

Lying with presuppositions

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1. Introduction

It is widely held that all lies are assertions: the traditional definition of lying entails that, in order to lie, speakers have to assert something they believe to be false. It is also widely held that assertion contrasts with presupposition and, in particular, that one cannot assert something by presupposing it. Together, these views imply that speakers cannot lie with presuppositions – a view that Andreas Stokke (2016, 2017, 2018) has recently explicitly defended. The aim of this paper is to argue that speakers can lie with presuppositions, and to discuss some of the implications this outcome has for current research on lying, assertion and presupposition.

To begin with, I will introduce lying and misleading as two forms of linguistic insincerity, and I will point to a criterion that can help to distinguish lies from misleading utterances (Section 2). Then, I will introduce examples of speakers lying with presuppositions (Section 3). The main example involves a question that carries a presupposition the speaker believes to be false but intends to convey. I will show that there are good reasons to hold that the speaker asking the question is lying, and I will argue that the utterance is a lie *because* of the presupposition it carries. In the remaining sections, I will consider some implications of such presuppositional lies. In the debate on how to define lying, presuppositional lies speak against certain definitions of lying that are based on the notion of what is said, and in favour of a commitment-based approach to defining lying (Section 4). Presuppositional lies also support a commitment-based view of assertion, and they go against views that require assertion to be explicit (Section 5). Finally, presuppositional lies fit well with a view of presuppositional content as content that is not at-issue and that falls within a broader category of projective content (Section 6).

2. Lying and misleading

Lying is a form of linguistic insincerity, but not the only one: an utterance can be intentionally misleading without being a lie. The distinction between lying and misleading is important in everyday life. Many people hold that, at least in some cases, lying is worse than misleading; and speakers often try to mislead rather than lie. Theorists working on lying have also paid close attention to the lying/misleading-distinction: a main concern in providing an adequate definition of lying is to ensure that it will neither count merely misleading utterances as lies (and thus be too broad) nor classify lies as merely misleading (and thus be too narrow).¹

The distinction between lying and misleading is of interest here because it matters for the question of whether speakers can lie with presuppositions. Those who answer this question negatively do not deny that speakers can *deceive* or *mislead* with presuppositions. Rather, they deny that speakers can *lie* with presuppositions: in their view, what may appear to be a presuppositional lie is in fact a misleading utterance. Let us therefore consider a few clear examples of lies and of misleading utterances and then look at a criterion that can help to distinguish lies from misleading utterances.

Our first example is the well-known case of the dying woman who asks about her son, which is discussed e.g. by Saul (2012: 70):

The dying woman

A dying woman asks the doctor whether her son is well. The doctor saw him yesterday, when he was well, but knows that he was later killed in an accident.

Version A:

(1) Doctor: Your son is fine.

Version B:

(2) Doctor: I saw your son yesterday and he was fine.

The dying woman comes to believe that her son is fine.

¹ See e.g. Saul (2012: 95). As Saul (2012: 71) points out, ‘mislead’ is a success term, while ‘lie’ is not. The relevant distinctions are thus between lying and *attempting* to misleading, and between *successful* lying and misleading. To keep things simple, I will in what follows be concerned only with *successful* instances of lying and misleading.

In both versions of the example, the doctor conveys that the dying woman's son is fine, and thus both utterances are deceptive. But only utterance (1) is a lie; while utterance (2) is strongly misleading, it is clearly not a lie. As a second and less dramatic case, consider the following example introduced by Stokke (2016: 85):

Paul's party

Dennis is going to Paul's party tonight. He has a long day of work ahead of him before that, but he is very excited and can't wait to get there. Dennis's annoying friend Rebecca comes up to him and starts talking about the party. Dennis is fairly sure that Rebecca won't go unless she thinks he's going, too. Rebecca asks Dennis: "Are you going to Paul's party?"

Version A:

(3) Dennis: No, I'm not going to Paul's party.

Version B:

(4) Dennis: I have to work.

Rebecca comes to believe that Dennis is not going to Paul's party.

Again, both utterances are deceptive: they both convey that Dennis is not going to Paul's party, although he is planning on going. But only (3) is a lie, while (4) is merely misleading.

How do the A- and B-versions of these examples differ? Of course, the A-versions are intuitively better candidates for being lies than the B-versions. But intuitions about utterances may not always be so clear, so I want to point to another difference between the two versions of the examples: the misleading utterances (2) and (4) allow the speaker to offer sincere denials in response to accusations of lying that are not possible following the lies (1) and (3). If Rebecca finds out that Dennis went to the party (and that he was planning on going all along), she might accuse him of lying. Following his misleading utterance (4), he can offer the following sincere (albeit pedantic) response to such an accusation:

(5) I didn't lie. I didn't claim that I wasn't going to go to Paul's party. I merely claimed that I had to work, which I did.

