Metaphors and Martinis:
A Response to Jessica Keiser[*]

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Abstract

This note responds to criticism put forth by Jessica Keiser against a theory of lying as Stalnakerian assertion. According to this account, to lie is to say something one believes to be false and thereby propose that it become common ground. Keiser objects that this view wrongly counts particular kinds of non-literal speech as instances of lying. In particular, Keiser argues that the view invariably counts metaphors and certain uses of definite descriptions as lies. It is argued here that both these claims are false.

1

In a recent paper Jessica Keiser (2015) objects to my account of lying, as set out in Stokke (2013). In this short note I show that Keiser's criticisms are unfounded.

My account of lying is an instance of the general view that to lie is to *assert* disbelieved information. I argue that the account of assertion needed to define lying is (a version of) the one that forms part of the influential theory of communication developed in the work of Robert Stalnaker (1999 [1970]), (1999 [1974]), (1984), (1999 [1978]), (1999 [1998]), (2002), (2014). According to this view, to assert that p involves making a bid for p to become *common ground*. Furthermore, I defend the view that

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assertion requires *saying* something, as opposed to, for example, merely implicating or presupposing it.[1] Hence, I endorse the following necessary conditions on assertion:[2]

> In uttering a sentence S, A asserts that p only if
>
> (A1) S says that p, and
>
> (A2) by uttering S, A proposes to make it common ground that p.

So, in asserting that p, a speaker makes an utterance that says that p and thereby proposes to make it common ground that p.

Consequently, my account of lying is that you lie when you say something you believe to be false and thereby propose that it become common ground:

> **The Common Ground Definition of Lying**
> A lies to B if and only if there is a proposition p such that
>
> (L1) A says that p to B, and
>
> (L2) A proposes to make it common ground that p, and
>
> (L3) A believes that p is false.

Finally, as Keiser emphasizes, it is crucial for my view that it relies on a particular way of understanding common ground information.[3] In particular, following Stalnaker (2002), I take common ground information to be information that is mutually believed to be *accepted* for the purpose of the conversation. This means that for a proposition p to be common ground it is not necessary that p be true, nor that the participants believe that p, but merely that the participants are willing to go along with it for the purpose of the conversation.[4]

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[1]I defend a detailed theory of what is said, in this sense, in Stokke (2016), Schoubye and Stokke (in press).

[2]See Stokke (2013). Contrast Keiser (2015, §5.2) who summarizes the common ground view of assertion as the claim that "S asserts p iff in stating p S proposes to add p to the common ground." This is a stronger view of assertion than the one employed in my account of lying, i.e., the view given by (A1)–(A2). However, I want to show that, even ignoring this, my view does not have the undesirable consequences Keiser points to.

[3]The main reason for this is the desiredatum to count as genuine lies cases of lying without the intent to deceive, so called "bald-faced lies." See Stokke (2013) for discussion.

[4]See Stalnaker (2002, 716).

2

Keiser argues that the Common Ground Definition wrongly counts certain kinds of non-literal speech as instances of lying. She considers two types of cases: on the one hand, metaphors, and on the other hand, Stalnaker's (2002) version of Donnellan's (1966) classic example in which someone uses "the man drinking a martini" to communicate something true about someone known not to be drinking a martini:

> the definition [...] wrongly counts both of these cases – where speakers are developing a metaphor, or going along with something they know to be false for the sake of conversational ease and efficiency – as instances of lying. (Keiser, 2015, §5.2)

In both cases Keiser suggests that the problem arises due to the way the theory relies on the notion of acceptance in characterizing common ground:

> acceptance is too weak a notion to ground the distinction between lying and non-literal speech. Since acceptance of p does not involve believing p, it is unclear how the provided definition is going to be able to rule out certain cases of non-literal speech as instances of lying. People can carry on with saying things that are mutually believed to be false, for the purpose of conversation. Non-literal speech exemplifies this kind of behavior; I may use a metaphor to communicate something true, and my interlocutor may respond by playing along with that same metaphor for the course of the conversation. And as Stalnaker and others have pointed out, one or both parties to the conversation may continue to refer to a man as "the man drinking the martini", knowing full well that he is drinking water [...]. (ibid.)

So the complaint is that the theory overgenerates by invariably counting both metaphors and Donnellan style cases like the martini-example as lies because, in each case, the theory will count as asserted something the speaker believes to be false. However, as I explain below, this is not the case.

