Lies are Assertions and Presuppositions are Not*

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Abstract

Most philosophers agree that lies are assertions. Most also agree that to presuppose information is different from asserting it. In a series of papers, Viebahn (2020), (2021), along with an empirical study in Viebahn, Wiegmann, Engelmann, and Williemsen (2021), has recently argued that one can lie with presuppositions, and therefore one can assert that p by presupposing that p. The latter conclusion is a rejection of a cornerstone of modern philosophy of language and linguistics, and as such we should require strong reasons for accepting it. I argue here that the reasons for thinking that presuppositions can be lies are too weak to motivate giving up either the view that lies are assertions or the traditional distinction between presuppositions and assertions.

1 Introduction

Consensus in philosophy is rare. But sometimes, we get at least very close. One instance is the view that lies are assertions. That is, to lie is (at least) to assert some-

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thing one believes to be false. Indeed, most endorse some version of what is sometimes called "The Assertion-Based Definition of Lying":[1]

> **The Assertion-Based Definition of Lying** (AL)
> A lies to B iff there is a proposition p such that
> (AL1) A asserts that p, and
> (AL2) A believes that p is false.

Some will add a further condition to the effect that A intends to deceive B about whether p, or something to that effect. This will not play a role here. (But see 4.2.)

(AL) is motivated by at least two observations. First, ordinary cases of lying are captured by (AL). When someone tells you that they stayed home all night, even though they remember very well that they were out partying, they satisfy (AL1) and (AL2). Second, (AL) captures clear cases of the familiar, everyday phenomenon of misleading while avoiding lying, the most ordinary examples being saying something true in order to conversationally implicate something false. Here's an example:[2]

> **Work**
> Mark 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. Mark's annoying friend, Rebecca, comes up to him and starts talking to him about the party. Mark is fairly sure that Rebecca won't go unless she thinks he's going, too.

(1) Rebecca. Are you going to Paul's party?
Mark. I have to work.

As reflected by the (near-)consensus on (AL), the vast majority of philosophers will think that Mark did not lie, even though he was being misleading. (AL) explains this straightforwardly, given that Mark did not assert that he was not going to the

[1] See e.g. Chisholm and Feehan (1977), Adler (1997), Carson (2006), (2010), Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), Saul (2012), Stokke (2013), (2018).

[2] From Stokke (2018, 76)

party, but conversationally implicated that he was. Indeed, what he asserted – that he had to work – was true.

A central point of debate, however, concerns how to understand (AL1), or more generally, how to understand assertion. Different philosophers who endorse (AL) have different views on the nature of assertion. In a series of papers, Viebahn (2020), (2021), along with an empirical study in Viebahn et al. (2021), has proposed that there is a range of ways of communicating that can amount to lying, as opposed to merely misleading, and that, therefore, we need a notion of assertion that can accommodate them.

Two of the phenomena that Viebahn focuses on are presupposing something one believes to be false and communicating something one believes to be false by showing a picture (chiefly, photographs). Here I will focus on the former of these. I make no claim as to whether what I will have to say applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of pictures, as well.

Concerning presuppositions, Viebahn's overall argument is straightforward, as summarized below.

(V1) You can lie by presupposing that p.

(V2) Therefore, you can assert that p by presupposing that p.

In other words, since Viebahn thinks there are sufficiently strong reasons to agree that one can lie with presuppositions, and since he accepts the consensus view that lies are assertions, (AL), he is willing to give up another arguably even clearer case of a consensus in philosophy and linguistics, namely the distinction between presuppositions and assertions.

As such, Viebahn's project prompts us to ask what kind of evidence can count against widely accepted views that are otherwise well-motivated, and the implementation of which has spawned fruitful results. In this case, there are two such fundamental ideas in play: the view that lies are assertions, (AL), and the distinction between presuppositions and assertions. In other words, there are three salient options, summarized by the table below:

	(V1)	(V2)	(AL)
Option 1	✓	✓	✓
Option 2	✓	×	×
Option 3	×	×	✓

Viebahn takes Option 1. By contrast, I will argue for Option 3. (I will comment briefly on Option 2 in 3.1.)

In order to assess Viebahn's project, we need to take into consideration the reasons why we have traditionally taken presupposition and assertion to be two distinct categories, that is, why we have rejected (V2) ever since Frege (1997 [1892]) first discovered the phenomenon of presuppositions (at least within this tradition). I review these classic observations briefly in Section 2.

Having reminded ourselves of the motivations for this traditional distinction, we need to consider Viebahn's arguments for (V1), that is, for why we should think that presupposing something false can be a way of lying. In Sections 3 and 4 I argue that there are no reasons to accept (V1) strong enough to motivate giving up either (AL) or the traditional distinction between presupposition and assertion.

In Section 5 I conclude that we should resist (V1) while holding on to both the orthodox distinction between presupposition and assertion and the standard picture of lies as insincere assertions.

2 Why Do We Distinguish Presuppositions from Assertions, and Both from What is Said?

2.1 Presuppositions and What is Said

Frege (1997 [1892]) observed that certain sentences are associated with information in a particular kind of way. Consider his example of (2).

