

University of Groningen

Fiction and common ground

Semeijn, Merel

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.177806543](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.177806543)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Semeijn, M. (2021). *Fiction and common ground: a workspace account*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen. <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.177806543>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

This chapter is a rewritten version of the unpublished paper ‘Bald-faced lies and parafictional updates’ which has been presented at several international conferences.

5.1 Introduction

Now that I have presented the basic framework for modelling assertions and fictional statements in terms of common ground updates, let’s see how related speech acts fit into this framework. In this chapter I consider lies and so-called ‘bald-faced lies’. Suppose Brian invites Alice to his birthday party but Alice does not want to attend and hence says (44) even though actually she is feeling perfectly fine. Compare this to Tolkien’s fictional statement (25):

(44) I have a cold.

(25) Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon.

Both Tolkien and Alice defied the Gricean maxim of quality; they said something they believed to be false. Yet, there is a strong intuitive difference between these two speech acts. Whereas (44) is a lie, (25) is ‘merely’ a fictional statement. A natural way of phrasing the difference is to say that lying, contrary to fiction telling, involves an intention to deceive (e.g., Augustine (395); Williams (2002)); whereas Alice had the intention to deceive Brian into believing that she had fallen ill, Tolkien never meant to deceive anyone into believing that some hobbit had a trying time on some afternoon.

I would like to thank Teresa Marques, the audience at the *Speech acts and fiction* seminar at the University of Genoa and the audience at the DGfS workshop *Post-truth: the semantics and pragmatics of saying “what you believe to be false”* at the University of Bremen for valuable feedback and discussion.

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

A well-known counterexample to such definitions of lying is what [Sorensen \(2007\)](#) has dubbed the bald-faced lie, i.e., a statement that involves no intention to deceive but that we do intuitively call a lie. For instance, [Keiser \(2016\)](#) discusses an example found in *The Godfather II* where mafioso Pentangeli is about to testify against Corleone (the Godfather) during a senate hearing. Because of Pentangeli's previous unofficial statements, it is common knowledge in the courtroom that Pentangeli knows Corleone and his crimes. However, Corleone has Pentangeli's brother attend the hearing in order to remind Pentangeli of the fact that by testifying, he puts the safety of his family in jeopardy. When asked whether he served the Godfather, Pentangeli testifies:

(45) I never knew no Godfather.

Pentangeli thereby ensures that Corleone is not convicted and his own family remains safe. Although (45) cannot involve an intention to deceive anyone (everyone in the courtroom knows that Pentangeli *did* know the Godfather, everyone knows that everyone knows this, etc.)¹ we do call it a (bald-faced) lie.

There are three main strategies that theorists have adopted to deal with bald-faced lies. First, we can bite the bullet: Bald-faced lies are valid examples of lies so apparently lying does not necessarily involve an intention to deceive. To make such an analysis tenable we need to provide a definition of lying that does not involve intention to deceive but somehow still distinguishes lies from fictional statements and mistakes (e.g., [Carson \(2006\)](#); [Fallis \(2009\)](#); [Stokke \(2013, 2018\)](#)). A second strategy is to deny the validity of the counterexample by arguing that bald-faced lies like in the Godfather scenario actually *do* involve an intention to be deceptive ([Lackey \(2013\)](#)). Third, we can deny the validity of the counterexample by arguing that bald-faced lies are not really lies (e.g., [Meibauer \(2014\)](#)), for instance because they are only quasi-assertoric (e.g., [Dynel \(2011\)](#); [Leland \(2015\)](#); [Keiser \(2016\)](#); [Maitra \(2018\)](#)).² In this chapter I align myself with the latter group. I incorporate an

¹Arguably, this is not the case for all speech acts that we may call 'bald-faced lies'. In general, I assume that a speaker who states some proposition *p* that is blatantly false to only a part of their audience (e.g., a politician fabricating facts in some public statement) performs two separate speech acts: A lie towards people with whom it is not common knowledge that *p* is false and a 'real' bald-faced lie (cf. [Maitra \(2018\)](#); [Keiser \(2016\)](#)) towards people with whom this *is* common knowledge.

²Cf. [Harris \(forthcoming\)](#) who argues that because bald-faced lies are not assertions, not all lies are assertions.

5.2 Common ground and lying

analysis of lies and bald-faced lies into the workspace account according to which bald-faced lies function like fictional statements. The obvious benefit of this approach is that we can avoid the “unhappy divorce” (Lackey (2013); see also Keiser (2016)) of definitions of lying and intention to deceive. One of the central contributions of this chapter is to argue that the bald-faced liar’s aim of ‘going on the record’ – sometimes taken to show that bald-faced lies are assertions (by e.g., Sorensen (2007); Carson (2006); Stokke (2013)) – can be used to the advantage of accounts of this type.

First, I briefly explore the challenges posed by modelling lying (section 5.2) in a Stalnakerian common ground framework. I then argue that in both an unofficial common ground account and in the workspace account, an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies does not adequately account for the temporary acceptance of the proposition expressed by the bald-faced lie and does not account for the fact that a bald-faced lie is only successful if it ‘goes on the record’ (section 5.3.1). Next, I argue that an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements improves upon the analysis of bald-faced lies as lies in both frameworks but that the workspace account has a definite advantage because it accounts for the aspect of ‘going on the record’ by analysing fictional statements as triggering parafictional updates of the form ‘In/According to story s , ϕ ’ (section 5.3.2). Lastly, I briefly introduce and counter five possible objections to my view (section 5.4).

