A SOCIETY OF TRUTH: WHY DECEPTION IS NOT AN ACCEPTABLE USE OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Society is built on communication, which is the union of individuals in truth. Truth is central to communication; without it, people have no commonality and society is impossible. Because of the centrality of truth to human society, offenses against truth (such as lying and deception) cannot be socially maintained. Although deception can be difficult or impossible to detect empirically, all of its forms are universally rejected and punished by society. People expect truth, indicating that truth is the norm of communication. The prevalence and ambiguity of deception cannot negate its essential inadequacy as communication.

Keywords: Deception, truth, lying, social norms

Introduction

The term "communication" implies and necessitates some act of union between people with regard to truth. When one person transmits a concept he holds in his mind to another person, who receives it, that is communication. This action relies on truth, which is the "convention crucially underpinning the ability to communicate" (Lewis, 1969). Humans, unlike other animals, converse and share in common rather than operating based on compatible instinctual drive. Because of this, "truth seems to be the cornerstone of the society in general and the communicative practice in particular" (Galasiński, 2000, 2). It is the essential element of cooperation and interaction. Man cannot trust in or advance with his neighbor unless he can believe that his neighbor speaks the truth. Universally, human society forbids all forms of lying, deceit, mendacity, criminality, and the like, "on the grounds of both morality and the potential success of communicative interaction" (Galasiński, 2000, 2). Every society (and, in his most natural or instinctual state, every man) demands that her members be honest because it is imperative for fidelity and cooperation within interpersonal human relationships.

I.

From time to time, a person will convey a message which is different than the one that he intended and contrary to what he knows to be true. Such messages are not considered deceptive or untrue; instead, they are regarded as mere errors of speech (Buller & Burgoon, 1994, 191-223). When a speaker intentionally communicates a message which is not what he knows to be true, however, his message is referred to as deception or a lie (Galasiński, 2000, 18). A lie is defined as a statement which is in itself misleading and is intended to be so by the speaker (Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosethnal in Berkowitz, 1981, 1-59). Such communication is straightforward: the speaker understands a true concept, but wishes the listener to grasp a false one. He therefore defiles the concept by altering the message so that it is not completely true or does not completely fit the context of the conversation. Thus, the listener is led to believe completely a direct statement which in the context of a larger conversation is simply not true.

Deception, on the other hand, has a more ambiguous definition. Consensus in literature and communication holds that in order for a message to be classified as deceptive, the speaker must have the intention of misleading the listener (Zuckerman, DePaulo, & Rosenthal in Berkowitz, 1981, 1-59). Following this, all lies may be classified as deceptive communication. The converse is not necessarily true since lies must be outright statements which are not true, while deception includes any communication transmitted in order to induce false beliefs. This includes aforementioned untrue statements (lies), but also omissions or failures to correct untrue information and statements made which are true but neglect defining or contextual elements that would prevent the listener from drawing a false conclusion (Galasiński, 2000, 19). Deception, then, includes a broad spectrum of communications, which makes it both difficult to define and difficult to detect.

Deception is, "at the core of noncooperation" (Galasiński, 2000, 115). The quintessential conceptualization of deception is seen in lying. Though lying is only one minor subset of deception, it is by far the most punishable. A major reason for this is that while it is relatively simple to determine whether someone knew the truth about something before telling lies about it, "it is impossible to find out empirically whether a speaker did or did not attempt to be deceptive" (Galasiński, 2000, 114), making it impossible to determine whether the speaker was actually deceiving or simply incorrectly reporting something he believed to be true. Furthermore, deception is "almost continually" present in human communication (Galasiński, 2000, 115). Because the classification of a specific statement as deceptive hinges on the intentions of the speaker, it is impossible to

determine certainly whether a statement made by another was or was not deceptive.

In a situation where accurate and complete communication is especially important (such as in the situation of a legal witness), special consideration is given to the fact that a person might lie, omit, or misrepresent some occurrence, which could have adverse effects beyond mere miscommunication. In ordinary interaction, however, one naturally assumes that whomever he is speaking with is telling the truth (Robinson, 1996). The listener is aware that the speaker could easily lie or misrepresent whatever information he is conveying, but customarily assumes that he is telling the truth. Typically, the listener does not even consciously consider that the speaker could be lying or attempt to verify his claims. Ordinary interactions (where one does not question that the other person is speaking the truth) lead people to develop a *truth bias*, that is, the assumption or "taking for granted" that others always mean what they say (Buller & Burgoon, 1996, 203-242). This bias makes everyday communication quicker and simpler while official, certain communication seems more foreign.

The prevalence of the natural human truth bias in interpersonal interaction speaks to the common opinion that communication should be holistic and truthful. If deception and lying were publicly accepted as norms in communication, witnesses would not be sworn to honesty and people would not unconcernedly and totally believe one another in everyday communication.   In reality, truthfulness is a *de facto* element of communication. In keeping with this, "a liar is normally viewed as doing something morally wrong" (Galasiński, 2000, 115).   Outright lying is condemned by society not only on religious grounds of violating the eighth commandment (Barnes, 1994), but even more so because, "a liar is someone who undermines the foundation on which human communication is built—the convention that we normally tell the truth" (Galasiński, 2000, 115). Someone who lies can be found out because it can be determined empirically whether a statement of his is false as well as whether he ought to have known the truth. He can be—and often is—tried and punished, if only at the very legalistic level of perjury (Galasiński, 2000, 115).

