrast Igor, Student, pathological liar.
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Criticism of walk-back of assertoric illocutionary force
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- If the bald-faced lies-are-fiction was a correct theory, it should be ok to state this truth.
- But we condemn walk-backs of the assertoric illocutionary force of a bald-faced lie,
Scaramucci and Trump
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- Trump tweeted Dec. 12 that he would have a news conference “in the near future to discuss the business, Cabinet picks and all other topics of interest.” He originally wrote in a series of Nov. 30 tweets that he would have “a major news conference” with his adult children “to discuss the fact that I will be leaving my great business in total in order to fully focus on running the country in order to MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (Politico, Dec. 20 2016)
Lying about assertoric force #1
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

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Lying about assertoric force #1

- Anthony Scaramucci: *Trump’s claims are to be taken symbolically and not literally*

Figure: https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-symbolically-anthony-scaramucci-232848
Giuliani: lying about assertoric force #2
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- Giuliani: My recent statements about discussions during the 2016 campaign between Michael Cohen and then-candidate Donald Trump about a potential Trump Moscow ‘project’ were hypothetical and not based on conversations I had with the president.

Figure: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/21/us/politics/giuliani-trump-tower-russia.html
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

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What are we condemning?

Laura Caponetto (2018), “Undoing things with words”, draws from Austin's distinction between illocutionary effects and perlocutionary effects. Illocutionary effects are determined by force and intrinsic to felicity conditions, automatically enter into context.

- Perlocutionary effects are unpredictable and independent of felicity of act.

What we condemn relates to illocutionary effects. We can interpret the condemnation in two ways:

(a) Is it that we condemn the lie about the assertoric illocutionary force of the previous utterance?

(b) Is it that we condemn the cowardly walk back, of the assertoric force?
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Caponetto on undoing things with words

• Annulments Apply to fatally infelicitous acts, mistakenly taken as felicitous and whose deontic effects were deemed to be binding due to the ignorance of the involved parties (contrast annulled marriage).

• Retractions' internal goal is to cancel the deontic updates generated by some past illocution, to render those effects no longer valid (and, thus, causally ineffective. This requires the original speech-act to have taken effect.

• Amendments Speakers may alter the force of their own acts within the same type, e.g. constatives: "P..., well at least I guess that P".

They differ in normative function: retraction is a way to cancel the illocutionary effects of one's words, whereas amendment is a way to alter their degree of strength. An annulment is a recognition that an act was invalidly performed.
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They could have amended the previous act (Trump's, or Giuliani's own).

But one can't amend someone else's actions, so Scaramucci can't be doing that.

Giuliani gives it away.

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They are lying about the illocutionary force of their speech acts, or Trump's.

Either way, the amendment and the lie require the initial speech act to be an assertion.
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Taking stock

- Bald faced lies are lies;
- Bald-faced lies are assertions;
- It is not essential to lying that the speaker intends to deceive the audience;
- But lies, and bald-faced lies, are particularly suited to deceive. How?
- And excluding polite or courteous lies, bald-faced lies are reprehensible.
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Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

Taking stock

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Taking stock

The thousand blades of Aegon’s enemies
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- Petyr ‘Littlefinger’ Baelish: *The realm. Do you know what the realm is? It’s the thousand blades of Aegon’s enemies, a story we agree to tell each other over and over, until we forget that it’s a lie.*

George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*
Lying is the message. It’s not just that both Putin and Trump lie, it is that they lie in the same way and for the same purpose: blatantly, to assert power over truth itself. . . . After the election, the media’s ability to do its job has been undermined even further. The standard model of reporting requires journalists to give the president-elect say in any news story about him. Thus we now have a series of stories in which reported facts are juxtaposed with a quoted Tweet that dismisses or contradicts the facts themselves. (Gessen 2016)
Totalitarian propaganda is overwhelming and inconsistent. It bombards you with mutually contradictory claims, which often come packaged in doublethink pairs... Timothy Snyder cited more recent examples: “There is no such thing as a Ukrainian language” goes with “Ukrainian authorities are forcing everyone to speak Ukrainian”... Far from promoting a single guiding ideology, this kind of propaganda robs you of your bearings. The regime gains a monopoly on reality, and can make any claim whatsoever.
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Hypothesis for how “the liar robs you of your bearings”
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The speaker establishes his dominance through a **blatant disregard for assertoric cooperative norms**, while exploring and abusing the proper mechanisms of assertion itself.
Hypothesis for how “the liar robs you of your bearings”

The speaker establishes his dominance through a blatant disregard for assertoric cooperative norms, while exploring and abusing the proper mechanisms of assertion itself. Treating a bald-faced lie as a kind of fiction cannot explain this abuse, nor why its moral condemnation is justified.
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

- An abuse of assertoric norms
- Abuse of conversational maxims

Diagnosis

- The abusive speaker exploits assertoric conversational norms, while blatantly violating and abusing those very same norms.
- Close to Fallis's 2009 hypothesis relying on Grice's quality norm of conversation assert only what you believe is true.
- The liar violates this norm.
- To operate under the assumption that the bald-faced liar is not exploiting assertoric norms is to grant the bald-faced liar power over the conversational record, and indirectly, power over us.
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How do you disagree with a bald-faced liar?

What does disagreement require?

• Disagreement with a bald-faced liar requires not only reinstating the truth – fact-checking.
• It requires resistance to the accommodation of the abusive speaker’s assertion without flagging it as a lie.
• Speech acts make requirements on context, but contexts are not only sets of propositions accepted as part of the common ground.
• Contexts are structured by commitments to propositions under different illocutionary forces (or different modes) (Marques & García-Carpintero 2019, García-Carpintero 2015).
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How do you disagree with a bald-faced liar?

State disagreement

Disagreement in conative attitudes
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

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Disagreement in conative attitudes

- The bald-faced liar puts forward a proposition $P$ as asserted, i.e., as a *bona fide* assertion.
Disagreement in conative attitudes

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Disagreement in conative attitudes

- The bald-faced liar puts forward a proposition $P$ as asserted, i.e., as a *bona fide* assertion.
- A speaker and a hearer disagree in attitude when they have incompatible intentions concerning permissible context updates.
- The bald-faced liar and the hearer disagree in attitude, it’s a disagreement based on the fact that the speaker made an assertion that $p$, although they don’t have a doxastic disagreement about $p$’s truth or falsity.
Disagreement with a Bald-faced Liar

How do you disagree with a bald-faced liar?

Disagreement in act

- A speaker and a hearer disagree in activity if and when they act on these incompatible intentions concerning permissible context updates.

- The student wants to be on the record as having asserted his innocence. The dean and the professor don't want that to be on the record.

- Takhlef wants to be on the record as having asserted the goodness of Saddam's regime. A journalist, or a human rights observer, might not want that to be on public records, because it's not true.

- Pantangelli wants to be on the record as having asserted his ignorance of Michael Corleone's crimes. The FBI and the US Senate don't.
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- Bald-faced lies as fiction-making can’t explain this.
- Bald-faced liars want (a) their utterances to be taken as assertions, and that they become part of context as asserted.
References and THANK YOU!