
Deception and euphemisms as a linguistic strategy in the context of (political) discourse

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Abstract

The paper discusses lying as an ordinal function of language in the context of political discourse. To begin with, the phenomenon of lying is regarded as an ordinary linguistic behavior with a specific function for the speaking individual. Based on a variety of empirical data, the aforementioned function is thought to be a certain evolutionary strategy that provides concrete advantages (to individuals).

Keywords: deception, discourse, political, strategy, euphemism.

Truth and falsity in language

Regarding the truth-falsity dichotomy in the context of language, the question can thus be asked: is falsity something inherent and naturally determined in language, or can it be seen as a specific linguistic strategy that has specific evolutionary benefits for the speaking agent? (and in this case too, representing a naturally determined phenomenon). In this regard, we consider the phenomenon of lying as a kind of evolutionary strategy taken in the context of political behavior (discourse).

Within this context, lying is defined as one of the functions of language. First of all, the phenomenon of lying is considered as an ordinary linguistic behavior that has a specific function for the speaking individual, giving him/her a certain advantage.

Generally speaking, consideration should be given to how language shapes social reality and the role that lies play in the aforementioned process. Language can create (new) social realities to the extent that it can recognize correctness and place it in the proper context. They can create illusions in individuals, which are usually of a destructive nature (C. Drummond, 2020)

In addition, illusions can be: psychological-philosophical, social. (Illusion: distorted, false perception of reality as a result of a fallacy of the senses.) This is where the difference between an illusion

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and a delusion occurs: an illusion is a perceptual disorder, while a delusion is a belief disorder.

Question: What is the role of language in generating psychological-social illusions, and specifically, what is the role of lies as (certain) linguistic strategies?

Before trying to answer the above-mentioned question, we continue our discussion with the definition of a lie: any statement (A), that is intentionally false (B), and uttered with the intent to deceive (C).

A lie is a certain assertion:

- A lie is a conscious mistake
- Its purpose is to mislead
- Intent to mislead is a necessary element of lying. A false statement without intent to mislead is not a lie.

Lying generally serves the purpose of gaining social advantages, which suggests the capacity to take advantage of other people when there is disagreement. By telling lies, people avoid the truth, obfuscate information, inflate certain facts, and cast doubt on others. Pro- and anti-social lies are distinguished in relation to social behavior. Therefore, not all lying is defined as an antisocial act. The purpose of pro-social lies is not to harm other individuals in any way. (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Other types of lies can cause different levels of social losses. (Vrij, 2008). When lying, a liar misrepresents something (a fact) in order to gain some advantage that he/she would not otherwise gain.

It is impossible to determine at which stage of evolution *Homo Sapiens* developed the ability to lie as a species. However, it is possible to assume that the origin of the language, with its syntactic and compositional properties, made it possible to develop the mentioned ability to a significant extent. Thinking with counterfactual logic can create the basis for manipulation and lying in humans in general. Counterfactual thinking focuses on facts that did not happen but could have. At this time, the brain segments responsible for inhibitory control and working memory are localized (Briazu, Walsh, Deeprouse, & Ganis, 2017). Mechanisms related to lies and manipulation are somewhat correlated with ontogenetic development (Debey, Schryver, Logan, Suchotzki, & Verschuere, 2015).

Language may have become more sophisticated as a result of lying. The expectation of cooperation among individuals led to the adaptive significance of evaluating others' intentions within the framework of effective communication. Increased linguistic recursion became a flexible way to better coordinate disparate viewpoints, which conferred a communicative advantage to both those who were more likely to lie and those who were more adept at spotting lies.

Language has the power to direct creative thought. Furthermore, lying may also entail the creation of alternate scenarios; language derivation serves this purpose. This theory holds that there are pro-social lies that support group cooperation. (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015).

Although the modern understanding of the subject considers that the evolutionary process favored the ability to detect lies in individuals, as well as the ability to detect them in the context of interpersonal relationships, it cannot be assumed that (today) humans possess an effective ability to detect lies (Moi & Shanks, 2015).

In general, discourse and related linguistic strategies can be considered as a means of evolutionary advantage, when an individual tries to use his/her linguistic abilities to influence others and accordingly, to gain evolutionary advantage. Essentially, such strategies manifest themselves in power interactions and manipulations, with language serving as the primary means of gaining an advantage. In the context of discourse manipulation, it will be interesting to see how far it can be considered an evolutionary strategy with a specific purpose.

The expression of falsehood in humans as a species may primarily stem from our capacity for counterfactual reasoning. Counterfactual thinking focuses on facts that haven't happened yet but could happen.