Although the intention of deception cannot be extrinsically determined (and thus cannot be penalized) with regard to a specific statement, the intrinsic pedagogy of deceptive communication can be examined. Deception is closely related to manipulation. Manipulation, as defined by Puzynina, is, "an attempt to affect the target in such a way that her or his behavior/action is an instrument of attaining the goals of the manipulator, who acts without using force but in such a way that the target does not know the goal of the manipulator's action" (Puzniya, 1992). Following this, deceptive conversation would utilize a combination of true

and/or false statements, as well as the inferences of natural language to prompt in the target some belief which the target does not identify with the manipulator. Puzniya regarded deception as essentially, "a type of linguistic manipulation, that is, manipulation by means of texts of natural language operating in the area of the truth and falsity of propositions" (Puzniya, 1992).

Puzniya's definition of manipulation, as it applies to deception, shows that although deceptive communication often involves lies from the speaker and false belief in the listener, these elements are not essential to the deceptive-manipulative act. So long as the speaker intends to deceive and manipulate, both the means and the end of whatever conversation he has may be pure of outright lying. However, deception naturally involves some form of non-truth. This exists in the mind and intentions of the deceiver, even if nowhere else (Galasiński, 2000, 21).

Persuasion, like deceptive manipulation, is interested in compliance-gaining. Both, "are attempts at discursive representation," and, "can be seen as strategies that language users employ in laying out, or imposing, a preferred version of reality" (Galasiński, 2000, 21). The distinction between them is that deception is a subset of persuasion, which itself is a subset of manipulation, much like lies are a subset of one's broader attempt at deception. The persuader, as a manipulator, "sets out to induce a belief or attitude or, indeed, action on the part the addressee, and does it also without the addressee's realizing it" (Puzniya, 1992). However, the persuader has a particular method for causing his aim to come about, while the manipulator does not necessarily. He constructs a value system, through which he leads the target to conclude that some options or actions are "good," whereas others are "bad." In deception, these labels are narrowed to "true" and "false." The real difference between persuasion and manipulation is that the manipulator may use any means, any authority, and any method toward the discursive representation he desires in the target; the persuader appeals only to the authority of whatever is "better" and uses a definite, limited system to compel the target to move toward the same end (Galasiński, 2000, 21).

Outside of outright persuasive and manipulative statements, deception can occur through inference and implication. This is most commonly recognized in the phenomena of leading questions (Galasiński, 2000, 21). An experiment performed by Elizabeth Loftus and coworkers evidenced that when participants were asked a question about an event they experienced which contained elements that were not present in the original event, their response (and their memory) incorporated the false elements and used them to form conclusions (Loftus, 1979). A similar experiment showed that the alteration in emphasis of value of a single word (in this case, *hit* versus *smashed*) changed how participants regarded the occurrence of the event (Loftus and Palmer, 1974). Other experiments about police

lineups(Malpass & Divine, 1981), child abuse remembered as an adult (Loftus, 1993), and post event witness questioning at crime scenes (Chan, Thomas, & Bulevich, 2009) have shown that even slight inferences and implications in questions can influence and even modify the memories and ideas of the people being questioned.

These are all excellent examples of deception, because they follow the deformative pattern of deceptive communication. In the aforementioned instances of manipulation, persuasion, and questioning, the deceiver began with two concepts. The first was the true reality of whatever situation he wished the other to be deceived about. The second was a distortion of the first; this one was the concept which he wished the other to hold as true and to act upon. This was represented (or misrepresented, as the case may be) to the target not as it really was (that is, a maligned copy of the first, true concept), but as that which the target needed or wanted to know (the undefiled first concept). If the manipulation, persuasion, or directed questioning were carried out efficiently, then it caused the target to perceive the false concept as if it were the true concept, accept it, and indicate belief in it. Because the listener received the misinformation as the speaker intended, the interaction is classified as deception.

Conclusion

Deception, though prevalent in language and especially in the coercive efforts of those bent on manipulation, is not limited to verbal or linguistic communication. In itself, deception is simply the attempt and promoting a false concept; therefore, it can be found in, "any symbolic activity of human beings" (Galasiński, 2000, 116). In every social atmosphere, "deception in human relations is not only abundant but normal" (Aitchison, 1996). However, the prevalence and acceptance of deception as a social norm cannot overcome the fact that it is intrinsically disordered and incomplete as a method of communication. Deception may become widely accepted—it may even become expected—but it will not replace truth in human communication. "Every lie contains a homage to the truth" (Tischner, 1990); that is, without some concept of truth no communication has value. In the same way, a lie or a line of deceptive manipulation is only believed because the target holds that it is true. The target expects the truth, and without some fragments of truth the deception is not believable and is cast out. In the same way, if deception departs from truthful norms (i.e. if it is not coherent) it will not be seen as communication at all (Tischner, 1990). In other words, without truth, even deception ceases to be.

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