By contrast, Dennis cannot sincerely reply in this way if he lies by uttering (3). Similarly, if the doctor is subsequently accused of lying (e.g. by a colleague who knows that the woman's son is dead),

she can sincerely deny having lied following her utterance of (2) but not following her utterance of (1). This difference in deniability can be used to decide whether an utterance is a lie or merely misleading. If in doubt about a certain case, we can consider whether the speaker could offer a sincere denial to accusations of lying. Sincere deniability indicates that the utterance is misleading, but not a lie, while a lack of sincere deniability supports the view that the utterance is indeed a lie.² Together with intuitive judgements about utterances, this criterion can provide robust evidence as to whether or not an utterance is a lie or merely misleading.

3. Lying with presuppositions

In this section, I will use several examples to argue that speakers can lie with presuppositions. My aim is not merely to show that lies can carry presuppositions the speakers believe to be false. Rather, I want to show that certain utterances are lies *because* they carry presuppositions the speakers believe to be false. Henceforth, I will call lies of this latter kind *presuppositional lies*.

To begin with, let me briefly introduce the notion of a presupposition. A presupposition (or presuppositional content) is a piece of information (or proposition) a speaker takes for granted in making an utterance. For example, if Anne utters (6), then she presupposes that she has a brother:

(6) I am meeting my brother at the station.

In other words: Anne's utterance of (6) carries the presupposition that she has a brother. While presuppositions are often accepted by both the speakers and their addressees at the time of the utterance, presuppositions can also be *informative*, i.e. they can be used to convey pieces of information that were not previously accepted by the addressee. To return to the previously example, Anne might use (6) to let the addressee know (among other things) that she has a brother. The process by which information is conveyed in such cases is known as *presupposition accommodation*: the addressee notices that the speaker is presupposing something she (the addressee) does not accept

² Stokke (2016: 89–91) puts forward a similar criterion for distinguishing between lies and misleading utterances. Of course, liars can sincerely deny having lied if they are *mistaken* about what they claimed. It would thus be more precise to say that misleading, but not lying, allows for sincere *and unmistaken* denials along the lines of (5). I will ignore this complication in what follows.

and accommodates that piece of information (unless she has reasons not to do so, e.g. if she has evidence to the contrary or she takes the speaker to be unreliable or insincere). Presupposition accommodation is a key feature of the examples to follow.³

As a first candidate for a presuppositional lie, consider the following case:

Diana is an undercover officer and is meeting a suspected art thief, who thinks she deals in stolen art. Diana wants to set up the thief by getting him to break into a house in which her colleagues will be waiting. She knows there are no paintings in the house, but tells the thief (who has no other information on the house):

(7) The painting in the master bedroom is worth millions.

The thief comes to believe that there is a painting in the master bedroom that is worth millions.

Is Diana's utterance of (7) a presuppositional lie? The utterance carries a presupposition Diana believes to be false, namely that there is a painting in the master bedroom (of the house under discussion). This presupposition is not shared by the thief prior to the utterance, and it is part of what is conveyed by (7). Furthermore, the utterance is clearly a lie, and this lie seems to have something to do with the presupposition just mentioned. Note that it would very natural to report Diana's utterance as follows:

(8) Diana lied about there being a painting in the master bedroom.⁴

The naturalness of this report suggests not only that Diana did lie by uttering (7), but also that she did so by presupposing that there is a painting in the master bedroom. Finally, this verdict is confirmed by the criterion introduced above: should Diana be accused of lying, she could not sincerely deny having claimed that there is a painting in the master bedroom. A later utterance along the following lines would be insincere:

(9) I didn't lie. I didn't claim that there was a painting in the master bedroom. I merely claimed...

³ For present purposes, I need not settle on one of the various theoretical accounts of presuppositions. The weight-bearing examples of this paper involve presuppositions that are widely accepted by those working on the matter. For helpful introductions to the notion of a presupposition, see e.g. Beaver & Geurts (2011) and Potts (2015). On presupposition accommodation, see e.g. Lewis (1979), Stalnaker (1999) and von Stechow (2008).

⁴ See Holton (forthcoming) on such *lying about*-reports.

Thus, (7) appears to be an example of a presuppositional lie.

But although it is (in my view) plausible that (7) is a lie due to its presupposition, this conclusion may not be unavoidable. In particular, one might argue that although (7) is a lie, this is so because of its *non*-presuppositional content. After all, there are several things Diana conveys by uttering (7): apart from conveying the presuppositional content that there is a painting in the master bedroom, she also conveys the non-presuppositional content that the painting is worth millions. One might hold that this latter non-presuppositional content is enough to make (7) a lie, and that it is thus doubtful whether the utterance should be counted as a *presuppositional* lie.