Here we will touch upon the phenomenon of lying in (political) discourse as one of its characteristics. As previously stated, thinking is characterized by errors, which are involuntary distortions in reasoning. However, we must investigate whether errors in speech, and thus in thinking, are objectively involuntary or can be consciously made by the (speaking) agent. In relation to all of the above, we must ask the following questions: are lies (as factual inconsistencies in political discourse) a conscious evolutionary strategy or unconscious cognitive errors?

Here, one has to define the term Distortion - Changing facts, perceptions, thoughts or intentions in such a way that they do not correspond to a generally accepted explanation or generally accepted perception. Distortion can be either a conscious or an unconscious process, or a combination of both.

As the given definition shows, distortions can be both conscious and unconscious (unintentional). We proceed from the second claim and consider distortions in relation to political discourse in its own context. Moreover, based on the reviewed literature, we associate the deliberate distortion of facts or reasoning by the speaking agent with lying as one of the functions of verbal communication. Here, lying is defined as a secondary function of language, which has a specific evolutionary purpose.

Those that constitute errors in thinking or patterned distortions in speech that occur systematically in certain situations should be considered cognitive distortions. One kind of mental behavior that has evolved through evolution is cognitive distortions. Some of them serve an adaptive purpose by facilitating quicker decision-making and more efficient action. Others are probably the result of using previously learned skills improperly or lacking in the necessary cognitive abilities.

Lie, as a secondary function of language

The primary biological function of human language, according to some, is to deceive and manipulate competitors. Lying can be used for both prosocial (strengthening social bonds) and antisocial purposes.

In the context of language evolution, this distinction is often referred to as the distinction between primary and secondary functions (Origi and Sperber, 2000). According to a number of researchers, most animal communication systems evolved primarily for the function of deception/manipulation. (Dawkins and Krebs, 1978; Krebs and Dawkins, 1984).

According to this hypothesis, the speaker (signal transmitter) may get a benefit by disrupting the normative relationship between the signal receiver and reality, while the signal receiver himself receives a significant loss as a result of such error-distortions (Searcy and Nowicki, 2005). According to the same perspective, communication is defined as an interaction within which the transmitted information produces functional results mainly for its transmitter: "Communication occurs when the transmitter of information affects the sensory organs of the recipient of information in such a way that the behavior of the latter (receiver) changes in favor of the former" (Dawkins and Krebs, 1978, p. 283).

Here is a more detailed elaboration of deceptive behavior(s): Tactical lie - when trying to hide something, action or feeling. Tactical lying is defined as "a habitual type of agent behavior that results in a second individual misperceiving the actions of the first as benefiting the agent (the first)." In the case of tactical lying, false (warning) signals are sent to seize food and reproductive opportunities (N. Oesch, 2016). In our opinion, this definition can be applied to a political behavior, in general.

Thus, there are prosocial lies (typically used to build/maintain social bonds) and antisocial lies. The function of lies is to manipulate competitors, to influence them. Our interest here is the role of antisocial lies in political discourse in general.

The ultimate goal of linguistic manipulations is to gain an advantage over (political) rivals and assert power, and asserting power means access to material resources.

Therefore, language/discourse is a specific type of resource that politicians use to gain power/access

to material resources.

Euphemistic language in politics

In our opinion, (political) euphemisms are one of the best examples of linguistic manipulation within the context of political discourse.

Below we will examine the use of euphemisms in political discourse. One can argue, that this is a kind of linguistic practice/strategy aimed at specific political-ideological tasks. First of all, let us give a simple definition of the term euphemism. Euphemism – a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.

Political euphemisms - Military/Economic/Environmental:

War - a special military operation

- Explosion - minor blow
- Airplane crash - unplanned emergency (hard) landing
- Economic recession - negative growth
- Fire – controlled spots of smoke
- Retreat/flight - radical reduction of military activities; goodwill gestures; regrouping.
- Military Objects: - Civilian / infrastructure - indiscriminate and overwhelming artillery attacks
- Evacuation – Resettlement
- “Environmental Enhancement.” - when it is paved for visitor parking, concrete picnic tables, a highway that took out an entire neighborhood and nearly one hundred, century-old live oak trees.
- Even-Aged Management - When all the trees are cut down at the same time. “clearcutting.”
- Overmature – clearcutting.
- Ozone nonattainment area: A smoggy place

It should also be noted, that each particular type of discourse has its own type of euphemisms. What is even more interesting, is that even scientific terms may have their euphemistic counterparts. One example of this linguistic phenomenon is the term *Global Warming*, which later has been substituted with the term *Climate Change*.

Summary

It should not be difficult to see that the direct purpose of euphemisms is to distort the receivers' perception of reality. This directly confirms our above statement that euphemisms and deception in the context of political discourse are a kind of linguistic manipulation applied by politicians in order to

obtain specific benefits/advantages. Therefore, for practical purposes, it is necessary to decipher the hidden semantics of euphemisms used by politicians - what do they (euphemisms) conceal? What is the meaning behind them?

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