Experimental insights on the relationship between pragmatics, lying, and misleading

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Whether false implicatures can be lies has been debated in the theoretical literature: Meibauer (2014) says yes; Saul (2012) says they are "merely misleading." A recent wave of experimental work (Weissman & Terkourafi, 2018; Willemsen & Wiegmann, 2017; Antomo et al., 2018) has also yielded diverging results. *Author's dissertation* (*omitted for anonymization purposes*) makes the case that adopting a theory of linguistic meaning that allows for contextual and interpersonal variation in "what is said" (e.g., Ariel, 2002) can explain the seemingly contradictory results and theories regarding false implicatures and lying. The present experiment, which operates in that framework, aims to elucidate the relationship between lying, misleading, and levels of linguistic meaning by exploring how false content delivered through three different linguistic mechanisms – bare linguistic meaning, explicature, and implicature – is processed and judged.

200 participants completed a response time experiment. Each trial consisted of a setup story followed by a screen with the target line of dialogue and a yes/no question ("is this statement a lie?" in half of the lists and "is this statement misleading" in the other half). Definitions of "lie" and "misleading" were not provided in order to capture participants' own intuitions of the categories. The target line could be a straightforward truth, a straightforward lie, a false explicature or a false implicature (Table 1). Stories across these four conditions varied systematically in the stakes of the scenario and the speaker's intention to deceive, both counterbalanced across lists. Target lines were matched for length across conditions.

A logistic regression model was run to analyze the likelihood of a "yes" response to the two questions across the four conditions (Fig. 1). The relative ordering of conditions for both "is this statement a lie?" and "is this statement misleading?" was the same: lie > explicature > implicature > truth. To both questions, all comparisons between conditions were significant. Participants were significantly more likely to respond "yes" to "misleading" than "lie" for explicatures, implicatures, and truths; there was no significant difference for lies. These results suggest that participants do not perceive an upper bound on the concept of misleading – straightforward lies are considered misleading as often and quickly as they are considered lies.

There was no significant difference in response time (Fig. 2) between the "lie" and "mislead" questions for straightforward lies, truths, or implicatures, but response times were significantly slower to "lie?" than "misleading?" question for explicatures. Collapsed across both questions, explicatures and implicatures led to slower response times than did the bare linguistic meaning categories (lies or truths).

The gradation in "yes" responses and the fact that implicatures and explicatures caused longer response times than bare linguistic meaning underscore (i) a strength-based graded scale of linguistic meaning (cf. Sternau et al., 2015), (ii) the importance of having all three levels in a theory of linguistic meaning (Ariel, 2002), and (iii) the value of utilizing such a theory of linguistic meaning in a theory of lying (as opposed to the less flexible operationalizations from e.g., Meibauer and Saul).

Condition	Target line	Relevant detail from setup story
Lie	“I didn’t steal your shirt”	(speaker did steal the shirt)
Explicature	“John and I played golf on Saturday”	(they both did, but played separately)
Implicature	“My father works for the FBI”	(father works as a janitor for the FBI)
Truth	“I’ve never been to Sweden”	(speaker has never been to Sweden)

Table 1 – Example stimuli from the four experimental conditions.

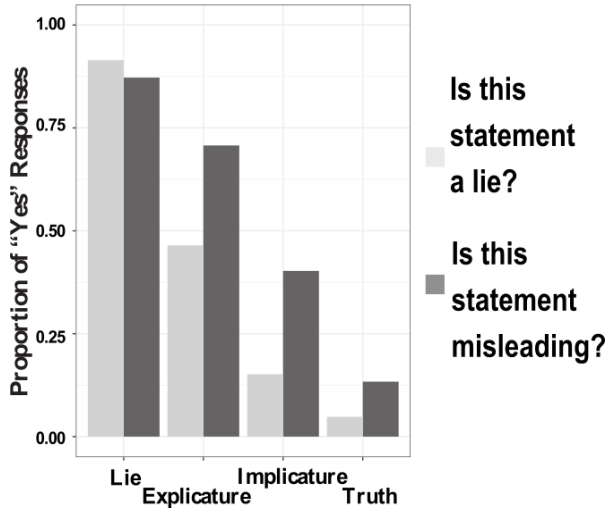

Fig. 1 - Proportion of “Yes” responses to two questions (lie, misleading) across four stimulus conditions.

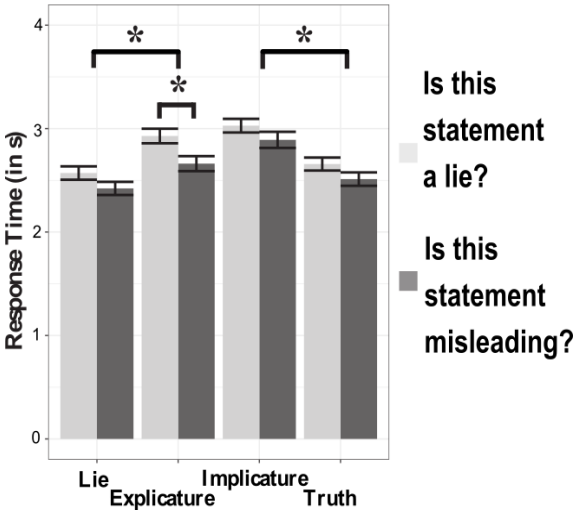

Fig. 2 - Average response time (in seconds) to screen showing the target line and question. Error bars indicate standard error. * $p < .05$.

References

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