I agree that it is somewhat difficult to pin down the lie to the presuppositional content of (7). Because Diana knows that the presupposition is unfulfilled, she presumably holds that it is neither true nor false that the painting in the master bedroom is worth millions. If this is indeed the case, and if a speaker has to commit herself to something she believes to be false in order to lie, it cannot be the non-presuppositional content of (7) that makes the utterance a lie. But, of course, one may very well hold that lies do not require the speaker to commit herself to something she believes to be *false* – instead one may think that commitment to something *untrue* suffices (where believing that something is neither true nor false is one way of believing that something is untrue). Or one might be willing to deny that Diana believes that it is neither true nor false that the painting in the master bedroom is worth millions. It is therefore quite possible to hold that the non-presuppositional content of (7) suffices to make it a lie.⁵

I am inclined to hold on to the view that (7) is a presuppositional lie. Even if one accepts that Diana lies about the painting being worth millions, it seems right to say that she (in addition) lies about there being a painting in the master bedroom, and thus that she lies with a presupposition. Nonetheless, I do not wish to rely on this view of the example, which is why I will now turn to an example that does not run into the complications just mentioned.

⁵ A further potential difficulty concerning the example is that some theorists would deny that Diana's utterance of (7) carries the presupposition I have ascribed to it because they do not take the definite article to be a presupposition trigger. As far as I can see, the majority view in philosophy and linguistics does accept the presupposition in question, but it would of course be good not to have to rely on a case that is even slightly contentious. See Elbourne (2011: 66–72) for a helpful discussion of the question whether the definite article is a presupposition trigger.

Here is a second candidate for a presuppositional lie:

David and Noah spend the evening at a bar together. Noah gets very drunk, and on the next day he has no recollection of what happened in the later parts of the evening. David wants to trick Noah into thinking that he gave Noah an envelope, which Noah then misplaced. In fact, David did not give Noah an envelope. David asks Noah:

(10) Have you still got the envelope I gave you last night?

Noah comes to believe that David gave him an envelope the previous night.

David's question carries the informative presupposition that he gave Noah an envelope last night, and David conveys this presupposition to Noah. Now, by uttering (10), David seems to be lying to Noah, and his lie is connected to the presupposition he conveys. To begin with, it would be natural to report David as follows (on the next day):

(11) David lied about giving Noah an envelope last night.

This verdict is confirmed by the deniability-criterion: David does not retain deniability with respect to the presupposition. He could not respond to accusations of lying along the following lines:

(12) I didn't lie. I didn't claim that I gave you an envelope last night. I merely claimed...

And this result can be further strengthened by the following three considerations:

Firstly, there appears to be no relevant difference between David's utterance of (10) and the following alternative utterance he could have made:

(10) Have you still got the envelope I gave you last night?

(13) I gave you an envelope last night. Have you still got it?

While (10) and (13) differ in some respects, they convey the same information in almost exactly the same way. It is hard to see how David could be lying through one of the utterances but not the other. But David would clearly be lying if he were to utter (13), so we should hold that he is indeed lying by uttering (10).

Secondly, ordinary speakers actually judge David to be lying to Noah. In a recent study, Viebahn et al (2018) tested whether ordinary speakers accept the possibility of lying with presuppositions. To do so, they confronted participants with vignettes featuring utterances such as (10) (i.e.

utterances of questions carrying presuppositions the speakers believe to be false but intend to convey). In the first part of the study, participants consistently considered the agents of the examples to be lying: lie-ratings were around 90 % for seven out of eight vignettes tested even if participants were given the chance to classify the utterances as misleading but not as lies. The second part of the study compared judgements about potential cases of presuppositional lies with judgements about clear cases of mere misleading (such as utterances (2) and (4)) and with judgements about an uncontroversial case of lying. Here, the participants' judgements about the potential cases of presuppositional lies patterned with the clear lie and not with the cases of mere misleading (again, lie-ratings for the cases involving presuppositions were around 90 %, while none of the clear cases of misleading reached more than 50 % if the participants were given the chance to classify the utterances as misleading but not as lies). Finally, the third part of the study compared judgements about questions carrying believed-false presuppositions with their declarative counterparts. Participants considered both the questions and their declarative counterparts to be lies.

The foregoing results show that ordinary speakers judge utterances such as (10) to be lies. Now, judgements of ordinary speakers are of importance in the debate on how to define lying, as e.g. Carson (2006: 301), Fallis (2009: 32) and Saul (2012: vii) have argued: an adequate definition of lying must accord with how ordinary speakers employ the term 'lying'. We thus have an additional reason to hold that (10) is a lie.

