

The Many Faces of So-called 'Bald-faced Lies'

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I defend the Gricean (1989) view of assertion on which assertion is essentially a speech act by which a speaker intends that a hearer acquire a belief. Such a view is thought to be problematic due to so-called 'bald-faced lies'. So-called 'bald-faced lies' are defined as cases in which a speaker asserts that p even though it is common knowledge (between speaker and hearer) that the speaker does not believe that p ; that is, the speaker and the hearer each know that the speaker does not believe that p , and each know that each know that the speaker does not believe that p , and each know that each know that each know that the speaker does not believe that p , and so on. It is the fact that it is common knowledge (between speaker and hearer) that the speaker does not believe that p which determines that a so-called 'bald-faced liar' does not – and indeed cannot – intend that the hearer acquire a belief that p . Such cases, then, seem to be counterexamples to the Gricean view of assertion, since they apparently demonstrate that a speaker can make an assertion without the intention that a hearer acquire a belief.

In this paper, I offer a novel adaptation of Moore's paradox, what I call 'the contextual Moorean paradox', which shows that uttering assertively sentences of the form ' p ' when it is common knowledge (between speaker and hearer) that the speaker does not believe that p , as in cases of so-called 'bald-faced lies', is absurd as uttering assertively sentences of the form ' p but I do not believe that p '. I argue that Moorean paradoxes, standard and contextual, are not genuine cases of assertion but rather cases of Austinian misfires (1955); that is, cases of 'botched assertion' which are a special type of utterance characterised by their failure to be the type of speech act they purport to be. This shows, therefore, that so-called 'bald-faced lies' are not genuine counterexamples to the Gricean view of assertion, since they are not genuine cases of assertion. With this laid out, I propose that so-called 'bald-faced lies' are best understood as *deliberate* Austinian misfires, what Bourne & Caddick Bourne (2019) call 'conversational perversions', whereby the speaker deliberately blocks the ways in which the hearer can recognise the speaker's intentions, with the aim of affronting, intimidating, or baffling the hearer. So-called 'bald-faced lies', on this view, are a type 'conversational sadism', to use Bourne and Caddick Bourne's terminology. I end the paper with a short discussion regarding the complexities surrounding our ability to challenge so-called 'bald-faced liars', given that they are not open to epistemic challenges. I conclude that not only should we not buy into the idea that so-called 'bald-faced lies' are assertions for philosophical reasons, but that we should not buy into this idea for social and political reasons as well.