5.2 Common ground and lying

Just as fictional discourse poses a challenge to the traditional common ground framework that is based on cooperative information exchange (as discussed in chapters 3 and 4), modelling lying poses yet another challenge. If we follow consensus and analyse lies as a type of assertion, we can – on either an unofficial common ground or workspace account – no longer construe assertions as proposals to update a belief-based (official) common ground; obviously when Alice said (44) she did not herself believe that she had a cold (i.e., $\neg \mathbf{B}_a p$) and hence did not propose that this became common belief. Rather, after a successful deceptive lie, a correct description of the speaker’s a and hearer’s b beliefs would be as follows:

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

$$\begin{array}{cc}
 & \mathbf{B}_b p \\
 \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a p & \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b p \\
 \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a p & \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b p \\
 \vdots & \vdots
 \end{array}$$

Even though b does believe that p , and the fact that b believes that p is common belief, a does not believe that p .

I argue that there are two potential fixes to the common ground definition of assertion so that it can include lies: First, a switch to a doxastically neutral (i.e., acceptance-based) conception of the common ground, and, second, a moderate psychologistic turn (i.e., a switch to talking about the hearer's conception of common belief).

5.2.1 Acceptance-based common ground

[Stokke \(2013\)](#) opts for the first strategy and defines assertions as proposals to update what is commonly accepted:

$$\begin{array}{cc}
 \mathbf{A}_a p & \mathbf{A}_b p \\
 \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{A}_a p & \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{A}_b p \\
 \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{A}_a p & \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{A}_b p \\
 \vdots & \vdots
 \end{array}$$

In words, a 's assertion is a proposal for both a and b to accept that p , for both to believe that the other accepts that p , etc. The above definition of assertion includes deceptive lies because, by lying, Alice proposes that it becomes commonly accepted that she has a cold; Alice herself accepts this and proposes that Brian also accepts this (because he comes to believe it).

A potential problem with this move is that it obfuscates the difference between official and unofficial common grounds or between the workspace and the common ground. This problem is especially pressing for an Eckardt-style unofficial common ground account (see chapter 3) where the content of both official and unofficial common grounds is accepted persistently. If unofficial and official common grounds are all acceptance-based, there would essentially be no difference between fictional and non-fictional common grounds. In Stokke's account and the workspace account, if everything is acceptance-based, the only real difference between fictional and non-

fictional discourse is whether you accept it temporarily or persistently.³ Also this doesn't seem to be enough to model the difference between fiction and non-fiction. As Keiser phrases it: "my carrying on a pretense with you is not a function of the length of time that I want us to accept what is being said, but rather what kind of attitude we take to what is being said" (Keiser, 2016, p.476).

5.2.2 The hearer's conception of common belief

Opting for the second strategy would entail defining assertions as proposals to update the hearer's presuppositions, i.e., the hearer's beliefs about what is common belief:⁴

$$\begin{aligned} & \mathbf{B}_b p \\ & \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a p \\ & \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b p \\ & \vdots \end{aligned}$$

In words, *a*'s assertion is a proposal to make *b* believe that *p*, believe that *a* believes that *p*, etc. The iteration implies nothing, however, about *a*'s own beliefs. This definition of assertion includes deceptive lies because, by lying, Alice proposes that Brian believes the asserted content to be common belief. In the case of truthful assertion (where the speaker already believed the asserted content, i.e., $\mathbf{B}_a p$) such a proposal boils down to a proposal to update common belief (assuming that the speaker also believes the assertion to be successful, i.e., $\mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b p$, $\mathbf{B}_a \mathbf{B}_b \mathbf{B}_a p$, etc.).

A potential issue with this strategy is that it involves a move away from the traditional Stalnakerian framework – where speech acts are defined as proposals to update a common ground – towards a psychologistic or Gricean framework – where speech acts are defined as proposals to update an agent's mental states (i.e., the hearer's beliefs about what is common ground). In the context of this dissertation this is undesirable because our starting point was to model fictional statements and related speech acts in terms of common ground updates. The move is 'moderate' because this framework still makes use of the concept of common ground.

³Here and in the rest of this chapter I am assuming a version of Stokke's account where unofficial common grounds are truly temporary (see the discussion in section 3.4).

⁴Cf. the discussion in van Ditmarsch et al. (2020).

5.2.3 Comparing the acceptance-based and psychological strategies

A potential motivation to go for the acceptance-based definition of common ground is that it seems to be in line with Stalnaker's original conception of common ground. Stalnaker argues that common ground should be construed in terms of common acceptance rather than common belief. This is because sometimes people "at least temporarily, and perhaps in a limited context" (Stalnaker, 2002, p.176) ignore the possibility that some proposition is false in order to enable smooth conversation. This for instance happens when one conversational participant is aware of a defective context (i.e., notices a divergence in the conversational participants' beliefs about what is common ground) and responds by accommodating for the defect by temporarily accepting something that she believes to be false as common ground. For instance, a hearer may interpret the speaker as making a mistake; a father holding his baby girl may respond to a colleague's question "How old is he?" by saying "16 months". Stalnaker's analysis of this situation is that the hearer chooses not to address the perceived defective context but to resolve it by accepting – for the purpose of the conversation – the information "my baby is a boy". Deceptive lies such as (44) are the mirror image of this situation; here the speaker (i.e., Alice) is the one that is in the know of the defect in context and the one that decides not to address it but to accept the asserted content (i.e., that Alice has a cold) as true to make the context non-defective.