Finally, if David lied by uttering (10), as I have argued, then clearly because of the presupposition in play. Not only does the lie seem to be *about* him giving Noah an envelope, this presupposition is also the only (relevant) proposition he conveys with his utterance. After all, standard semantic theories of questions entail that the non-presuppositional content of a question is a set of propositions (see e.g. Cross & Roelofsen 2016), and content of this kind seems unsuited to function as the content of a lie. The example thus avoids the complications that showed up in the previous case, where there was some room to argue that the lie was not presuppositional. In the current case, there appears to be no way of accepting that David's utterance of (10) is a lie while denying that this is because of the presupposition the utterance carries.

There is thus good evidence that presuppositional lies are possible. But are they common enough to be of any importance? I think they are. First of all, the possibility of presuppositional lies is not confined to questions, as presuppositions are not bound to a particular sentence-type or speech-act. If it is possible to lie by asking a question that carries a believed-false presupposition, the same goes for assertions, commands, promises and other kinds of speech-acts. So speech-acts of many different kinds can be used to lie with presuppositions.

Furthermore, speakers frequently communicate with the help of informative presuppositions, as has been empirically verified e.g. by Abbott (2000). This is unsurprising, as such a form of communication is efficient, and at least sometimes more efficient than other more direct forms of communication. For example, it is slightly more efficient for David to utter (10) than (13). As there is no good reason to hold that speakers less frequently convey information by presupposing it when they are sincere than when they are insincere, we have good reasons to hold that speakers often lie with presuppositions.⁶ And indeed, once you look out for presuppositional lies, it is easy to find real-life examples.⁷ Presuppositional lies are not only possible, but unexceptional. Let us now consider the theoretical impact of this result.

4. Implications for the debate on lying

In recent years, several theorists have proposed definitions of lying that are based on the notion of what is said. In this section, I will argue that presuppositional lies are a challenge for such says-based definitions of lying. First, I will introduce Andreas Stokke's says-based definition of lying, which rules out the possibility of presuppositional lies. Then, I will point to difficulties that arise if

⁶ There may even be cases in which insincere speakers have a reason to convey the (dis)information they want to get across by presupposing it: this may allow them to divert attention from the (dis)information by signalling that it is not at-issue and uncontroversial. I will return to this point in Section 6.

⁷ Some such examples are to be found in Leonhardt & Thompson's (2017) compilation of false statements uttered by Donald Trump. For instance, on April 16, 2017 Trump uttered: 'Someone should look into who paid for the small organized rallies yesterday. The election is over!' In doing so, Trump presupposed that someone paid protesters, although there was no evidence of paid protesters. If Trump indeed believed that there were no paid protesters, his utterance was a presuppositional lie.

says-based definitions of lying are to be made compatible with presuppositional lies. Finally, I will introduce a definition of lying that is based on the notion of commitment and that can account for the fact that speakers can lie with presuppositions.

4.1 Stokke's definition of lying

Andreas Stokke (2013, 2016, 2017, 2018) is a prominent proponent of a says-based definition of lying. Stokke's starting point is the traditional definition of lying:

The traditional definition of lying

A lies to B if and only if there is a proposition p such that:

- (L1) A asserts that p to B, and
- (L2) A believes that p is false.⁸

While a definition in this spirit is widely accepted in the debate, theorists disagree about how (L1) should be spelled out. Stokke opts for an account of assertion thus includes the following necessary condition:

Stokke's account of assertion (Stokke 2016: 96, 2018: 84)

In uttering a sentence S, A asserts that p only if:

- (A1) A says that p, and
- (A2) by uttering S, A proposes to make it common ground that p.

Stokke's account thus combines the Stalnakerian idea that in asserting the speaker proposes to update the common ground of the conversation (see e.g. Stalnaker 1999) with the requirement that in order to lie that p, the speaker has to say that p. This leads to the following definition of lying:

Stokke's definition of lying (Stokke 2016: 96, 2018: 28)

A lies to B if and only if there is a proposition p such that:

- (L1) S says that p to B, and
- (L2) A proposes to make it common ground that p, and
- (L3) A believes that p is false.

⁸ In calling this the traditional definition of lying, I am simplifying somewhat: at least some authors who accept that lying should be defined in terms of (L1) and (L2) hold that further requirements should be added, for example a requirement that the speaker has an intention to deceive the addressee (see e.g. Adler 1997). Because of the possibility of bald-faced lies, i.e. lies without the intention to deceive, most recent definitions of lying do not mention an intention to deceive. For discussion of bald-faced lies see Carson (2006) and Sorensen (2007).