(2) The man who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits died in misery.

Frege observed that (2) is closely associated with (3).

(3) There was someone who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits.

Furthermore, Frege noted that although the information in (3) is linked with (2), the former cannot be regarded as an entailment, or logical consequence, of the latter. Instead he called it a presupposition (*Voraussetzung*).

Frege had an argument for this, which turned on the observation that the presupposition is unaffected by – or *projects* out of – standard negation.[3] For present purposes we can summarize this as follows. If (2) entails (3) (and not the other way around), the truth of the negation of (2) is consistent with either the truth or falsity of (3). But consider the negation of (2):

(4) The man who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits did not die in misery.

Clearly, there is a strong sense in which this sentence *requires* the truth of (3). (4) seems to carry the information that there was someone who made the great discovery and did not die in misery. Hence, (3) is not an entailment of (2). Rather, the relation appears to be stronger than entailment.

As work in this area progressed, we discovered that other sentences exhibit the same kind of phenomenon, as in the hackneyed case of (5) and its negation, (6).

(5) Naomi stopped smoking.

(6) Naomi didn't stop smoking.

Both (5) and (6) imply that Naomi used to smoke, or has been smoking. (Here we use "implied" in an intuitive, non-technical sense.) Again, therefore, the latter information cannot be an entailment of (5) – nor of (6) for that matter. Since this fits the Fregean pattern perfectly, we take this case to be another example of presupposition.

This gave rise to the by now generally accepted characterization of (semantic) presuppositions as constraints on truth-values:[4]

[3] See Frege (1997 [1892], 163).

[4] Cf. e.g. Searle (1969, 126).

A presupposes that B iff: A is true or false only if B is true.

A corollary of this picture, then, is that the non-presuppositional content of (5) – that Naomi stopped smoking – is its truth-conditional content. The latter is also often called *what is said*. In other words, on this standard picture, (5) *says* that Naomi stopped smoking while *presupposing* that she used to. So as long as it is true that Naomi used to smoke, (5) is true if and only if she stopped (and false if she did not). This idea is confirmed by the fact that, when applied to (6), we get exactly the right result: given that Naomi used to smoke, (6) is true if and only if she did not stop smoking.

2.2 Assertion

Concurrently, during the 20th century, philosophers in the broad tradition of so-called ordinary language philosophy began to develop a systematic understanding of the phenomenon of speech acts. Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and other pioneers provided us with the notion of an *assertion* (already present in Frege's writings). We use this notion to describe a particular class of speech acts, that is, a particular way of using sentences for certain purposes.

A fundamental discovery about speech acts was the observation that which speech act is performed by a particular utterance is underdetermined by what is said by the relevant sentence, or sentences. This was the observation that Geach (1965) took from Frege (1997 [1918]) according to which the content of an utterance is distinct from its linguistic force.

In the case of declarative sentences, the observation is that you can say that p without asserting that p.[5] This is how we describe what happens in cases like joking or irony. If a standup comedian on stage doing her act utters,

(7) Obama went bungee jumping.

she has not asserted that Obama went bungee jumping, even though she clearly said that. Indeed, her utterance is true if and only if Obama went bungee jumping.

[5]Frege (1997 [1918]) already noted this, too.

Yet force is distinct from content in the sense that one may utter a sentence that is true if and only if p without thereby having put forward that p as a claim about what is actually true. Distinguishing assertion from what is said in this way is an elegant and natural way of capturing utterances like (7), and others like it. Other ways of saying something without asserting it includes practicing one's pronunciation or diction, dictating examples of English sentences to students as a spelling exercise, and so on.

Through a remarkably successful history of collaboration between philosophy and linguistics, once we understood presuppositions better, and their relation to assertion and what is said, we came to realize that presupposition is broader than just the phenomenon of information being implied by both a sentence and its negation, and is found for many other linguistic environments, too.[6] For instance, the utterances in (8) usually also imply that Naomi has been smoking:[7]

(8) a. Naomi might have stopped smoking.
b. Jordan thinks Naomi stopped smoking.
c. If Naomi stopped smoking, her roommate must be happy.
d. Either Naomi stopped smoking or her roommate doesn't care.
e. Did Naomi stop smoking?

The crucial observation about these further cases of presupposition was that none of them assert anything about whether Naomi has stopped smoking or not. None of (8a–e) can be used (except perhaps in some outlandish contexts) to claim that Naomi stopped smoking, or did not.

Again, our three-way distinction between presupposition, assertion, and what is said is corroborated. Cases like (8a–e) show that you can presuppose things even when you are not making any relevant assertions. And moreover, while examples of non-declarative clause types, as in (8e), do present some separate issues, at least cases like (8a–d) are standardly regarded as more evidence for the force-content

[6] See Beaver (2001, ch. 1) and Simons (2006) for overviews of this tradition.