Stalnaker offers a fair description of the mistake and liar case (i.e., I agree that the content expressed by a lie (or mistake) is at least accepted temporarily for the purpose and duration of the conversation). However, in both the workspace account and in Stokke's version of the unofficial common ground account, a distinction is made between things that are accepted only *temporarily* (for the purpose and duration of some fictional conversation) and things that are accepted more *persistently*. In the workspace account, this is the distinction between information that was temporarily accepted (as part of the workspace) also updating the stable common ground or not (only in an embedded form). In Stokke's account, this is the distinction between information being part of a temporary unofficial common ground or information being part of the stable official common ground. Stalnaker does not distinguish between temporary and stable common grounds and only establishes that the notion of common ground *in general* cannot be in terms

5.2 Common ground and lying

of common belief. However, once we introduce this distinction, it becomes clear that establishing that a lie (or mistake) involves acceptance that is temporary (and “perhaps in a limited context”) of the expressed content is really only an argument for why workspaces or unofficial common grounds should be acceptance-based. It does not establish that the *stable* (official) common ground must be construed as acceptance-based. Lies and mistakes could just involve updating some kind of unofficial common ground or workspace that is only there for the duration of the conversation.⁵ It is an open question whether lies or mistakes also involve updating the stable official common ground.

One way to think about this question is by trying to establish what a successful deceptive lie is (so as to establish what it is that the liar proposes). Suppose Alice was successful in her lie to Brian that she had a cold. Is it then, after the conversation has ended, stable common ground between Alice and Brian that she had a cold (because they both permanently accept this)? Or is it, after the lie, not *really* common ground that Alice had a cold but now Brian falsely believes that this is stable common ground (i.e., because the hearer *did* and the speaker *did not* update their conception of the official common ground with this information)? Or, in case someone interprets the speaker as making a mistake, is it after the conversation between the parent and the colleague stable common ground between them that the baby is a boy? Or is it not *really* common ground, but the colleague now thinks that it is (i.e., because the speaker *did* and the hearer *did not* update their conception of the official common ground with this information)? The answer to these questions will ultimately depend on how we want to use the concept of (official) common ground; whether we allow that someone can, after engaging in conversation, be aware of a stably defective context (and not do anything about it but pretend that it isn't defective in the relevant conversations), or whether we think defective contexts must always be resolved by stable acceptance, i.e., a permanent pretence on the part of the accommodator. In other words, whether we want to use the concept of common ground solely to explain linguistic behaviour or whether we also think there is a notion of ‘real’ common ground between two interlocutors that is dependent on their actual persistent beliefs.

⁵In fact, Stalnaker's comment that accommodation involves “at least temporary” acceptance hints in this direction; Alice and the father are only temporarily accepting something as common ground.

5 *Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates*

Both strategies discussed are possible in an unofficial common ground account as well as in a workspace account. Stokke opts for an acceptance-based official common ground. As will become clear below, this is a necessary move in his framework because of his analysis of bald-faced lies as lies. Since I prefer an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements I am not forced towards either of the two strategies. When discussing my analysis of bald-faced lies in this chapter, I opt for a moderate psychologistic turn (although the arguments in the succeeding sections in favour of an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements also work for acceptance-based variants of the theories). I opt for this strategy because it allows us to model what is interesting about the deceptive lie and how it differs from regular assertions. Namely, that successful lies create an asymmetry in the beliefs of the speaker and hearer (i.e., a defective context emerges that is not resolved).

5.3 Bald-faced lies

Now that we have an overview of the different possible accounts in place to model fiction and lying in common ground terms, I turn to bald-faced lies. I argue that an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies misdescribes the temporary acceptance of the expressed content and misdescribes the success conditions of the speech act (section 5.3.1). Next, I propose that an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements improves upon an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies and can, in the workspace account specifically, adequately account for the success conditions of the speech act (section 5.3.2).

Consider another example of a bald-faced lie: Carson's (2006) cheating student scenario. A student accused of plagiarism is called to the dean's office. The student knows he plagiarized, the dean knows he did, the student knows that the dean knows, etc. However, it is also well known that the dean will not punish anyone who explicitly denies their guilt. When asked the student therefore says:

(9) I didn't cheat on the exam.

Similarly to the Pentangeli case, the speech act cannot involve an intention to deceive the hearer (i.e., it is common belief that the student did cheat just like it was common belief that Pentangeli knew the Godfather). Yet, the student is (bald-faced) lying.

5.3.1 Bald-faced lies as lies

In this section I argue that an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies is inadequate. Stokke (2013; 2018) adopts this approach in his unofficial common ground account. This means bald-faced lies are analysed as proposals to update the official common ground.⁶ A common ground updated with (45) is represented as follows:

$$(46) \quad \begin{array}{|c|} \hline x, y \\ \hline \text{Pentangeli}(x) \\ \text{Godfather}(y) \\ \dots \\ \hline \neg \text{know}(x, y) \\ \hline \end{array} \text{Official}$$

Alternatively, in the workspace account, an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies would mean they trigger assertive closure, i.e., update the stable common ground:

$$(47) \quad \left\langle \begin{array}{|c|} \hline x, y \\ \hline \text{Pentangeli}(x) \\ \text{Godfather}(y) \\ \dots \\ \hline \end{array} \right\rangle^C, \left\langle \begin{array}{|c|} \hline x', y' \\ \hline \text{Pentangeli}(x') \\ \text{Godfather}(y') \\ \dots \\ \hline \neg \text{know}(x', y') \\ \hline \end{array} \right\rangle^W$$

$$(48) \quad \left\langle \begin{array}{|c|} \hline x', y' \\ \hline \text{Pentangeli}(x') \\ \text{Godfather}(y') \\ \dots \\ \hline \neg \text{know}(x', y') \\ \hline \end{array} \right\rangle^C, \emptyset$$

This analysis forces a switch to an acceptance-based notion of the (official) common ground (i.e., Pentangeli's speech act cannot be a proposal to update the hearer's conception of what is common belief since it is already common belief that Pentangeli knew the Godfather). Pentangeli thus does not propose that anyone *believes* that he knew no Godfather (he does not intend to deceive

⁶Here I obviously gloss over the fact that (45) is a fictional example.