The final ingredient of this definition is Stokke’s account of what is said. This account makes use of the question under discussion (QUD) framework introduced by Roberts (2004, 2012) and entails that what is said by an utterance depends on which QUD the speaker addresses (see Schoubye & Stokke 2016). For present purposes, it is enough to report one aspect of the account: it entails that presuppositions do not belong to what is said.

The foregoing makes clear that Stokke’s definition rules out that speakers can lie with presuppositions: lying requires saying, and presuppositions are not said.⁹ This can be illustrated with the main example from the previous section: David’s utterance of (10) is not counted as a lie because although David arguably proposes to make it common ground that he gave Noah an envelope last night, which he believes to be false, this proposition is not (on Stokke’s view) part of what is said. And as (10) involves no other proposition that fulfils all three clauses, the utterance is not counted as a lie.

Stokke is aware that his approach is incompatible with presuppositional lies, but does not see this as a defect, as he has different intuitions about potential cases of presuppositional lies. In his view, these cases involve ‘a different way of being misleading while avoiding full-blown assertion of disbelieved information’ (2016: 119). However, I hope to have made plausible that presuppositional lies *are* possible, and that this view is supported both by the deniability-criterion and the judgements of ordinary speakers. Unless Stokke can provide evidence to the contrary, presuppositional lies thus are a reason not to opt for Stokke’s definition.

4.2 Other says-based definitions of lying

As mentioned, Stokke is one of several theorists who have proposed a definition says-based definition of lying. Another theorist in this camp is Jenny Saul, who proposes the following definition:

⁹ The definition does not rule out that lies can carry presuppositions the speaker believes to be false, but it rules out that an utterance can be a lie *because* it carries a presupposition the speaker believes to be false – these are the lies that are at issue in this paper and that I have tried to make plausible in the preceding section.

Saul's definition of lying (Saul 2012: 19)

If the speaker is not the victim of linguistic error/malapropism or using metaphor, hyperbole, or irony, then they lie iff:

(L1) they say that p;

(L2) they believe p to be false; and

(L3) they take themselves to be warranting for the truth of p.¹⁰

Is this definition compatible with presuppositional lies? That depends on whether presuppositions are included in what is said. While Stokke is the only proponent of a says-based definitions of lying who has discussed this question, one might think that Saul would agree with his negative answer. After all, says-based definitions of lying have to be based on a *narrow* view of what is said that excludes implicatures, or else they would count merely misleading utterances as lies (as is argued in detail by Saul 2012: Chapter 3). Given this narrow view, one might expect that presuppositions are likewise excluded from what is said. But even if including presuppositions in what is said is not in the spirit of existing says-based approaches, such a manoeuvre is not entirely implausible, given that implicatures and presuppositions are quite different linguistic phenomena. So I now want to discuss how Saul's definition fares if presuppositions are included in what is said.

To begin with, let us consider an approach on which *all* presuppositions belong to what is said. On this approach, Saul's definition delivers the right verdict on utterance (10): David takes himself to warrant for the presupposition in play, which he believes to be false and which is part of what he says. But there are other examples for which the current account does not lead to right result. For speakers sometimes presuppose propositions they believe to be false without thereby lying, as in the following example due to Stalnaker:

For example, if you are presupposing something false but irrelevant, I may presuppose it as well, just to facilitate communication. (You refer to Mary's partner as "her husband," when I know that they are not married. But I might refer to him in the same way just to avoid diverting the discussion.) (Stalnaker 1999: 100)

One challenge for the current approach is thus to make sure that such utterances are not counted as lies. It may be possible to do so by appealing to (L3): possibly speakers do not take themselves

¹⁰ Saul puts the third clause slightly differently. I have slightly modified it so as to make clear Saul's idea that speakers have to take themselves to be warranting for the truth *of what they say*. On Saul's notion of warranting, see Saul (2012: 10–11). Similar definitions have been proposed by Fallis (2009) and Carson (2006, 2010: 37).

to be warranting for the truth of a disbelieved presupposition they go along with simply to facilitate communication. But there is certainly some work left to do in spelling out when speakers warrant the truth of something and when they do not. Saul holds that speakers generally warrant for the truth of what they say, even if the warranting is not made explicit:

[I]n at least the overwhelming majority of cultures one warrants the truth of what one says unless one is in some special context – e.g. joke-telling – where the warranty is removed. (Saul 2012: 10, also see Carson 2006: 294)

On this view, the speaker would be warranting for the truth of the presupposition in Stalnaker's example, and would thus be lying according to the definition. Saul's view of warranting would thus have to be replaced with a different one to solve the problem at hand.