3

Consider first the case of metaphors. For concreteness, take Grice's (1989, 34) example in (1), also discussed by Keiser (2015, §2).

(1)   You're the cream in my coffee.

According to my view of lying, you lie when you say something you believe to be false and thereby propose to make that thing common ground. Hence, Keiser is right that my view invariably counts (1) as a lie only if the view is forced to accept that the following two claims are true for all instances of (1):

(a) The speaker of (1) says that the addressee is the cream in her coffee.

(b) By saying that the addressee is the cream in her coffee, the speaker of (1) proposes to make it common ground that the addressee is the cream in her coffee.

First, consider (a). There are broadly two ways of thinking about metaphors in relation to what is said. The first is the classic Gricean view, according to which metaphors are instances of conversational implicatures, and in particular, cases in which the speaker says – or strictly speaking, for Grice, "makes as if to say" – something false in order to implicate something true.[5] In particular, these are cases in which the speaker flouts the First Maxim of Quality, "Do not say what you believe to be false." The other school of thought is that the literal meaning of a metaphor is not said, and hence that the metaphorical meaning is not something that is conveyed by way of a Gricean inference. Instead the metaphorical meaning is expressed directly as what is said, and is not arrived at via an antecedent literal interpretation.[6] For convenience, call the latter stance the "anti-Gricean" view of metaphors.

So, according to the Gricean view, the speaker of (1) literally says that the addressee is the cream in her coffee. In doing so, she flouts the First Maxim of Quality, thereby inviting the hearer to infer the metaphorical meaning – i.e., that the speaker is fond of the addressee, or the like – as a conversational implicature. By contrast, according to the anti-Gricean view, the speaker of (1) directly expresses the metaphorical meaning as what is said by the utterance. As we will see next, on neither view is my theory of lying forced to accept both (a) and (b).

If the anti-Gricean view of metaphor is right, then (a) is false. If the speaker of (1) does not say the false literal meaning of her utterance, my theory of lying does not automatically count metaphorical utterances as lies. Still, if the metaphorical meaning of utterances like (1) is said by the speaker, my theory of lying does count

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[5]See Grice (1989, 34). Note that, if one follows Grice's strong view of non-literal speech as cases in which the speaker merely "makes as if to say" the literal meaning of her utterance, my view straightaway is not saddled with (a). For discussion, see Neale (1992) and Stokke (2013).

[6]For relevant discussion, see, e.g., Sperber and Wilson (1981), Stern (2000), Bach (2001), Bezuidenhout (2001), Camp (2011), Saul (2012).

such utterances as lies if the speaker believes the metaphorical meaning to be false. For instance, (1) will be a lie if the speaker is aware of not being fond of the addressee. Whether or not this is the right result is an open question – namely, the question of whether one can lie with metaphors or not.[7] But what we wanted to establish was that my theory does not *invariably* count metaphorical utterances as lies. Given an anti-Gricean view of metaphor, it does not.

On the other hand, if the Gricean view of metaphor is right, then (a) is true. But (b) is not. What is proposed for common ground uptake by an utterance of (1), in the right context, is not that the addressee is (literally) the cream in the speaker's coffee. Hence, on my view, even if the literal meaning of metaphorical utterances is said, it is not asserted. The whole point of uttering (1) is to communicate something else, e.g., that the speaker is fond of the addressee. This may or may not be what the speaker takes to be the truth about her sentiments toward the addressee. But either way, she is not lying, since, on the Gricean view, the metaphorical meaning is not said. Even if the speaker is using (1) to communicate something she believes to be false, such an utterance will be a case of merely implicating disbelieved information.

Given Keiser's remarks, quoted above, a possible interpretation of her worry is that, because common ground information is characterized in terms of the weak attitude of acceptance, my view will be forced to accept that the speaker of (1) proposes to make the literal meaning of her utterance common ground. But why should it? Why should we agree with the obviously false idea that the participants in the conversation, when (1) is uttered, come to accept for the purpose of the conversation that the addressee literally is the cream in the speaker's coffee? Of course, everyone will understand that that is not what the speaker is proposing to add to the common ground.

To corroborate the suggestion that the literal meaning of metaphorical utterances does not become common ground – even in the sense of being accepted for the purpose of the conversation – we can note that it cannot subsequently be felicitously presupposed. Suppose, for example, that Mona utters (1) to Jack, but that Jack does not hear her. Then consider the following utterance by one bystander to another both of whom did hear the utterance, and both of whom know that the other one heard it, etc.