[7] Compare the list of triggers in Geurts (1999, ch. 1) and Simons (2006, 357). The reason it is less natural to formulate the presupposition as "used to smoke" in these cases is that they do not assert that she stopped.

distinction, in that they involve saying that Naomi stopped smoking, as well as presupposing that she has been smoking, without asserting anything about either matter.[8]

In more recent years, theorists have expanded the canvas and noted that "not all that projects is a (standard classical) presupposition." (Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver, & Roberts, 2010, 310) A range of expression types, including appositives, expressives, and non-restrictive relative clauses, have been shown to trigger inferences that survive embeddings in environments like those in (8a–e).[9] This has led to efforts to understand projection as a general phenomenon, one influential view being that projection is a function of a certain kind of information structure:

> the relevant implications of these diverse expression types project because they share a pragmatic property, namely *not-at-issueness* (Simons et al., 2010, 311)

In turn, Simons et al. (2010) define at-issueness in terms of Roberts's (2012 [1996]) notion of *questions under discussion* (QUDs).[10] On this view, a proposition p is at-issue relative to a QUD $?q$ if and only if $?p$ is relevant to $?q$. For instance, roughly, that Bill drinks beer is relevant to the QUD "What will Bill drink?" in that "Does Bill drink beer?" is a relevant questions to address in a strategy toward answering that QUD.

This research program is a direct heir to the tradition from Frege. Indeed, Simons et al. (2010, 315) explicitly relate the notion of information not being at-issue to it not being asserted. Yet, as we should expect, the picture has evolved to a more nuanced one where certain projective contents are sometimes seen as asserted in virtue of their exhibiting a particularly strong projection pattern.[11] (We return to

[8] Whatever one thinks of the meanings of interrogative clauses, no one should deny that, for instance, the meaning of (8e) relates in a systematic way to the meaning of "Naomi stopped smoking."

[9] See also e.g. Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990), Potts (2005), Simons (2006), AnderBois, Brasoveanu, and Henderson (2010) for more discussion.

[10] Stokke (2018) employs this framework in a definition of what is said and assertion, and in turn of the lying-misleading distinction.

[11] See e.g. Potts (2005, 24).

this in 3.2.) Even so, standard presuppositions, it is fair to say, continue to be almost universally regarded as not asserted.

Summing up, then, we are heirs to a strikingly fruitful lineage of formative research in the intersection between philosophy and linguistics spanning the last 130 odd years. Giant steps have been taken in understanding semantics and pragmatics and their interfaces with syntax, extra-linguistic context, and many other aspects of language use. It is clearly true to say that a centerpiece of this body of research has been the discovery of presuppositions and the recognition that presuppositions should be distinguished from assertions, and that both should be distinguished from what is said (or truth-conditional content).

3 Presuppositions and Commitment

3.1 Disbelieved Presuppositions

Consider again our distillation of Viebahn's project:

(V1) You can lie by presupposing that p.

(V2) Therefore, you can assert that p by presupposing that p.

As we can now see, (V2) is a direct rejection of one of the central observations of the heritage sketched above. It is safe to say that we should require very strong reasons for this plunge.

It is important to be clear about how (V1) is intended to be read. As Viebahn makes explicit, (V1) is to be understood as the claim that the relevant utterances are lies "*because* of the disbelieved presuppositions in play." (Viebahn, 2020, 731) To see what is at stake here, consider the following story:[12]

> **Brother**
> Anne wants Bert to think she has a brother, although she knows that this is not the case. When Bert asks Anne what she is up to after work, she replies:

[12] From Viebahn (2020, 734).

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

Bert comes to believe that Anne has a brother.

Viebahn's judgment on this case is that "the utterance is clearly a lie, and this lie seems to have something to do with the presupposition [...]." (Viebahn, 2020, 734)

However, as Viebahn immediately goes on to recognize, "one might argue that although [(9)] is a lie, this is so because of its non-presuppositional content." (loc. cit.) That is, one might think that, if (9) is a lie, it is because of what it asserts, rather than its disbelieved presupposition. What Anne asserted was that she was meeting her brother at the station. On the classic view of presuppositions outlined earlier, since it is false that she has a brother, this assertion (what is said by her utterance) is neither true nor false and as such defective or undefined. So if one agrees that (9) is a lie, one can try to point to this status of what is said by Anne's utterance.

Suppose you are sympathetic to the view that (9) is a lie and that the reason has to do with what was said, the truth-conditional content of the utterance. If so, it is nevertheless not obvious that Anne's lie in uttering (9) is captured by (AL), as it stands.

The Assertion-Based Definition of Lying (AL)
A lies to B iff there is a proposition p such that
(AL1) A asserts that p, and
(AL2) A believes that p is false.

The issue is whether Anne satisfied (AL2). Given that (9) lacks a truth-value due to the presupposition failure, did Anne assert something she believed to be false?

There are two ways of answering. First, one can argue that despite appearances (9) does satisfy (AL2). Namely, because it is plausible that Anne did believe that it was false that she was meeting her brother. Indeed, it has often been suggested that the phenomenon of presupposition failure should lead us to "reconsider the straightforward identification [...] between the semantic values 1 and 0 and the pre-theoretical notions of truth and falsity," as Heim and Kratzer (1998, 77) put it.[13]

[13]Cf. e.g. Yablo (2006), Schoubye (2009).