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

anyone) but instead proposes that it becomes persistently commonly *accepted* that he knew no Godfather. Similarly, the student proposes that he and the dean persistently *accept* that he did not cheat (and that they both believe that the other accepts this, etc.)

Temporary acceptance

The resulting characterization of the bald-faced lie is unsatisfactory because it does not adequately model the temporary acceptance of the proposition expressed by the bald-faced lie. In the above versions of the workspace and unofficial common ground accounts, the (official) common ground is construed as involving persistent acceptance. However, bald-faced lie scenarios seem to be characterized by *temporary* acceptance.⁷ If a bald-faced lie is a lie, the proposition p expressed by it is accepted persistently (also after the conversation has ended). This would mean that p would be common ground in subsequent non-fictional discourse between the same interlocutors. However, suppose that after the courtroom meeting one of the senators came up to Pentangeli in the hallway and asked him: “Hey, now that we’re off the record, you did actually serve under Corleone, right?”. Their conversation will continue as it did before the hearing (when it also was common ground that he knew the Godfather) and Pentangeli can be expected to answer something like: “Well, yes of course! We all know that. But I couldn’t say that during the hearing!”. Similarly, the dean may run into the student at a bar later that week and ask a similar question: “So, tell me, off the record, how exactly did you manage to cheat on that exam?” to which the student may reply: “Really? Off the record? Well, what I did is...”. An analysis of bald-faced lies as proposals to persistently accept the expressed content would have to predict that such discourse cannot take place (or is fictional). It seems that in this sense the bald-faced lie scenarios are better described as involving a kind of temporary acceptance for the purpose and duration of the relevant conversation, i.e., while the conversation is ‘being recorded’ (similar to the temporary acceptance involved in workspaces or Stokke’s unofficial common grounds). In other words, Pentangeli and the student are only temporarily in ‘warranting contexts’ (cf. [Carson \(2006\)](#); [Fallis \(2009\)](#); [Saul \(2012\)](#)) where they have an obligation to justify the truth of what they

⁷A similar point has recently been made by [Keiser](#) (forthcoming).

say when challenged.⁸ Surely, in the courtroom or in the dean's office, Pentangeli and the student will need to defend what they said if challenged, but once they are off the record they can admit that what they said was false.

Going on the record

A second problem with an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies is that it misconstrues the success conditions of the speech act. The purpose of bald-faced lies is often described as that Pentangeli and other bald-faced liars want to 'go on the record' with what they said. The desire to 'go on the record' is referred to by for instance [Stokke \(2013\)](#), [Sorensen \(2007\)](#) and [Carson \(2006\)](#) to argue that bald-faced lies must be assertions and hence lies; the bald-faced liar wants her speech act to be 'recorded' and this supposedly only happens through assertion and not through fiction because fiction involves only temporary acceptance. However, there is little consensus on what 'going on the record' means exactly. I take some agent *a* putting some statement *p* 'on the record' as meaning that *a* ensures that it becomes stable common ground that *p* was part of a certain conversation or discourse *d*. This means that the bald-faced liar who says *p* does not actually propose a stable common ground update with *p* (as in the case of assertion), but with something of the form 'In/According to conversation *d*, *p*'. In other words, Pentangeli does not propose that anyone actually persistently accepts or believes that he knew no Godfather – and that this becomes stable common ground. This is irrelevant for Pentangeli and the Godfather.⁹ Rather, what's important for the success of his bald-faced lie is that it becomes common ground that he said the right things during the hearing.¹⁰ Specifically, he needs the Godfather (one of Pentangeli's hearers in the courtroom) to believe this. Such an update of the common ground will actually ensure that Corleone is not convicted (and hence save Pentangeli's family). Pentangeli's bald-faced lie is thus successful if something like the following hedged or modalized proposition becomes stable common ground: 'According to the courtroom proceedings, Pentangeli did not know the Godfather'. Similarly,

⁸See section 5.4.3 on disagreement with a bald-faced liar.

⁹Pentangeli only cares about people temporarily accepting that he knew no Godfather in so far as that what happens in the courtroom conversation determines what becomes part of proceedings. In other words, he needs people to 'play along' in court but nobody needs to persistently accept what he said as part of the (official) common ground.

¹⁰Cf. [Leland \(2015\)](#); [Dynel \(2011\)](#); [Harris \(forthcoming\)](#).

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

the student's speech act is successful if it becomes stable common ground between him and the dean that he did not confess but rather explicitly denied having cheated, i.e., that 'According to the conversation in the dean's office, the student did not cheat on the exam'.

5.3.2 Bald-faced lies as fictional statements

I propose, contra Stokke, to analyse bald-faced lies as fictional statements.¹¹ An analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements allows us an independent choice of strategy in dealing with lies in the common ground framework, i.e., the moderate psychologicistic turn is still available.