To avoid this problem, one might opt for an alternative approach on which only *some* presuppositions belong to what is said. In particular, one might adopt a notion of what is said that includes only those presuppositions that are not previously accepted by the addressee (i.e. only informative presuppositions). This would greatly restrict the presuppositions entering into what is said: the informative presupposition carried by utterance (10) would count as part of what is said, but the presupposition that Mary and her partner are married (in Stalnaker's example) would not belong to what is said. As a result, the approach can deliver the right verdicts on the examples discussed, but it is not entirely without problems either.

In particular, adherents of this approach would have to provide an argument for why only informative presuppositions should belong to what is said. Why should we draw the line here, and not elsewhere? A natural reply appeals to what speakers convey or intend to convey: informative presuppositions are used to convey content, which is not the case for non-informative presuppositions. But it is hard to see why the question of whether a certain content is conveyed matters for the question of whether it belongs to what is said. After all, saying something is one thing and conveying it another: speakers can say something without conveying it (e.g. in practicing a speech) and they can convey something without saying it (e.g. through implicatures). It thus unsurprising that most theorists hold, *pave* Grice (1975), that what speakers say need not coincide with what

they convey (or intend to convey).¹¹ So, a different argument to count only informative presuppositions as said is required, and it is not obvious how such an argument might go: the main (and possibly only) difference between informative presuppositions and non-informative ones (that are already accepted by the addressees) seems to concern whether these presuppositions are conveyed (or intended to be conveyed) by the speaker.

While these problems are not insurmountable, I hope to have made plausible that there is still work left to do if says-based definitions are to capture presuppositional lies. This provides at least some motivation to investigate how presuppositional lies are handled by definitions that are not based on the notion of what is said.

4.3 Defining lying in terms of commitment

The current trend of defining lying in terms of what is said originates from the idea that lying and misleading differ with respect to what is said: in lying, but not misleading, speakers *say* something they believe to be false. I want to propose a definition that takes its cue from a different difference between lying and misleading: liars commit themselves to something they believe to be false, while misleaders avoid such commitment. This difference in commitment is obvious when clear cases of lying and misleading are compared: for example, while the speakers of (1) and (3) commit themselves to something they believe to be false, no such commitment is taken on through (2) or (4).

Building on the notion of commitment, one might define lying as follows:

A commitment-based definition of lying

A lies to B if and only if there is a proposition p such that:

- (L1) A undertakes a communicative act C with the content p;
- (L2) by undertaking C, A commits herself *vis-à-vis* B to p; and
- (L3) A believes that p is false.

What is it to commit oneself to a content or a proposition? I cannot give a full answer to this question here, but want to offer three considerations on the matter.

¹¹ See e.g. Bach (2012) on this matter.

Firstly, I think that the commitment in lying can plausibly be seen as the commitment in asserting, as it has been proposed e.g. by Peirce (1934), Brandom (1983), MacFarlane (2011), Kölbel (2011) and Geurts (forthcoming). For example, it seems plausible that, in lying about p and thereby committing oneself to p , one assumes responsibility to defend p if challenged, as Brandom (1983: 641) argues. This fits with the observation that liars do not retain deniability: faced with accusations of lying about p , they either have to furnish further lies to defend p , or else admit having lied and thus take back their commitment to p .

Secondly, even without a fully worked out account of commitment, we have a good intuitive grip on whether speakers have committed themselves to a proposition. We can often tell right away whether an utterance was committal or not; and even if the speaker's commitment or lack thereof was not immediately evident, we can generally reach a retrospective verdict on the matter. For example, we can consider whether the speaker retains deniability, just as I have done in the examples discussed above.

Thirdly, and importantly, there are different ways of committing oneself to a proposition: one can commit oneself to p by saying p , but (in at least some situations) one can also do so by presupposing p , e.g. when p was not previously accepted in the conversation. As a result, commitment-based definitions allow for different ways of lying, and they accept the possibility of presuppositional lies, which means they can deliver the right verdicts for (10) and similar examples. Furthermore, it seems plausible that speakers are not always committed to what they presuppose. For example, if a speaker goes along with a presupposition that is already part of the common ground then she may not be committing herself to it. The commitment-based definition can thus also account for the fact that Stalnaker's example is not a lie. Finally, the definition does not count clear cases of misleading (such as those discussed in Section 2) as lies, as in these cases the speakers clearly do not commit themselves to something they believe to be false.

The relevant notion of commitment has to be substantiated before we can tell whether a commitment-based definition can be adequate as a definition of lying – that is an issue I plan to take up in future work. But I hope to already have made plausible that commitment-based defini-

tions fare at least as well as says-based definitions in capturing presuppositional lies and that they are thus worth further investigation.