Further, they note that it is not implausible to think that "the colloquial term "false" covers both truth-value-less sentences and those that are false in the technical sense of denoting 0." (loc. cit.)

It is likely that, in many cases of this kind, if asked whether what they said was false, they would reply "yes." So it is plausible that many speakers like Anne do satisfy (AL2). However, obviously, this raises the further issue of cases in which agents in fact do think that what they asserted is neither true nor false. Perhaps Anne is a philosopher or a linguist, whose beliefs do distinguish between falsehood and lack of truth-value. Or suppose you see a spot on your friend's shirt that you think does not clearly look red but also does not clearly look not red. Yet you tell your friend that there is a red spot there to make them think they spilt red wine on their shirt. Are such speakers lying? That is a question for another time.

Yet there is a second way of responding to this issue, namely to simply weaken (AL2) to the requirement that A believes that p is not true (or untrue). This is satisfied in all the ordinary cases where liars assert things they believe to be false (as long as they are not irrational in the relevant respect) and it is also satisfied in cases where the speaker thinks what she says is neither true nor false.[14] So there is a relatively low-cost way of agreeing that cases like (9) are lies, while not accepting that their presuppositions are asserted.

Given this, (V1), *qua* putative motivation for (V2), should be seen as a claim about utterances involving disbelieved presupposition but where, on the standard view, there is no relevant assertion being made. To this end, Viebahn focuses mainly on interrogatives embedding presupposition triggers. Here is one of Viebahn's examples:[15]

> **Mercedes**
> Harry wants Rosa to think that his friend John is wealthy. In fact, John is not wealthy and does not own a car, as Harry knows very well. Harry asks Rosa:

[14] See Stokke (2014) for some discussion of insincere speech involving contradictory attitudes on the part of the speaker.

[15] From Viebahn (2020, 735).

(10) Did you know that John owns a Mercedes?

Rosa comes to believe that John owns a Mercedes.

According to Viebahn, Harry is lying by uttering (10). Here is another of his examples:[16]

Beggar
A beggar approaches a passer-by to ask him for money. Although the beggar has no children, he asks the passer-by:

(11) Could you spare one pound for my ill son?

The passer-by comes to believe that the beggar has an ill son.

Again Viebahn maintains that the beggar lied by uttering (11).

As opposed to (9), in these cases of interrogatives with disbelieved presuppositions, the only way to count them as lies, while holding on to (AL), is to count the presuppositions as asserted. This is Viebahn's conclusion, or what we called Option 1 earlier. So, according to this view, (10) asserts that John owns a Mercedes, while asking whether Rosa knows that. (11) asserts that the speaker has an ill son, while asking whether the passer-by can spare a pound for his ill son. As we have seen, this is a fundamental re-orientation of the conception of assertion and presupposition that emerged from the Fregean tradition.

On the other hand, even if one ends up deciding that the pressure to count these interrogative utterances as lies is strong enough, one can give up (AL) to avoid (V2). This is Option 2 from above. Even though many philosophers, including myself, have endorsed (AL), I suspect that many would give up or modify (AL) rather than denounce the legacy of distinguishing presuppositions from assertions. I certainly would. That is, rather than concluding that we have been wrong all along and there is no distinction between presupposing something and asserting it, we might conclude that while lies are usually assertions, in the right cases, one can lie in virtue of a disbelieved presupposition.

[16] From Viebahn (2020, 736).

Yet, as already advertised, I think the motivations for (V1) are far from strong enough to force us to give up either (AL) or our Fregean inheritance. This is Option 3. It is not in dispute whether utterances like (10) and (11) are misleading, and it is not in dispute whether the speaker deceives the listener in such cases. No one should deny these characterizations. What is in dispute is just whether we should agree with (V1) that they are instances of lying. Indeed, it is open to the proponent of (AL) to insist that they are especially effective and clear-cut cases of misleading and deception, while stopping short of agreeing that they are outright lies. This is the view I favor.

3.2 Local Accommodation and Commitment

Viebahn gives two main motivations for (V1):

(V1a) Presupposing that p commits one to p.

(V1b) Ordinary speakers judge the relevant cases of presupposing something believed to be false to be lies.

I discuss (V1a) in the rest of this section. In the next section, I turn to (V1b).

We should mention a caveat up front.[17] In some places, Viebahn attenuates his endorsement of (V1a), as in this passage:

> In the examples of presuppositional lies I have presented, the speakers do commit themselves to the presuppositions they intend to convey, which they take to be false. Furthermore, it seems plausible that speakers are not always committed to what they presuppose. (Viebahn, 2020, 743)

One reason for this is the observation that "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." (loc. cit.) In this case, of course, no one would think the speaker has lied, and indeed she may not even have said anything at all.[18] Regardless, the argument I am interested in is the argument that, in the cases that (V1a) targets – chiefly,

[17] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this.

[18] See also Stokke (2018, ch. 5) for discussion.

cases of uttering something that presupposes that p – the relevant utterances are lies.