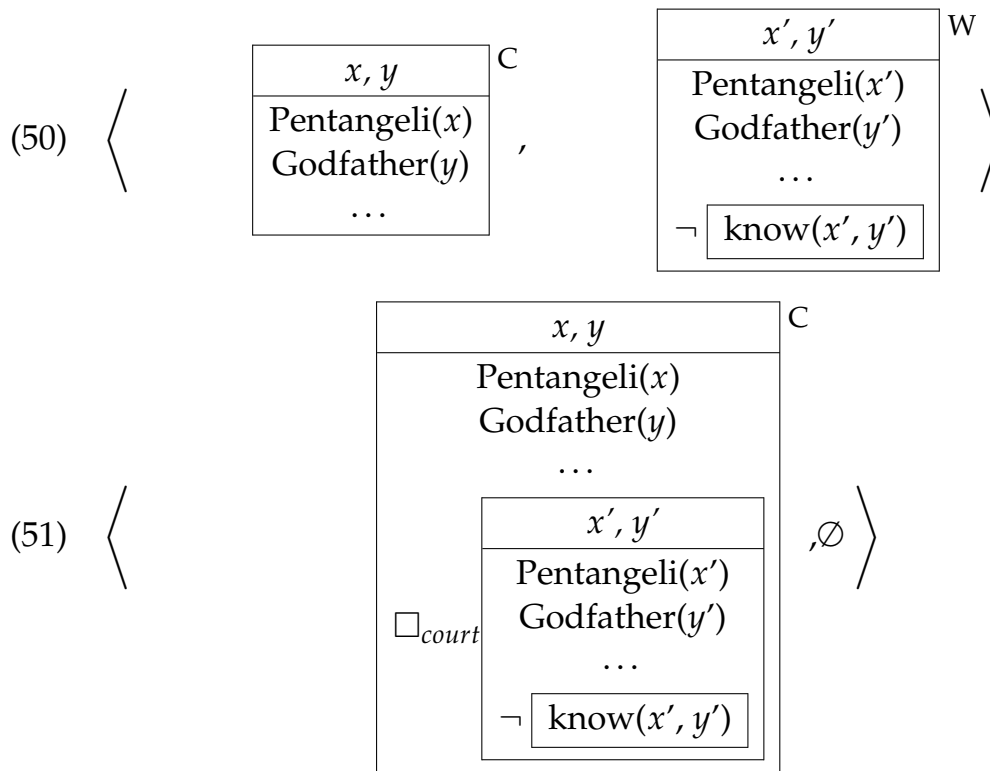
For a psychologicistic version of the unofficial common ground accounts, an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements would entail that Pentangeli's speech act (being a fictional statement) is analysed as a proposal to update (or create) the hearer's conception of the unofficial common ground of the courtroom conversation (and assertions and lies as proposals to update the hearer's conception of the belief-based official common ground). Assuming it was already official common ground who Pentangeli and the Godfather were, the complete common ground updated with (45) thus looks as follows:



In a psychologicistic version of the workspace account an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements entails that, whereas assertions and lies trigger assertive closure, fictional statements and bald-faced lies trigger fictive closure. In other words, the content of the hearer's conception of the workspace (e.g., that Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon or that Pentangeli knew no Godfather) is not added directly to the hearer's

¹¹This understanding of bald-faced lies comes closest to Maitra's (2018) who discusses similarities between bald-faced lies and the utterances of an actor on stage. However, Maitra has a different understanding of 'going on the record' that is deemed irrelevant to what the actor and bald-faced liar do. Moreover, I prefer to stick with the term 'fictional statement' so as to not exclude the possibility of written bald-faced lies.

conception of what is common belief. Rather, it is added to the hearer’s conception of what is common belief as modalized, parafictional information, i.e., respectively under the ‘In/According to *The Lord of the Rings*’-operator and the ‘In/According to the courtroom proceedings’-operator (\square_{court}):



Temporary acceptance

An advantage of an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements is that it enables us to make sense of the fact that the propositions expressed by bald-faced lies are only accepted temporarily.¹² If we adopt an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements in Stokke’s unofficial common ground account, bald-faced lies and fictional statements update a *temporary* unofficial common ground, i.e., the interlocutors temporarily accept that Pentangeli knew no Godfather or that Frodo had a trying time some afternoon. At the end of the discourse – as the hearing ends or as we stop reading *The Lord of the Rings* – the unofficial common ground evaporates. Hence the content expressed by the bald-faced lie is only accepted temporarily.

¹²On an Eckardt-style version of the account (see chapter 3), unofficial common grounds are non-temporary so this aspect of bald-faced lies remains unaccounted for.

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

In the workspace account, bald-faced lies and fictional statements update a *temporary* workspace during the discourse. At the end of the discourse, fictive closure is triggered and the expressed propositions – that Pentangeli knew no Godfather or that Frodo had a trying time some afternoon – are no longer accepted in their unembedded form (but a prefixed version *is* added to the hearer’s conception of the stable common ground). Hence, as in the unofficial common ground account, the content expressed by the bald-faced lie is only accepted temporarily.

Going on the record

Another advantage of the analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements is that in the workspace account it allows us to account for the fact that bald-faced lies are successful if they ‘go on the record’. I have argued that Pentangeli’s and the student’s bald-faced lies are proposals to make it stable common ground that ‘According to the courtroom proceedings, he knew no Godfather’ and ‘According to the conversation in the dean’s office, the student did not cheat on the exam’. Crucially, these are *parafictional* statements of the form ‘In/ According to story s , ϕ ’ (i.e., $\Box_s\phi$). In the workspace account, a bald-faced lie p (or a fictional statement p) is analysed as ultimately a proposal to make the hearer’s conception of what is common belief include $\Box_s p$. Hence the workspace account can model how the bald-faced liar succeeds at ‘going on the record’ with their speech act, i.e., making $\Box_s p$ stable common ground (assuming that the bald-faced liar also believes that their speech act was successful). In the unofficial common ground accounts there are no parafictional updates of the official common ground at the end of fictional discourse and hence this aspect of bald-faced lies remains unaccounted for.¹³

5.4 Possible objections

Now that I have made my case why, in terms of common ground updates, the bald-faced lie is much more akin to a fictional statement than to a lie, I will introduce five possible objections to this analysis and offer replies.

¹³As discussed in chapter 3, we could model parafictional information as ‘stored’ in the relevant unofficial common ground but this forces us to give up that unofficial common grounds are temporary.

