

LYING ABOUT

RICHARD HOLTON

Abstract: We do not report lies with *that*-clauses but with *about*-clauses: he lied about x. It is argued that this is because the content of a lie need not be the content of what is said, and *about*-clauses give us the requisite flexibility. Building on the work of Stephen Yablo, an attempt is made to give an account of lying *about* in terms of partial content and topic.

The philosophical literature on lying is overwhelmingly concerned with the issue of what one must do in order to lie. Very little is said about how to characterize the content of a lie. It might be thought that this is unsurprising, since the answer to that question is trivial: when one lies, one asserts (or says) something, and the content of the lie is simply the content of the assertion (or of the thing said).¹ Here I argue that that is false.

Part of the reason that little attention has been paid to the content of lies is that little attention has been paid to the ways in which they are naturally reported. So let us start there. If M says ‘Ms Price is in Barcelona’, we may report him using a simple *that*-clause:

(1) M said that Ms Price is in Barcelona.

But suppose M is lying; he knows full well she is in Slough. Would we naturally say:

(2) M lied that Ms Price is in Barcelona?

No. Such a construction lives in the borderland of ungrammaticality. Instead we would naturally use an *aboutness* construction, perhaps:

(3) M lied about where Ms Price is;

or, giving more specificity:

¹ The issue of whether lying should be characterized in terms of saying (stating), or in terms of assertion, though much discussed, is largely orthogonal to the concerns here.

(4) M lied about Ms Price being in Barcelona.²

Why? It seems odd to move away from the very words that M used and give instead an *about*-clause that requires some paraphrasing on our part.

Sometimes we use *about*-clauses to retreat from specificity. Consider, for instance:

- (5) She knows about roses;
- (6) She worried about her mother.

Such sentences, where the *about*-clause picks out a subject matter, can be usefully less specific than similar sentences taking sentential complements:

- (7) She knows that roses flourish in clay soils;
- (8) She worried that her mother would not be able to cope.

So a first thought might be that we are removing specificity in this way when we report a lie with an *about*-clause. Perhaps sometimes that is so. It has some plausibility in the case of (3). But it doesn't look to be the explanation for (4). *About*-clauses can be just as specific as sentential ones. (Or, more precisely, just as specific about their subject matters: we'll return to this at the end.)

Focussing on the idea of *less* specificity is to miss the general point. *About*-clauses allow us to *change* the specificity. By restricting us to particular subject matters, they also allow us to be *more* specific about the nature of the lie than we would be if we kept with what the speaker had said when they lied.

To see why this is important, consider some further cases. In the course of a police interview, N says:

- (9) My wife and I loved each other very much.

² Evidence for the greater naturalness of the *about*-constructions: Google (March 2018) gives a ratio of 'he lied about' to 'he lied that', where the latter uses 'that' as a complementizer, of around 46:1. The ratio of 'he was lying about' to 'he was lying that', is even wider, around 300:1. The *Corpus of Global Web Based English* gives a ratio of 35:1 for British and US citations.

Two further reasons for thinking 'lied that' is non-standard: attitude constructions that take sentential complements normally (i) licence dropping the complementizer 'that':

I knew he was there;

and (ii) licence anaphora on the *that*-clause:

Many people thought that she was there, but John knew/said/doubted it.

In contrast 'lied' licences neither:

* I lied he was there;

*Many people thought that she was there, but John lied it.

N is lying. He never loved his wife, married her for her money, and is now trying to hide her murder. But she loved him, which is what made her so vulnerable. So N's statement, whilst clearly a lie, contains both truth and falsity.³

Another case, this time with a quantified sentence (we remain in the interrogation room). P says to the police:

- (10) None of us saw Tony come in.

In fact P did see Tony come in, but the rest of the group did not, as P noticed. Like N, P is lying, and once again the statement contains both truth and falsity.

Such lies are common. Effective liars often bury falsity in a web of truth, much as an effective government buries contentious legislation in the details of a finance bill. How do we report them? We might say:

- (11) N lied about the two of them loving each other;
(12) P lied about none of them seeing Tony come in.

Such sentences are surely true. But much more informative are ascriptions that cut things more finely:

- (13) N lied about loving his wife;
(14) P lied about not seeing Tony come in.

These last two sentences, unlike the previous two, make clear what the content of the lie was. Conversely:

- (15) N lied about his wife loving him;
(16) P lied about the others not seeing Tony come in;

are simply false.

The crucial point is the one with which I opened: when someone lies the content of the lie need not be the content of the assertion. There may be times when we simply want to report the content of the lying assertion; that is what we explicitly do with a roundabout construction like:

- (17) M lied when he said that Ms Price is in Barcelona.