What kind of commitment is associated with presuppositions, on Viebahn's view? He gives the following description:

> A speaker commits herself to a proposition (in the sense relevant for the lying-misleading distinction) iff she takes on a responsibility to justify (or defend) that she *knows* the proposition in question. [...] Specifically, she has taken on the relevant kind of responsibility with respect to a proposition iff she cannot consistently dismiss audience challenges to justify her knowledge of that proposition. (Viebahn, 2021, 302)

In other words, (V1a) amounts to the claim that uttering any of our examples repeated below involves taking on the responsibility of justifying that one knows that Naomi used to smoke (or has been smoking).

(5) Naomi stopped smoking.

(6) Naomi didn't stop smoking.

(8) a. Naomi might have stopped smoking.
b. Jordan thinks Naomi stopped smoking.
c. If Naomi stopped smoking, her roommate must be happy.
d. Either Naomi stopped smoking or her roommate doesn't care.
e. Did Naomi stop smoking?

I want to make two observations on this. First, when one looks closer, there are reasons to think that presuppositions are in fact not committing in the relevant sense. Second, even if one wants to insist that presuppositions are committing, and hence that (V1a) is true, it does not motivate counting presuppositions as asserted.

The distinctive feature of presuppositions is not just that they project out of entailment-canceling environments such as modal operators, antecedents of conditionals, questions, negation, and so on. The distinctive feature of presuppositions is that they *sometimes but not always* do so. We describe this by saying that presuppositions can be *locally* accommodated. This was another foundational discovery

about presuppositions, and it is why we speak of a projection *problem* for presuppositions.[19]

I will not go through scenarios, or contexts, to make vivid each of these readings for all of the cases above, since it is uncontroversial that they are found. But some brief comments will be useful. I can utter (8a) in a setting where we are wondering about who among our colleagues have once been smokers and have quit smoking. In that kind of scenario, I am not presupposing that Naomi used to be a smoker, but merely that she might have been a smoker. I can utter (8b) in a scenario where everyone knows that Naomi never smoked, but I want to convey that Jordan is confused and thinks Naomi used to be a smoker and then later quit.

There are similar contexts for the other cases. (6) can convey that Naomi has never smoked – and hence, trivially, has not stopped smoking. (8c) can covey that if Naomi used to smoke but has stopped, her roommate must be happy. (8d) can convey that either Naomi used to smoke but has stopped or her roommate does not care. And finally, (8e) can be used to ask whether Naomi used to smoke but has stopped.

This puts pressure on the idea that presuppositions are committing. Suppose I want you to think that Naomi has been a smoker, even though I know she never smoked. I tell you (8a). You challenge me by asking me how I know that Naomi has been smoking. As a response I can say that I simply meant that she might be someone who used to smoke but has quit, and that I was not trying to convey that she definitely has been smoking.

Needless to say, I will be considered annoying, uncooperative, and transparently disingenuous. Yet that is the same result as will usually ensue from denying a conversational implicature.[20] In both cases the reason is that such a denial amounts

[19] In early work, such as Stalnaker (1999 [1974]) and Gazdar (1979), this phenomenon was often known as presupposition "cancelation". Foundational works also include Karttunen (1974), Soames (1982), Heim (2002 [1983]). For a useful overview, see Beaver and Zeevat (2007).

[20] Viebahn (2021) rightly distinguishes ordinary "additive" conversational implicatures, as in Work, from "substitutive" implicatures, which occur in cases like hyperbole and metaphor. I cannot discuss this issue in depth here, yet I agree that the latter are committing in Viebahn's sense. Indeed, I think this, and other aspects such as embedding, speaks in favor of not regarding such

to claiming that one thought the context was radically different from what it was, and such claims are typically wildly implausible.

By contrast, the main reason we distinguish presuppositions from *conventional* implicatures is that the latter cannot be locally accommodated. This is why they are regarded as assertions – albeit of a secondary nature due to their projective behavior – and correspondingly why some have argued that one can lie with conventional implicatures.[21] Consider, for instance, (12).

(12) Did Naomi stop smoking, as her mother told me?

If I tell you (12), there is no way for me to later deny that I wanted to convey that Naomi's mother told me that she stopped smoking. I can deny that I think that Naomi stopped smoking. And I can deny that I think that she has been smoking at all. But I cannot deny having claimed that Naomi's mother told me that Naomi stopped smoking.

Given what we said above concerning Viebahn's argument, it is particularly important to see that interrogatives embedding presupposition triggers also allow local accommodation. Again, consider a scenario in which we are wondering who among our colleagues have been smokers and have quit smoking. In such a context I might utter (8e) to ask whether Naomi is one such colleague. In that case I am not presupposing that she used to smoke.

Correspondingly, in a scenario where I know that Naomi never smoked, but I am using (8e) to try to make you believe that she did, I can claim that I only wanted to ask whether she is someone who used to smoke but has quit. Again, I will be uncooperative and obviously dishonest, but the contrast with (12) is clear, let alone of course with a case where I flat-out assert that Naomi used to be a smoker.

What about the particular cases that Viebahn chooses to appeal to, chiefly (10) and (11)? Clearly, for the latter, one can find local accommodation readings. For instance, in (13) I am not presupposing that I have an ill son.