5.4.1 Non-fictional parafictional updates

A possible objection to the analysis outlined above is that updates of the form ‘According to the courtroom proceedings, he knew no Godfather’ are also possible in non-fictional discourse. For instance, Stalnaker (2002) maintains that, since speech acts are so-called ‘manifest events’, as a side effect of a asserting p , it will also become common ground that a said p in some conversation or discourse d . Arguably, if it is also common ground that a ’s assertion was accepted, this will imply that it was common ground in d that p (or $\Box_d p$). So can ‘going on the record’ not also be achieved through regular assertions or lies?

Although I agree that people can also ‘go on the record’ with non-fictional discourse, this does not establish that bald-faced lies could just as well be analysed as regular assertions. The crucial difference between fictional statements and assertions is that this ‘parafictional update’ in the case of non-fiction is a *non-essential* update (as it is for Stalnaker) whereas it is an *essential* update in the case of fiction. In other words, when a asserts p , a proposes to make p common ground (through the workspace), not to make p and $\Box_d p$ common ground. On the other hand, when a fictionally states p , a proposes to make $\Box_d p$ common ground (through the workspace). Hence an assertion is also successful if the parafictional update does not take place but a fictional statement is not (e.g., Tolkien’s fictional statement (25) is not successful if, after reading *The Lord of the Rings*, it is not common ground that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo had a very trying time). This is why bald-faced lies are like fictional statements; a bald-faced lie p is only successful if we temporarily accept p and as a result of that the common ground is updated with $\Box_d p$.

Moreover, even if we would (contra Stalnaker) construe assertions as involving a parafictional update as part of their essential updates (i.e., define assertions as proposals to update the common ground with p and $\Box_d p$ and fictional statements as proposals to update the common ground with $\Box_d p$), bald-faced lies would *still* be more like fictional statements precisely because (like fictional statements) their success does not depend on whether the common ground is updated with the content they express but only on whether it is updated with the relevant parafictional update.

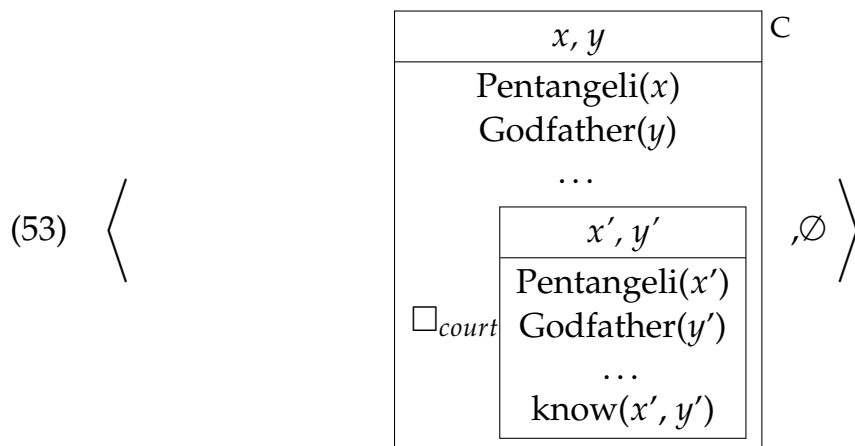
5.4.2 Commitments in bald-faced lie scenarios

Another possible objection to the current proposal is that conversations in institutional settings, such as in a courtroom or in the dean's office, seem to be eminent models of conversations where what people commit themselves to (i.e., what 'goes on the record') is essential for determining subsequent actions and sanctions in the real world. Bald-faced lies such as Pentangeli's and the student's take place in such contexts and hence it is counterintuitive to analyse them as akin to fictional statements. Fictional statements do not impose commitments on speakers like assertions do, so how can they determine possible sanctions? In response to this, I suggest that in fact the whole conversation in a bald-faced lie scenario can be understood as a pretend-conversation. To make this intuitive, suppose that Pentangeli *had* in fact wanted to harm the Godfather and testified against him in court (or that the student, for some reason, wanted to be punished and confessed in the dean's office):

(52) Yes, I knew the Godfather.

In this scenario it still does not matter to Pentangeli whether anyone somehow comes to accept or believe that he knew the Godfather. Actually, everyone already believes this and Pentangeli is aware of this. So, again, his utterance of p is not aimed at making p persistent common ground.¹⁴ To really hurt the Godfather, Pentangeli needs it to become common ground that 'According to the courtroom proceedings, Pentangeli knew the Godfather'. Again, the speech act is aimed at a parafictional update that results from fictive closure:

¹⁴Harris (forthcoming) makes the similar point that a witness who already admitted everything on the courthouse steps, with everyone present who is also in the courtroom, still will have to repeat this confession in the courtroom in order to affect subsequent legal sanctions.



So not only bald-faced lies but also other utterances that could be made in bald-faced lie scenarios (e.g., (52)) should be understood as fictional statements.¹⁵

Likewise, the whole conversation in the courtroom or in the dean's office can be understood as a kind of pretend-conversation, i.e., as consisting of fictional statements.¹⁶ Even if everyone present in court already knows that someone is in fact guilty, still the parties involved will speak as if they do not yet know this and are trying to establish what happened based on the available testimonies and evidence. As Keiser (2016) helpfully suggests, the courtroom conversation is much like a proof; you may not assume its conclusion even if you already know it to be true. What determines potential sanctions is what we eventually have been able to 'prove' or establish as 'true according to the courtroom conversation'. For instance, even though it may be common ground that someone is guilty, if we cannot 'prove' this in an institutional setting, they are considered legally innocent. Hence, even though the conversations in court or in the dean's office are pretend-conversations, the commitments made *within* these conversations are pivotal for determining subsequent action; the way the pretend-conversation progresses will determine the relevant parafictional data and this data in turn has 'real world' legal consequences.

