



## Short Communication

## Lying despite telling the truth



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## ABSTRACT

According to the standard definition of lying an utterance counts as a lie if the agent believes the statement to be false. Thus, according to this view it is possible that a lie states something that happens to be true. This subjective view on lying has recently been challenged by Turri and Turri (2015) who presented empirical evidence suggesting that people only consider statements as lies that are objectively false (objective view). We argue that the presented evidence is in fact consistent with the standard subjective view if conversational pragmatics is taken into account. Three experiments are presented that directly test and support the subjective view. An additional experiment backs up our pragmatic hypothesis by using the uncontroversial case of making a promise.

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## 1. Introduction

Lying is an important moral category, which has been discussed by philosophers for centuries. Despite the great philosophical interest in the concept of lying there are surprisingly few empirical studies on the concept of lying coming from psychology. Psychologists have typically taken it for granted that we understand what lying is, and have therefore addressed other issues, such as lie detection or the developmental path of lying (e.g., Vrij, 2008; Xu, Bao, Fu, Talwar, & Lee, 2010).

## 1.1. The subjective versus objective view of lying

The standard definition of lying in philosophy is:

“Making a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that that other person believes that statement to be true.”

[Mahon, 2008, p. 3]

This definition includes the so called *untruthfulness condition* which states that the statement needs to be *believed* to be false to constitute a lie. According to this definition it suffices that a liar believes a statement to be false even when it is in fact true (*subjective view*).

This subjective view has recently been empirically challenged by Turri and Turri (2015). They claim to have shown that most

people have an *objective view* on lying which means that to count as a lie a statement has to be objectively false. The goal of this article is to defend the standard subjective view and demonstrate empirically that the findings of Turri and Turri are consistent with the standard view.

## 1.2. The studies of Turri and Turri (2015)

Turri and Turri (2015) used the following vignette in their experiments to test whether the concept of lying entails that the statement is objectively false<sup>1</sup>:

“Jacob’s friend Mary recently posted information on the internet that will alert the public to serious government corruption. Soon some federal agents visit Jacob and ask where Mary is in order to detain her. Jacob thinks that Mary is at her brother’s house, so he tells the agents, “She is at the grocery store.” In fact, Mary is at the grocery store.”

[p. 167]

When participants were asked “Did Jacob lie about Mary’s location?”, the overwhelming majority (78.3%) answered with “yes,” which supports the standard subjective view. However, Turri and Turri (2015) claim that the responses are an artefact of the question mode. Rather than expressing whether the agent has told a lie, they may have interpreted the test question as a request to

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<sup>1</sup> In Experiment 1 they used a slightly longer variant of this story but the quoted version was presented in all experiments that were used to argue for the objective view on lying.

assess whether the agent thinks he lied (i.e., perspective taking). Alternatively, subjects may have classified the statement as a lie because they wanted to express blame for the agent's intent.

To control for these possible artefacts, in subsequent experiments [Turri and Turri \(2015\)](#) used more complex response options that allowed subjects to separate attributions of the agent's intent from an assessment of whether the agent's speech act indeed constituted a lie. In Experiment 2, the crucial options among which subjects could choose were (out of four):

- (a) "He tried to tell a lie but failed to tell a lie."
- (b) "He tried to tell a lie and succeeded in telling a lie."

Choosing option (a) was interpreted as an endorsement of the objective view, option (b) expresses, according to [Turri and Turri](#), a subjective understanding of the concept of lying. To rule out the possible confound that subjects interpreted failing and succeeding in these response options again from the perspective of the agent, Experiment 3 offered options (c) and (d) that were intended to rule out this possibility. Here option (c) expresses an objective, (d) a subjective concept of lying:

- (c) "He tried to lie but only thinks he lied."
- (d) "He tried to lie and actually did lie."

In the two experiments the overwhelming majority chose the options (a) and (c) that are consistent with the objective view.

### 1.3. Conversational and experimental pragmatics

[Turri and Turri \(2015\)](#) interpret the findings of their Experiments 2 and 3 as supporting the objective view on lying. Here we offer an alternative explanation of their findings that is consistent with the subjective view on lying. Our explanation is based on conversational and experimental pragmatics ([Grice, 1989](#); [Noveck & Reboul, 2008](#)).