5. Implications for the debate on assertion

In the remaining part of the paper, I want to look at the implications presuppositional lies have for the debates on assertion and on presupposition – given that we accept the view that our examples of presuppositional lies are assertions.¹² Should we accept this view? I can see two reasons to answer this question positively. Firstly, it follows from the traditional definition of lying, according to which lies are assertions, and the fact that David's utterance of (10) is a lie. Given that most theorists in the debate on lying accept a definition of this kind, it is certainly of interest what follows *if* the definition is accepted. Secondly, it is immensely plausible that David is asserting that he gave Noah an envelope last night by uttering (10). Let us once again compare (10) and the alternative utterance (13):

(10) Have you still got the envelope I gave you last night?

(13) I gave you an envelope last night. Have you still got it?

There can be no doubt that if David were to utter (13), he would assert that he gave Noah an envelope last night. But in that case he surely also asserts this proposition by uttering (10). For these reasons, I will proceed under the assumption that David asserts what he presupposes through uttering (10), focussing on the debate on assertion in this section and on the debate on presupposition in the next.

What do presuppositional lies tell us about assertion? On the one hand, they speak against the widely-held view that assertion is 'open, explicit and direct' (Pagin 2016: Section 2). For example, consider the following definition by Alston (2000: 120), which requires assertions to be explicit:

¹² Up to this point of the paper, nothing hangs on the view that lies in general and utterances such as (10) in particular are assertions. Although the definitions I have discussed originate from the view that lies are assertions, one could accept each of the definitions without accepting the traditional definition of lying (according to which lies are assertions).

Alston's account of assertion

A asserts that p in uttering S iff

- (A1) A takes responsibility for its being the case that p
- (A2) S explicitly presents the proposition that p, or S is uttered as elliptical for a sentence that explicitly presents the proposition that p.

Presuppositional lies are in tension with Alston's account. A speaker can assert a proposition p by presupposing p although she is neither explicitly presenting p nor uttering a sentence that is elliptical for another sentence that explicitly presents p. While I take it to be uncontroversial that (10) does not explicitly present the proposition that David gave Noah an envelope last night, it might be objected that (10) is elliptical for sentences that do explicitly present that proposition, namely for the sentences in (13). If that were the case, Alston's account could capture presuppositional assertions after all. But Alston explicitly rules out this possibility:

When, for example, I make a normal utterance of 'Please open the window' I have *not* uttered my sentence as elliptical for 'The window is closed', and hence the account gives the correct judgment that I did not assert that the window is closed.
(Alston 2000: 120)

In fact, Alston brings in the notion of explicitness precisely to rule out the possibility of asserting by presupposing, so it is not surprising that he does not want sentences to elliptically express their presuppositions. Presuppositional lies thus do not fit well with views that treat assertion as explicit and direct.

On the other hand, presuppositional lies support certain accounts of assertion, and in particular those accounts that analyse assertion in terms of commitment (see the authors cited in Section 4.3). A commitment-based view of assertion might be put as follows:

Assertion and commitment

A asserts that p to B if and only if:

- (A1) A undertakes a communicative act C with the content p;
- (A2) by undertaking C, A commits herself *vis-à-vis* B to p;

These two clauses are the same as the first two of the definition of lying proposed in Section 4.3, so it is obvious that these approaches fit together well.

6. Implications for the debate on presupposition

Finally, there are interesting implications for the debate on presupposition and projective content more generally. To begin with, presuppositional lies go against the common view that presupposition contrasts with assertion and that one cannot assert something by presupposing it. Here are some representative statements of that view:

To presuppose something is to take it for granted in a way that contrasts with asserting it. (Soames 1989: 553)

[O]ne common core in most theories of both implicature and presupposition is that they contrast with assertion. What is asserted is not presupposed and it is not implicated. (Brown & Cappelen 2011: 5)

[The] nature of the obligation one seems to have to justify a presupposition upon request is different from the nature of the obligation one has in the case of assertion. Asserters [...] are personally responsible for having justification. [...] Nothing of the sort occurs when someone makes an utterance that requires the presupposition that *p*, even if *p* was not already accepted at the time of utterance. [...] Also, if a presupposer is challenged, she may just say something like “Oh, I thought this was uncontroversial” (for an asserter such a response would be feeble). (Kölbel 2011: 69–70)

If David uses (10) to assert that he gave Noah an envelope last night, the views expressed or reported in these passages cannot be correct. Especially the view Kölbel expresses in the third passage is of interest here, as he is concerned with the question of whether speakers are obliged to justify what they presuppose, which seems closely related to the question of whether presuppositions involve speaker commitment. Although Kölbel mentions the possibility of conveying something by presupposing it, he denies that the speakers of such utterances are ‘personally responsible for having justification’ concerning the presupposition. That may be true in some cases, but presuppositional lies seem to show that it is not universally true.¹³

¹³ Note that, following his utterance of (10), David could not respond to challenges by saying something like ‘Oh, I thought it was uncontroversial that I gave you an envelope’. One of the interesting questions raised by presuppositional lies is thus the following: When are speakers responsible for what they presuppose, and when do they avoid such responsibility?