But more often we want to report the content of the lie. *About-clauses*, giving us the means to move away from the content of the assertion, enable us to do just that.

³ For the background notion of partial truth and partial falsity, see Joseph Ullian and Nelson Goodman, "Truth about Jones," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIV 6 (June, 1977): 317–38; Stephen Yablo, *Aboutness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) ch. 1.

So we need to add something to the standard accounts of lying. I take as illustrative of sophisticated recent work Jennifer Saul's discussion of the distinction between lying and misleading.⁴ Saul needs the idea of the content of a lie. She points out that we can only usefully ask whether lying is worse than misleading "when we hold everything else fixed." In particular then, we need to hold the *content* of the lie fixed, since, as she says, using an *about* construction, "It is not hard to see why it is worse to lie to my partner about whether I'm having an affair than to mislead someone about how much I like to eat peas".⁵

That point is widely recognized. In legal contexts too it is the content of the lie that matters, not the mere fact of lying. A person will not be guilty of perjury, even though they have lied under oath, if the content of their lie is not material to the case; that is if, in Edward Coke's words, "it concerneth not the point in suit".⁶

So Saul needs the idea of the content of a lie; and she expresses it, in the quotation above, using an *about*-clause. But, as is normal in philosophical discussions, in giving her account of lying Saul does not tell us what it is to lie *about* something, only what it is to lie when uttering a sentence:

If the speaker is not the victim of linguistic error/malapropism or using metaphor, hyperbole, or irony, then they lie iff (1) they say that P; (2) they believe (know) P to be false; (3) they take themselves to be in a warranting context.⁷

In effect Saul is giving us an account of sentences like the roundabout (17). So, if we are to say what it is to keep things fixed in the way she requires, we will need to supplement her account with an account of lying *about*. It clearly will not do to say that a person lies about some topic T iff they lie when they say that p, and p is either partly or wholly about T: in our earlier case, N lied when he said that he and his wife loved each other, and that was partly about his wife loving him, but he didn't lie about his wife loving him; and conversely, he did lie about loving his wife, but what he said was not wholly about that.

I suggest instead that we first define what it is for someone to say something about T; and then define lying *about* in terms of that. Here is a first attempt, abstracting

⁴ Saul, Jennifer Mather Saul, *Lying, Misleading, and What is Said: An Exploration in Philosophy of Language and in Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 71.

⁶ Edward Coke, *The Third Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England* (London: Clarke and Sons, 1817), ch. 67. I am understanding 'concerning the point in suit' as equivalent to being *about* the point in suit.

⁷ Saul, *Lying*, *op. cit.* p.18. I have added the parenthetical 'know'. Following Saul, I take no stand here on whether lying requires falsity in what is said. My own view is that it does, and that we capture it best by requiring knowledge of the speaker in the way indicated; but I shall not argue the point.

from the issues of error, metaphor, warrant, and so on, but otherwise remaining close to Saul:

- (A) Someone says something about a topic T iff they say that P, and (i) R is part of the content of P; and (ii) R's topic, T^* , is part of T.
- (B) Someone lies about T iff they say something about T that they believe (know) to be false.

Such a definition of course relies on the ideas of something being *part of the content* of what is said, and of something being the *topic* of what is said. Fortunately

Stephen Yablo has done much to make that precise, in terms of *ways*: roughly, P is part of the content of Q iff every way for Q to be true is implied by a way for P to be true; T is the topic, or subject matter, of P iff T is the class of ways that P can be true.⁸ That meshes well with (A) and (B). To see how (A) works, consider again N saying that he and his wife love each other. Part of the content of what he says is that he loves his wife, so he says something about the topic of loving his wife, and about all the other topics of which that topic is a part. But he believes (knows) what he says about loving his wife to be false. So N lies about that topic—about loving his wife—and also about the topics of which that topic is a part—about who he loves, about who loves his wife, about he and his wife loving each other, about the state of his marriage, about the world.

I suggested (A) and (B) as supplements to accounts like Saul's. But it may be more economical to think of them as replacements. We can think of lying *about* as the fundamental notion. Other notions of lying can then be defined in terms of it:

- (C) Someone lies iff there is something that they lie about.
- (D) Someone lies when they say that P iff when they say that P there is something that they lie about.

I have lent on Saul's account of lying, and on Yablo's account of aboutness. My reliance on the former is not great; while I have used it as an exemplar, what I have proposed could easily be adapted to many other accounts. My reliance on Yablo is more substantial. Should I embrace all the details of his account? That is hard to say, not least because there currently are so few well articulated alternatives.⁹ But let me close by outlining two features that result if I do.