¹⁵Not *all* possible utterances in bald-faced lie scenarios constitute continuations of the shared pretence. See footnote 18.

¹⁶In this respect the analysis is similar to Keiser's (2016) account according to which bald-faced lies are moves in language games; Pentangeli makes a move in the courtroom game by which he avoids scoring points against the Godfather. In the workspace account these language games are understood as pretend-conversations and 'scoring points' is analysed as ensuring that the desired parafictional updates take place.

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

Additionally, this analysis explains why Pentangeli and the student are being asked questions in the first place that are somehow ‘insincere’ because the person asking already knows the answer to them; in the pretend-conversation the questions asked *are* sincere because it is part of the pretence that the questioner does not yet know the answer to them. Moreover, the analysis accounts for a special feature of courtroom talk of being able to ‘scratch’ or undo statements. A similar ‘scratching’ is possible in pretend play where you can stop and rewind pretend scenarios to revise what will eventually be true in the fiction.¹⁷ By contrast, taking back something you have asserted requires retraction of something that was said; you cannot simply replay the discourse and make it true that you never said it.

5.4.3 Disagreement with a bald-faced liar

In line with the previous concern, Marques (2020) has recently argued that the fact that we can (and often do) disagree with bald-faced liars shows that bald-faced lies cannot be fictional statements. People contradict bald-faced lies because it is important for them to ‘set the record straight’. We don’t feel compelled to (and shouldn’t) contradict fictional discourse. For instance, you wouldn’t interrupt an actor on stage because you believe that they uttered a falsity.

The analysis of bald-faced lie conversations as pretend-conversations explains why people can (and often will) disagree with a bald-faced liar in institutional settings. The disagreement takes place *within* the pretend-conversation and is crucial for determining what eventually is parafictional truth. Although I agree with Marques that we shouldn’t disagree with an actor on a stage, this is because, as an audience member, you cannot influence fictional truth. However, scripted performances are not the only kind of fictional discourse. Courtroom conversations are probably more akin to unscripted pretend-discourse (e.g., ‘improv’ or role-playing games) which *can* involve disagreement. Consider the following pretend-conversation:

¹⁷This seems to be what the senator questioning Pentangeli initially attempts in reply to the bald-faced lie: “Mr. Pentangeli, you – you are contradicting a sworn statement you’ve previously made to me and signed. I ask you again, sir, here and now under oath: Were you at any time a member of a crime organization headed by Michael Corleone?”

- (54) *Tineke*: Help! A dragon is approaching. Flee!
John: Don't worry, it is actually a unicorn.
Tineke: Eh, no... It really is a dragon and now it's spitting fire on you!

Here two 'actors' engaged in a pretend-conversation are both equally licensed to determine what is fictionally common ground and hence what is true in their game of pretence. There is no *real* disagreement between Tineke and John whether there is a dragon approaching (it is stable common ground that dragons do not exist) but there is a temporary pretend-disagreement. Their pretend-disagreement over what kind of creature they are facing influences whether, after the pretend play, the parafictional information that "In the pretend play, a dragon approached John and Tineke" is stable common ground or not.

Similarly, the senator questioning Pentangeli or the dean questioning the student can disagree with the bald-faced liar and push their interlocutor on what they said *within* the pretend-discourse. Although the questioners themselves would probably not be allowed to respond with "That's not true/a lie",¹⁸ they *can* report on someone having directly contradicted the bald faced liar. The bald-faced liar, or another party in the pretend-conversation that wants the content expressed by the bald-faced lie to become parafictional truth, will then respond by defending the bald-faced lie. Hence we can expect, as Marques also notes, that bald-faced liars will often accuse the party that contradicts them of being the liars. For instance, the courtroom discourse in *The Godfather II* continues as follows:

- (55) *Senator*: We have a sworn affidavit – we have it – your sworn affidavit that you murdered on the orders of Michael Corleone. [...]
Pentangeli: Look, the FBI guys, they promised me a deal. So, so I

¹⁸ Since it is part of the institutionalized pretend play that the conversation is a cooperative information exchange where the questioner is trying to find out what happened, the dean's or senator's utterance of "That's a lie/false" would be inadmissible. In these contexts such a statement would not serve its ordinary function of signalling that an attempt to deceive has failed. Rather, it functions like a notification that the questioner is refusing to play along with the bald-faced liar and terminates the pretend-discourse. In some bald-faced lie scenarios (e.g., the cheating husband or chicken thief scenarios described in section 5.4.4) such a refusal would be an admissible move but in institutional settings, officials such as the dean and the senator are not allowed to 'break character' in this way. Arguably, another witness could potentially accuse the bald-faced liar of lying without breaking character in the pretend scenario).

5 Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

made up a lot of stuff about Michael Corleone 'cause that's what they wanted. But – But it was all lies. Uh... everything!

Again, there is no *real* disagreement between the senator and Pentangeli over whether Pentangeli knew the Godfather; it is stable common ground that he did. There is, however, a temporary pretend-disagreement between the interlocutors, through which both the senator and Pentangeli attempt to fix the record (i.e., influence the parafictional information that eventually becomes stable common ground).

5.4.4 The point of fiction and bald-faced lies

An additional possible concern with my view is that bald-faced lies and fictional statements seem to differ essentially in the point of the speech acts. Both Pentangeli's and Tolkien's speech acts can be construed as proposals to update the workspace and trigger fictive closure, but only for Pentangeli does the parafictional update really seem to be the point of the speech act; the point of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is to make its readers imagine its content (which involves updating the workspace) and enjoy that experience, not to stock up on parafictional beliefs.