So presuppositional lies support views that do not entail a contrast between presupposition and assertion. One such view has been developed by Simons et al (2010), who distinguish between presupposed content and *at-issue* content. On this view, presupposed content is content that is not at-issue in the context of utterance. The notion of at-issueness is based on Roberts' (2012) QUD-theory: a proposition is at-issue if it addresses the current QUD of the conversation. This view allows speakers to assert propositions that are not at-issue, and that is exactly what happens if a speaker presupposes something in order to convey it.

While the framework of Simons et al (2010) allows speakers to assert both non-presuppositional and presuppositional content (i.e. at-issue and not-at-issue content), the choice of how a speaker asserts something can make a difference. For one thing, von Stechow (2008: 163) has argued that presuppositions can only be used to make an assertion if their content is uncontroversial. A presuppositional assertion of something controversial leads to infelicity or appears to be uncooperative. (While von Stechow's observation seems to be on the right track, it relies on a notion of *controversialness* that requires further spelling out). And for another, a speaker who asserts something by presupposing it seems to imply that the content presupposed is not-at-issue (and, if von Stechow is right, uncontroversial). So although (10) and (13) (repeated below for convenience) have almost the same communicative upshot, the first utterance differs from the second in that it implies that it is not-at-issue and possibly uncontroversial that David gave Noah an envelope last night:

(10) Have you still got the envelope I gave you last night?

(13) I gave you an envelope last night. Have you still got it?¹⁴

One reason for speakers to lie with presuppositions may thus be their aim to convey disbelieved information while at the same time implying that it is not-at-issue and uncontroversial. In other

¹⁴ This difference provides another reason against treating (10) as elliptical for (13), as I have argued in the previous section.

words, a speaker may choose to lie with a presupposition in order to smuggle across disbelieved information.¹⁵

Secondly, presuppositional lies matter for the question of whether presuppositions form a subclass of a broader class of *projective content*. For presuppositions are not the only not-at-issue content that can be used to lie: the same is possible with conventional implicatures. Interestingly, this latter view is shared by Stokke. Stokke (2017) provides the following examples of lying by conventionally implicating:

Sue: Lance Armstrong, an Arkansan, won the 2003 Tour de France.

Context: Sue knows that Armstrong won the 2003 tour but that he is a Texan.

Sue: Ames was, as the press reported, a successful spy.

Context: Sue knows that Ames was a successful spy but that the press didn't report that. (Stokke 2017: 143)

In these cases, Stokke observes, the speaker lies by asserting the content conventionally implicated. I think Stokke is right about this matter, and that this brings out a striking parallel between presuppositions and conventional implicatures. A speaker can commit herself to and thus assert a proposition *either* by presupposing it *or* by conventionally implying it, and both presuppositions and conventional implicatures can be used to lie. This supports the view that presuppositions and conventional implicatures should be grouped together, as has been argued by Simons et al (2010). At the same time, it lends further support to the main claim of this paper: if it is possible to lie with conventional implicatures, then that might provide an additional reason to hold that speakers can lie with presuppositions.

Stokke (2017) is a response to Sorensen (2017), who argues that speakers can lie with arguments even if they believe the premises and the conclusion to be true. Here is Sorensen's first example:

¹⁵ Similar observations have recently been made by Stanley (2015: 150) and Langton (2017), though Stanley and Langton would not say that speakers make an *assertion* in the examples discussed.

You can lie with an argument without any of your premisses being a lie. You can lie with an argument without your conclusion being a lie. Therefore, you can lie with an argument without any of your premisses or your conclusion being a lie.

Confession: Although I believe the premisses and the conclusion, I do not believe that the premisses entail the conclusion. I lied. (Sorensen 2017: 105)

Sorensen holds that this is a lie because ‘therefore’ carries a conventional implicature he (the speaker) believes to be false, namely that the conclusion is entailed by the premisses. The main point of Stokke’s paper is to argue that ‘therefore’ does not carry a conventional implicature, and that it rather triggers a presupposition. The (dis)information that the conclusion is entailed by the premisses is presupposed, not conventionally implied. Because Stokke takes presuppositional lies to be impossible, he holds that Sorensen’s argument cannot be a lie. In my view, both Stokke and Sorensen are right, at least partially: Stokke is right about the linguistic analysis of ‘therefore’, while Sorensen is right that it is possible to lie with arguments – given that they carry presuppositions the speaker believes to be false and intends to convey through her utterance.

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