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cases as standard particularized conversational implicatures, but rather as part of what is said. See also Stokke (2018, 69–72).

[21] See Viebahn (2020, 747) and Stokke (2017).

(13) So you're saying you can't spare any money for charity? What if I had an ill son? Could you spare a pound for my ill son?

On the other hand, local accommodation is not readily available for (10), if at all. The reading would be something like, "Did John own a Mercedes, and if so, did you know that?" While this reading is not incoherent, there are bound to be reasons for why it is hard to find a context where it would be salient pertaining to this particular trigger.[22] Regardless, the claim that presuppositions are committing, that is, (V1a), should not rest on special cases but should be a general claim.

Trivially, there are no local accommodation readings of unembedded presupposition, such as (5) or (9). As such, it may be that we should ultimately say that presuppositions are deniable when they can project, that is, when the trigger is embedded, since those are the environments that allow local accommodation. Even so, the contrast with conventional implicatures is clear. And moreover, the unembedded cases are precisely those that, as we saw above, do appear to be lies in virtue of the untruth of what is said in the presence presupposition failure.

To deny that there are contexts in which one can claim (albeit falsely) to have intended a local accommodation reading subsequent to having conveyed a disbelieved presupposition is to deny data. Yet, of course, one might want to insist that such cases do not show that presuppositions are not committing in the relevant sense. I think such an argument looks question begging at this stage. Yet, as I argue below, even if one wants to maintain that presuppositions are committing, it is unclear that this should motivate one to regard them as asserted.

Familiarly, a longstanding view, found in Searle (1969), Brandom (1983), Wright (1992), MacFarlane (2010), and many others, has been that assertion is associated with commitments. Yet few in this tradition would think that we should thereby deny the distinction between presuppositions and assertions. One quote from MacFarlane (2010) will have to serve as an example here:

> in asserting that Jane has not stopped beating her husband, one does not also assert (but only presupposes) that Jane has been beating her husband.

[22] One suggestion is that "Did you know that p?" has become a standard way of simply saying that p, similarly to the way "It is expensive, isn't it?" does not ask whether it is expensive.

(MacFarlane, 2010, 82)

It is not difficult to see how one can accept this distinction while also accepting that presuppositions engender commitments. Here is a simple, schematic version of such a view:

Commitment-Assertion Schema (CA)
A asserts that p iff there is a proposition p such that
(CA1) A says that p, and
(CA2) A commits to p.

Indeed, many will think, quite generally, that a theory of assertion (in these respects) is a theory of what is needed for asserting that p *in addition* to saying that p, or uttering a sentence with the conventional meaning that p, or something similar.

As we saw, there are classic reasons why we need a notion of what is said (or something equivalent) in addition to the notion of assertion, namely because of the distinction between force and content. Correspondingly, if one is attracted to characterizing what is distinctive about assertion in terms of commitments, it is straightforward to hold that, in such cases, one says that p without committing to p. This is captured by (CA), in that (CA1) classifies presuppositions and conversational implicatures as not asserted, and (CA2) classifies jokes, practicing one's pronunciation, irony, and so on as not asserted, in accordance with the standard observations we made in Section 2.[23]

In other words, there are reasons to think that (V1a) is less convincing that may at first appear, due to local accommodation. And independently, it is unclear that it motivates counting presuppositions as asserted.

4 An Experimental Result

4.1 Non-Philosophers' Judgments and Philosophical Theorizing

We now turn to (V1b).

[23]Depending on one's views of commitment and implicatures, the latter may be discounted by both (CA1) and (CA2).

(V1b) Ordinary speakers judge the relevant cases of presupposing something believed to be false to be lies.

The support for this claim comes from an empirical study presented in Viebahn et al. (2021). Participants were given a number of vignettes and were asked yes-no questions concerning whether the situations described involved lying, misleading, or deception. Overall, in this study, a large majority of participants answered "Yes" to "Did Harry lie to Rosa?" when presented with Mercedes, and similarly for Beggar and other cases.

As such, the question of how to assess (V1b) is an instance of the general issue of how, if at all, philosophical theories should react to empirical evidence concerning how speakers with little or no familiarity with philosophical theorizing tend to reply to certain questions, or what they otherwise tend to say about philosophical matters.[24] The debate over this issue, and others in the vicinity, is now a well-established subdiscipline of philosophy itself, concerned with philosophical methodology, and in particular, so-called experimental philosophy.[25] We cannot review even parts of this debate here. Below, I first offer some general considerations before commenting on Viebahn et al. (2021) specifically.[26]

Suppose for the sake of argument that we had conclusive, replicated, unambiguous evidence that a clear majority of ordinary speakers think that cases like

[24]More particularly, the issue is not specifically over philosophical training or academic education in philosophy *per se* but over familiarity and proficiency with philosophical thinking concerning the topic at hand.