First, it is important to note that it is unclear whether a difference in the point of bald-faced lies and fictional statements is relevant for deciding what kind of speech acts bald-faced lies are; *why* people are performing some speech act (e.g., telling a fictional story) seems to be an essentially different question from *whether* people are performing this speech act. Still, it is interesting to see whether and why the motivation behind performing these two types of speech acts may diverge.

Second, it is not obvious that this difference in motivation generalizes to all stereotypical fictional statements. Suppose the CEO of a firm calls in an employee, Mike, after Mike disagreed with him during a meeting. The CEO tells the following story:

- (56) Listen, Mike. Once upon a time there was an annoying little midget that pissed on a giant's cake. Do you want to know what the giant did to the midget? He ate him, Mike.

Is the point of this fictional story to make Mike temporarily imagine a story about giants and midgets or is the point of this story to make Mike believe that 'In the CEO's story, the giant eats the midget that bothered him' and draw the 'appropriate' lessons from that?

Third, even if the point of fiction is generally to make its audience entertain its content, sometimes this is the point of a bald-faced lie as well. Pentangeli's statement in court and the student's statement in the dean's office are examples of bald-faced lies in rule-bound institutional settings. However, bald-faced lies can also be more spontaneous. Meibauer (2014) discusses the case of a cheating husband who tells his wife that he has spent the night in his office while it is common knowledge that he was with his lover. Or consider Cargile's (1970) bald-faced lie scenario in which a man catches his son-in-law in his chicken coop at 5 AM holding two dead chickens. The son in law then says:

(57) My coming by must have frightened the thief away.

Arguably, the aim of these bald-faced lies is to make the people involved entertain or uphold a favourable narrative about their marriage or family relations (not to obtain parafictional beliefs about such a narrative). Such bald-faced lies are thus in this sense even more like stereotypical pretend-discourse than Pentangeli's speech act. This suggests that, if there is a difference in the point of bald-faced lies and fictional statements, it is a gradual difference where bald-faced lies and fictional statements lie on a continuum; they are similar in the sense that both result in parafictional updates but bald-faced lies can be more or less like stereotypical fictional statements depending on whether the point of the speech act is also to obtain this result.

5.4.5 Blameworthiness

The last potential worry with the analysis outlined above is that bald-faced lies and fictional statements seem to differ essentially with respect to blameworthiness; whereas the bald-faced liar is blameworthy for saying something false (e.g., Pentangeli can be convicted of perjury), someone who tells a stereotypical fictional story (e.g., Tolkien) is not blameworthy – rather, they are praiseworthy – for stating something false. If Pentangeli is just telling a fictional story, why should he be any more blameworthy than Tolkien?

First, although we can deem some bald-faced liars (e.g., the student) blameworthy (contra Sorensen (2007)), blameworthiness does not extend to all bald-faced lie scenarios.¹⁹ Can we really blame the couple in the cheating

¹⁹It is not even clear that blameworthiness extends to all lies. Is the white liar blameworthy? Or the liar that saves innocent people with their lie?

5 *Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates*

husband scenario or the father and son-in-law in the chicken thief scenario for pretending their relation is better than it is? Moreover, many examples of bald-faced lies in institutional settings (e.g., the case of Pentangeli) involve some kind of coercion into making a particular statement. The Godfather was non-verbally threatening to hurt Pentangeli's family if he would testify against him. Can we really blame Pentangeli for working the system to protect his family?

Second, in cases where the bald-faced liar does seem to be blameworthy (to some extent) I follow Maitra (2018) who argues that this is because of an implicit or explicit 'honor code' that requires the bald-faced liar to not just 'tell some story' but be truthful in the relevant context. The parafictional updates that result from their speech acts should reflect what we know is really the case.²⁰ For instance, the student is blameworthy for (by telling a fictional story) creating an unfair academic advantage for himself compared to the other students. Likewise, Pentangeli is to some extent blameworthy for creating an unfair trial. Such honor codes are not in place when people tell stereotypical fictional stories or in the described cases of spontaneous bald-faced lying. Moreover, given that there is an implicit or explicit expectation for the courtroom (or conversation with the dean) proceedings to track the truth, bald-faced liars can also be construed as being blameworthy for (indirectly) deceiving an potential third party that is not aware of the falsity of the bald-faced liar's statement and would read the proceedings expecting them to be truthful.

5.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have explicated different possible strategies to model lies in Stalnaker's common ground framework; we can either switch to an acceptance-based conception of the stable (official) common ground or we can take a moderate psychologistic turn and define speech acts as proposals to update the hearer's belief-based presuppositions. I have argued that an analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements is superior to an analysis of bald-faced lies as lies. The analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements

²⁰In other words, certain content expressed in the courtroom conversation must be viable for export (see section 4.6.2). Similarly, authors of fiction can be blameworthy if they intentionally include falsities in a novel that is expected to be realistic with respect to a certain cluster of facts.

allows us to account for the temporary acceptance of the content expressed by the bald-faced lie. In a workspace account it also allows us to adequately model the success condition of the bald-faced lie of 'going on the record' as consisting in a parafictional update. In response to possible objections I have argued that even if non-fictional statements also involve a 'parafictional' update, this does not constitute an essential update of the speech act as it does in the case of bald-faced lies and fictional statements. Second, the analysis of bald-faced lies as fictional statements can be extended to the entire conversation in bald-faced lie scenarios. This allows us to explain (amongst other things) why, even when p is common ground, testifying p is just as relevant as testifying $\neg p$ and why people can disagree with bald-faced liars. Last, I have aimed to defuse some worries about supposedly essential differences between bald-faced lies and fictional statements such as the point of the speech act and blameworthiness.