It is important to note that in both experiments of [Turri and Turri](#) all the response options consist of two parts, which we shall call the "trying-part" and the "result-part." For instance, in Experiment 2 the objective option was "he tried to tell a lie but failed to tell a lie" while the option supposed to represent the subjective option was worded "he tried to tell a lie and succeeded in telling a lie." An important difference between the subjective and the objective view is that lying is a more difficult act under the objective view compared to the subjective view. To qualify as a lie under the subjective view, it suffices that the agent says something believed to be false with the intent of deception. Under the objective view, these conditions hold as well, but additionally the lie needs to state something objectively false. Because of this second component a lie can fail under the objective view, whereas failure is hard to conceive under the standard subjective view; here trying to lie and lying almost never fall apart.<sup>2</sup> In the moment the agent has uttered something he believes to be false he has lied. No further checks are necessary.

The ease of uttering a lie under the subjective interpretation makes the splitting up of the response options in a trying- and a result-part sound unnatural. When describing an action that took its normal course and was easy to achieve, we do not split up its description in a trying- and a result-part. An example from a different domain highlights this fact. For instance, if someone asks what Jacob ate for lunch and he ate a hamburger, we do not reply with

"Jacob tried to eat a hamburger and succeeded in eating a hamburger"-we just say "Jacob ate a hamburger." We only split up the description into a trying- and a result-part when the action was hard to perform or unlikely to be achieved ("he tried to break the world record and succeeded in breaking the world record"). Accordingly, if the question is split up for an act that normally is easy to accomplish, an additional unusual complication seems to be pragmatically implied. In the eating example, the two-part format of the question may imply that there was something special about eating the hamburger, something that goes beyond opening the mouth and swallowing food. For example, the result-part "succeeded in eating a hamburger" could be interpreted as implying that the whole hamburger has been eaten although it was really too big for a normal person, or a person is described who ate the hamburger for the first time without making a mess.

Something analogous may have happened in the lying scenario in [Turri and Turri's](#) experiments. When subjects who in our view understood lying in the subjective sense were presented with the split-up response options, they might have interpreted the question not as solely referring to whether Jacob lied. If the question had just been about lying, less complex response options would have been chosen (such as "he did lie" and "he did not lie"). Splitting up the answers into a trying- and a result-part might have led subjects to conclude that the questions were not merely about the question of whether Jacob lied but about some additional relevant component of the story, namely the fact that what Jacob said turned out to be true although he intended the statement to be objectively false. Since the trying-part is identical in both response options and only the objective option states that he failed, subjects might have chosen the objective option not because they think that lying requires falsity but because of the fact that this response option expresses the failure of the agent to say something that is objectively false.

In sum, our hypothesis is that subjects in the studies of [Turri and Turri \(2015\)](#) did hold the subjective view of lying but were led by the two-part response options to interpret the test question not merely being about the question of whether Jacob lied but about the question of whether what Jacob said was objectively false. In the following experiments we will provide direct empirical evidence for this view.

## 2. Experiment 1

The pragmatic implications of the split-up options used by [Turri and Turri \(2015\)](#) could be avoided by providing two options, one which states that Jacob lied and the other one stating that he did not lie. This is exactly what [Turri and Turri](#) did in their first experiment in which the overwhelming majority stated that Jacob lied. This finding fully supports the subjective view, and in our view is the best test for assessing how people understand the concept of lying. However, [Turri and Turri \(2015\)](#) pointed out two possible confounds, blame and perspective taking. In the present experiment we will focus on blame. According to [Turri and Turri](#), subjects may have used the lying option to express their disapproval of the protagonists' conduct. It may certainly be true that the lie in the scenario is considered blameworthy by people. But no empirical evidence was offered by [Turri and Turri](#) for the further claim that subjects actually try to express blame by changing the meaning of the concept of lying. We remedied this deficit and actually tested this supposition. We presented subjects either with the story used by [Turri and Turri](#) in their Experiments 2 and 3 or with a modified version of this story in which Jacob and Anna live in a country ruled by a merciless dictator who commits crimes against humanity. Anna has reported these crimes and therefore faces torture if she gets caught. Otherwise the story was the same as in [Turri and](#)

<sup>2</sup> Cases in which it may be appropriate to say that somebody tried but failed to lie may occur in extremely unlikely scenarios. For example, somebody may try to utter a lie but because of feelings of guilt (or some act of God) he may be unable to utter the words.

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