(2)   #Jack doesn't realize that Mona thinks he's a dairy product.

The only way to hear this utterance is as a joke. By contrast, unsurprisingly, the metaphorical meaning can be felicitously presupposed, as illustrated by (3).

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[7]For discussion, see Saul (2012) and Fallis (2014).

(3)   Jack doesn't realize that Mona is crazy about him.

Since (3) felicitously presupposes that Mona is crazy about Jack, this is evidence that the metaphorical meaning of (1) becomes common ground, when uttered in normal contexts.

Still, Keiser's comments seem to suggest that the problem is that one can keep talking in the same metaphorical terms once a metaphorical utterance has been made. For example, the following utterance is also felicitous:

(4)   Jack doesn't realize that Mona thinks he's the cream in her coffee.

However, the felicity of (4) does not support the claim that the literal meaning of (1) becomes common ground. What is presupposed by (4) is the metaphorical meaning of "Mona thinks he's the cream in her coffee."[8] That is, on the relevant reading, (4) does not presuppose that Mona thinks Jack is a dairy product. The infelicity of this kind of presupposition is demonstrated by (2). The felicity of (4), therefore, does not support the suggestion that the literal meaning of (1) becomes common ground. And moreover, the fact that common ground information is characterized in terms of (belief about) what is accepted does not prevent the Stalnakerian from accepting these facts.

So, to sum up, the common ground view of discourse does not have to accept that the literal meaning of metaphorical utterances becomes common ground, regardless of whether one's view of metaphors implies that the literal meaning is said or not.

4

The second objection raised by Keiser concerns the example of using "the man drinking a martini" to communicate something true about someone known not to be drinking a martini. For concreteness, suppose that, at a cocktail party, Alice says to Bob,

(5)   The man drinking a martini is a philosopher.

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[8]The fact that metaphorical meaning survives embeddings – as in this case, under attitudes – is one major piece of evidence against the Gricean view of metaphors as cases of (particularized) conversational implicatures. As noted, if the Gricean view is wrong, my view of lying has an even easier time not counting all metaphorical utterances as lies.

According to my view of lying, (5) is a lie if and only if, in uttering (5), the speaker says something she believes to be false and thereby proposes to make that thing common ground. However, it is easy to see that my view does not have the consequence that this is so whenever the referent is known not to fit the description.

Call the man Alice is talking about Mike. In uttering (5), Alice does not say that Mike is drinking a martini. Rather, she is presupposing that he is. It is true that in doing so, she is proposing to make it common ground that Mike is drinking a martini, i.e., she is proposing that Bob accommodate this presupposition, assuming that it is not already common ground. As Stalnaker (2002, 718) emphasizes, the fact that common ground information is characterized in terms of the non-factive attitude of acceptance allows for cases of this kind in which something is being presupposed despite that the participants commonly know it to be false. Yet, there is nothing in the theory that forces it to accept that the speaker of (5) is *asserting* that the referent is drinking a martini.[9]

Since Alice is proposing to add to the common ground something she believes to be false, cases like this one are cases in which the speaker is potentially being misleading. But they are not cases of lying simply in virtue of presupposing something false. To be sure, on my view, (5) is a lie if Alice believes that Mike is not a philosopher. This, however, I take to be the right result.

5

My view of lying does not overgenerate by counting all metaphorical utterances as lies. Regardless of one's account of metaphorical meaning, the view does not have to accept both that the literal meaning of metaphors is said and proposed for common ground uptake. Nor does the view overgenerate by counting all Donnellan style cases as lies. Using a description to refer to a person known not to fit the description is not *eo ipso* to say something one believes to be false. Hence, neither in cases of metaphors nor in Donnellan style cases does my view of lying imply that speakers invariably assert disbelieved information.

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[9]On a Russellian view of definite descriptions, an utterance of "the man drinking a martini" asserts that there is a unique (salient) man drinking a martini. Hence, on such a view, it is harder to avoid the result that all utterances like Alice's utterance of (5) are lies. However, I take it that there are sufficient, independent reasons for rejecting a Russellian view of definite descriptions in favor of a presuppositional view. For recent discussion, see, e.g., Heim and Kratzer (1998), Elbourne (2005), (2010), Schoubye (2009), (2013), Glanzberg (2007), Kripke (2005).

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