- (i) Can one lie with a presupposition? The issue is contentious, but if M says

⁸ See Yablo, *Aboutness*, op. cit. ch. 2 for the details spelt out in terms of divisions of logical space; for this simplification see his "Precis of Aboutness", *Philosophical Studies*, CLXXIV, 3 (2017): 771–77.

⁹ There is, to my knowledge, just one, from Kit Fine, summarized in his "Yablo on Subject-Matter", forthcoming in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Fine's account does not differ in the aspects that are relevant here.

- (18) I know that Ms Price is in Barcelona.
or
(19) Have you heard that Ms Price is in Barcelona?

when he knows that she's in Slough, it is very plausible that he has lied about her being in Barcelona, even though that is presupposed and not asserted in what he says.¹⁰ That result follows automatically for (18) from the account given here, and the factivity of knowledge: every way that M can know that she is in Barcelona is a way in which she is. It follows for (19) given a natural extension of (A) to cover questions. The point may generalize. It is equally plausible that one can lie with metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and the like.¹¹ Suppose M had said

- (20) Ms Price is somewhere around the arch of the Italian boot.

Again, if he knows she is Slough, that looks to be a straightforward lie about where she is, despite the picturesque presentation. We may need to modify our account of lying itself to deal with such cases; but the solution may well fall out directly from our account of aboutness when it is extended to non-literal cases.¹²

(ii) Yablo extends his account so that aboutness is preserved under negation: the subject matter of P consists not just of the ways that P could be true, but also of the ways that it could be false: the subject *anti*-matter.¹³ In summarizing him above, we did not include that extension. But perhaps we should have done. If we were to do so, since M's statement was about Ms Price being in Barcelona, it would also have been about Ms Price not being in Barcelona. That means that while we reported our initial story with:

- (4) M lied about Ms Price being in Barcelona,

we could equally well have reported it with:

- (21) M lied about Ms Price not being in Barcelona.

That is certainly disconcerting at first glance, but perhaps it is the right result. Consider this exchange between counsel and witness:

- (22) C: Where did M say that Ms Price was?
W: He said that she was in Barcelona
C: But Ms Price wasn't in Barcelona, was she?

¹⁰ Such an approach is defended in Emanuel Viebahn, "Lying with Presuppositions" ms. For a contrary view see Andreas Stokke, "Lying and Misleading in Discourse," *Philosophical Review*, CXXV, 1 (2016): 83–134.

¹¹ Emanuel Viebahn, "Non-literal Lies," *Erkenntnis*, LXXXII, 6 (2017): 1367–80.

¹² See Yablo, *Aboutness*, *op. cit.*, chs. 10–12 for a start on this; the example is from Kendall Walton.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 42–3.

- W: No.
C: And M knew full well that Ms Price was not in Barcelona.
W: Yes.
C: So M lied about Ms Price not being in Barcelona.
W: Yes.

In short: Ms Price was not in Barcelona, and M lied about that. (4) is certainly a more natural thing to say in many circumstances, but the exchange given in (22) suggests the considerations are pragmatic, and that sometimes (21) is better. In reporting a lie we can foreground either what was lyingly said, or how things actually stood; (4) does the former, (21) the latter. If someone has an affair, and then says that they didn't, do we characterize them as lying about having one, or as lying about not having one? The former form is just as acceptable as the latter: we saw it used earlier in the quotation from Saul contrasting talk of affairs with talk of vegetable preference.¹⁴ But that means that an *about*-clause, however specific it gets about the subject matter of a lie, does not strictly give all of its content: it gives, so to speak, the content modulo the direction of the assertion, modulo whether a given predication was asserted or denied. So if the context or pragmatics do not make things clear, after saying what our liar lied about, we may still need to say what they said.¹⁵

¹⁴ Some real-world examples: "Grounds for impeachment if Trump lied about trying to fire Mueller" *The Guardian*, 28th January 2018 (Trump said that he did not try to fire him); "During a press conference with the German chancellor, President Trump lied about his claims of wiretapping" *The Atlantic*, 17th March 2017 (Trump said that Merkel's phone was not tapped); "Trump's business engaged in illegal race discrimination and Trump lied about it in an affidavit" John K. Wilson, *President Trump Unveiled* (New York: Or Books, 2016), p. 234 (Trump said that they didn't engage in it).

¹⁵ Thanks to Rae Langton, Emanuel Viebahn and Stephen Yablo for discussion. As will have been evident, the latter's *Aboutness* provided the inspiration. In "Facts, Factuals and Contra-Factuals", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume XCI* (2017): 245–66, I endeavour to give an independent explanation of why sentences like (2) are bad; but since it relies on the contentious claim that the content of a lie must be false, I do not give it here.