[25]Much of this literature concerns the so-called "negative program" involving putative empirical evidence to show that judgments are influenced by irrelevant factors such as gender or cultural background, this having been seen as undermining philosophical methodology, which allegedly relies heavily on "intuitions" about thought experiments. This issue is distinct from the one under discussion here concerning putative evidence to show that non-philosophers' judgments conflict with those found in the philosophical literature. For a small sample of literature on experimental philosophy, see e.g. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001), Knobe (2003), Williamson (2007), (2011), Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg (2008), Buckwalter and Stich (2011), (2014), Cappelen (2012). And see Knobe and Nichols (2017) for an overview.

[26]Much of what I say here is a version of the so-called "expertise defense" found in Williamson (2007, ch. 6), (2011).

Mercedes or Beggar are instances of lying. Make the evidence as strong as you like. For short, suppose we *knew* that the majority of ordinary speakers think utterances of interrogative sentences with disbelieved presuppositions are lies. Clearly, even in such a situation, it does not follow that such utterances are lies without at least one further assumption. Namely, the obviously false assumption that if ordinary speakers think an utterance is a lie, then it is a lie.

This is not to deny that philosophers and non-philosophers are using the same concepts of lying, misleading, and deception, and that the corresponding terms mean the same in the mouths of both groups. Nor does this rule out that a theory of lying should accord with folk intuitions, as many theorists accept.[27] Even if one thinks that a motivated and clear philosophical theory should not be in opposition to what people think about the subject, it may of course very well be that people are in general imperfect in their ability to apply the relevant concepts. Even if we all use the same concepts when speaking of emotions, biases, recessions, epidemics, languages, classes, and myriads of other things, it is likely that many are confused about their proper application.

Philosophical topics such as lying, knowledge, justice, harm, personal identity, or beauty are no different. It is a platitude that a central aim, and benefit, of learning and practicing philosophy is to reduce such confusions and to acquire the corresponding skills. To be sure, as Williamson (2011) notes, this observation

> does not imply that a good philosophical education involves the cultivation of a mysterious *sui generis* faculty of rational intuition, or anything of the kind. Rather, it is supposed to improve far more mundane skills, such as careful attention to details in the description of the scenario and their potential relevance to the questions at issue. (Williamson, 2011, 216)

Correspondingly, even if it was shown that the vast majority of people think that, say, Mercedes is a case of lying, it would still not amount to more than one factor, or consideration, among many others, which may have more or less weight against the other dimensions of theory choice in the relevant area. Of course, the weight we should give to this kind of evidence will be weakened considerably by reasons

[27] See e.g. of Carson (2006), Fallis (2009), Saul (2012), Arico and Fallis (2013).

to think that the ordinary speakers in question were confused in their application of the relevant concepts.

4.2 Unskilled Application of Shared Concepts

Given this, it is not without interest to ask what Viebahn et al. (2021) can tell us about how ordinary speakers react to cases involving lying and misleading. In Experiment 1 of Viebahn et al. (2021), 96.7% of the participants answered "Yes" to the question "Did Harry lie to Rosa?" in Mercedes.[28] Viebahn et al. comment,

> A potential explanation for this finding holds that ordinary speakers have an undifferentiated concept of lying and that they hence do not distinguish between lying on the one hand, and misleading utterances or deceptive behaviour on the other. (Viebahn et al., 2021, 192)

Experiment 2 of the study therefore aimed to test this

> by adding utterances and behaviours that philosophers consider to be uncontroversial cases of deceiving (without lying) or misleading (without lying). (loc. cit.)

Two of the vignettes designed for this purpose were Therapist (a variation on Saul, 2012, vii) and Football Fan, reproduced below.

> **Therapist**
> A physical therapist is treating a woman who is not in touch with her son anymore. The woman knows that her son is seeing the same therapist and asks the therapist whether her son is alright. The therapist saw the son yesterday (at which point he was fine), but knows that shortly after their meeting he was hit by a truck and killed. The therapist doesn't think it is the right moment for the woman to find out about her son's death and so, for now, wants her to think that her son

[28] In the experiment the formulation of the case was slightly different from that in Viebahn (2020), in that the vignette for the study omitted the specification that "Harry knows very well" that John does not own a Mercedes. I ignore this here, since it plausibly would not have altered the results.

is fine. In response to the woman's question whether her son is alright he says: "I saw him yesterday and he was happy and healthy." The woman comes to believe that her son is fine.

Football Fan

Dennis wants to go to a party that the local football club is organising for its fans. He isn't interested in football and isn't a fan of the local football club, but he knows that the organisers will check at the door and only let in fans of the club. He buys a jersey of the club and dresses in suitable colours in order to make the organisers at the door think that he is a fan. When he arrives at the party, the organisers see his outfit and indeed come to think that he is a fan of the club, so they let him enter.

In Experiment 2 89.7% answered "Yes" to the question "Did Harry lie to Rosa?" concerning Mercedes. In both experiments, moreover, over 90% answered "Yes" when asked about a control case of a clear lie, that is, an utterance of a disbelieved declarative sentence with the intent to deceive, and over 90% answered "No" to whether a control case of a clear non-lie was a lie. In addition, in Experiment 2, 50.5% answered "Yes" to the question of whether the therapist lied in Therapist and 44.9% answered "Yes" to whether Dennis lied in Football Fan.

