

Bald-faced lies and parafictional beliefs

Bald-faced lies. When Clinton and Tolkien respectively said (1) and wrote (2):

- (1) I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky
- (2) Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon

both stated something they believed to be false. Yet, there is a strong intuitive difference between these two speech acts; Whereas (1) is a lie, (2) is a fictional statement (i.e. part of a fictional narrative). An intuitive way of phrasing the difference is to analyse lying, contrary to fiction telling, as involving an intention to deceive (e.g. Augustine, 1952; Williams, 2002). A well-known counterexample to this definition of lying is what Sorensen (2007) has dubbed the ‘bald-faced lie’, i.e. a statement that involves no intention to deceive but that we do intuitively call a lie. For instance, in *The Godfather II*, Pentangeli testifies in court:

- (3) I never knew no Godfather

Pentangeli thereby ensures that mafioso Corleone is not convicted and Pentangeli’s family remains safe. However, it is common knowledge in the courtroom that Pentangeli did know the Godfather. Hence, even though we judge that Pentangeli lied, (3) cannot involve an intention to deceive anyone.

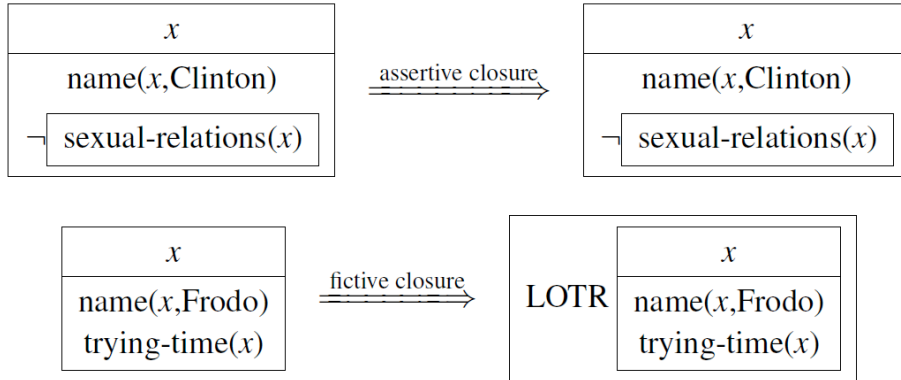
An unofficial common ground account. In response, Stokke (2013) has proposed a definition of lying that does not involve intention to deceive. He makes use of Stalnaker’s (1970) concept of common ground (i.e. the set of mutually shared presuppositions between speaker and addressee). In Stokke’s ‘unofficial common ground account’, lies and assertions are modelled as proposals to update the ‘official’ common ground. Fictional statements are modelled as proposals to update or create an ‘unofficial’ common ground related to the relevant fiction (e.g. (2) is a proposal to update the *The Lord of the Rings* unofficial common ground with the proposition that Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon).

Because Stokke counts bald-faced lies as genuine lies and analyses lies as proposals to update the official common ground, he switches to a notion of official common ground that is doxastically neutral; Pentangeli does not intend that anyone *believes* that he knew no Godfather but instead intends that this becomes commonly *accepted*. I argue that this is not a convincing characterization of the bald-faced lie; Pentangeli does not care if anyone somehow accepts (3). Rather, Pentangeli wants it to be on the record that he said the right things in court. His bald-faced lie is thus ultimately focused on making it common belief that *according to the account that Pentangeli gave in court, he knew no Godfather*.

A workspace account. I propose a Stalnakerian analysis of lies, bald-faced lies and fictional statements according to which bald-faced lies are more akin to fictional statements than to stereotypical lies: The ‘workspace account’ (Anonymous, 2017). This account models the distinction between fictional and ‘parafictional’ statements, i.e. statements about the content of a fictional story that are prefixed by a (covert or overt) ‘In story S’-operator (e.g. (4)):

(4) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo lives in the Shire

All statements – fictional statements, parafictional statements, assertions and (bald-faced) lies – are modelled as proposals to first update a temporal common ground: the ‘workspace’. At the end of the discourse, ‘assertive’ or ‘fictive closure’ is performed; The content of the updated workspace is added to the common ground as belief (for non-fiction) or as parafictional belief (for fiction). Below, a simplified representation of assertive closure of (1) and fictive closure of (2) in the DRT style formalism (Kamp, 1981) of common grounds:



So, as soon as I stop entertaining the propositions of *The Lord of the Rings*, I stop updating the workspace and instead update the common ground with parafictional beliefs concerning *The Lord of the Rings*. Parafictional statements (e.g. (4)) are analysed as plain assertions (about the content of some fictional work) and trigger assertive closure, i.e. they are proposals to update the common ground with the parafictional content of the workspace directly.

I have argued that Pentangeli’s bald-faced lie (3) is aimed at making it common belief that “according to the account that Pentangeli gave in court, he knew no Godfather”. Crucially, this is a *parafictional* belief. Hence, as a speech act, the bald-faced lie has a stronger resemblance to a fictional statement than to a stereotypical lie. Lies trigger assertive closure, i.e. the content of the workspace (e.g. that Clinton did not have sexual relations with Lewinsky) is added directly to the common ground; There is no parafictional belief formation. Fictional statements and bald-faced lies trigger fictive closure, i.e. the content of the workspace (i.e. respectively, that Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon and that Pentangeli knew no Godfather) is added to the common ground as parafictional belief (i.e. respectively under the ‘In *The Lord of the Rings*’-operator and the ‘In Pentangeli’s story’-operator). Hence, telling a bald-faced lie is more like telling a fictional story than like telling an actual lie because bald-faced lies result in parafictional belief formation.

References: **Augustine**. (1952)[395] ‘Lying’ in *Treatises on various subjects* • **Kamp, H.** (1981) ‘A theory of truth and semantic representation’ in *Formal methods in the study of language* Part 1 • **Sorensen, R.** (2007) ‘Bald-faced lies! Lying without the intent to deceive’ in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 • **Stalnaker, R.C.** (1970) ‘Pragmatics’ in *Synthese* 22(1-2) • **Stokke, A.** (2013) ‘Lying and asserting’ in *Journal of Philosophy* 110(1) • **Williams, B.** (2002) *Truth and truthfulness*