Viebahn et al. argue that if the potential explanation for the judgment in Mercedes were as indicated above,

> we should expect that people do not differentiate between cases involving disinformative questions and cases usually considered as clear examples of deceiving and misleading. Both should be clearly judged as lies. (loc. cit.)

However, if the participants distinguished lying from merely misleading, we should rather expect something resembling the opposite result from cases like Mercedes and the clear cases of lying. That is, Therapist and Football Fan should be judged as non-lies by a majority comparable to the proportion who judged the clear non-lies as non-lies.

Instead, since about half of the participants judged Therapist and Football Fan as lies, about half of the judgments clearly diverged from those of the vast majority of philosophers, who unequivocally think that such cases are not cases of lying, albeit of misleading or deception.[29] As I said above, rather than conclude that the participants in the study were simply using different concepts from those used and discussed by philosophers, a more plausible conclusion is that they are unskilled in applying them and insensitive to the the relevant distinctions, and to the relevant aspects of the examples described.

In particular, a plausible conclusion to draw is that the participants' judgments were based on, at least, the following three factors or ideas, all in competition with each other in an unsystematic way (given here in no particular order):

(i) Not lying involves saying something one believes to be true.

(ii) Lying involves saying something/making an utterance.

(iii) Lying involves being highly misleading/deceptive.

This would explain the majority judgment on Mercedes as being a lie because the utterance is clearly highly misleading and the speaker did not say anything they believed to be true. By contrast, the clear non-lies were judged as non-lies by the majority because they are not misleading at all and what the speaker said was something they believed to be true.

On the other hand, this rough picture explains that while about half judged Football Fan as lying because it was highly misleading, about half judged it as not a lie because no utterance was made at all. For Therapist, we can see about half as judging the utterance as a lie because it was highly misleading and about half as judging it as not a lie because the speaker said something they believed to be true. Concerning the smaller groups that thought that Football Fan and Therapist were lies but not misleading or deceptive, it is harder to speculate. One not implausible

[29]This is true of Augustine (1952 [395]), Kant (1997 [1784–85]), Adler (1997), Williams (2002), Carson (2006), (2010), Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), Saul (2012), Stokke (2013), (2018), and countless others.

suggestion is that some participants understood questions like "Did so-and-so mislead/deceive so-and-so?" as asking whether they *merely* or *only* misled or deceived, that is, while avoiding lying.

This way of understanding the judgments supports the hypothesis that these surveyed participants were not using different concepts. Rather, what our philosophical theories do, among other things, is to clarify such ingredient or associated ideas, determine their relations, and dispel inconsistencies.

For example, most philosophical theories agree that (i) is true read as a sufficient condition concerning the relevant kinds of cases. As noted above, (ii) is unanimously accepted, read as a necessary condition. By contrast, as an instance of the kind of endeavor undertaken by philosophy, much debate in this century has concerned (iii). Some think that (iii) is not true in general, albeit it holds for ordinary cases of lying.[30] Others see lying as in itself a form of deception.[31] And so on, for other areas of this pre-theoretical landscape.

5 Lies are Assertions and Presuppositions are Not

Rather than give up either the widely accepted view that lies are assertions, on which philosophers over a long period of research have converged, or the even more fundamental distinction between assertion and presupposition in the face of examples like Mercedes or Beggar, we should regard these cases as instances of highly misleading and deceptive utterances that are nevertheless not instances of lying.

Indeed, the classic conception of presuppositions gives us a way of understanding why they are particularly effective or direct cases of misleading and deception. Namely, because presuppositions are lexically encoded by the relevant triggers, as witnessed by their being constraints on truth-values in the declarative cases. This is the contrast to conversational implicatures, and as such also with the more commonly discussed cases of misleading while stopping short of lying: the examples

[30] Cf. e.g. Sorensen (2007), Fallis (2009), Stokke (2013), (2018).

[31] Cf. e.g. Augustine (1952 [395]), Isenberg (1964), Williams (2002), Lackey (2013), Mahon (2015).

of false implicature like Therapist or Work.

To put it another way, it follows directly from the definition of presuppositions that you cannot say (or assert) something true while presupposing something false, in the relevant sense. This means that presupposition does not lend itself to the kind of misleading while speaking truly with a declarative that we find in the classic cases of conversationally implicating something false by saying something true.

Nevertheless, as I argued, it not clear that presuppositions engender commitments in the majority of cases, and even if one thinks they do, this should not motivate us to agree that you can assert that Naomi used to smoke by all of the utterances in (8), no more than you can assert that she stopped.

(8) a. Naomi might have stopped smoking.
    b. Jordan thinks Naomi stopped smoking.
    c. If Naomi stopped smoking, her roommate must be happy.
    d. Either Naomi stopped smoking or her roommate doesn't care.
    e. Did Naomi stop smoking?

Furthermore, while the study in Viebahn et al. (2021) does not allow firm conclusions, we have seen that the most plausible explanation for its findings is that people who are not used to thinking systematically and persistently about these issues tend to conflate distinctions and misapply concepts.

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