

The CRGN Research Notes

French Gendarmerie Research Center

Issue 113 – March 2025

Gendarme (RO) Samantha BORDES



© Adobe Stock

The CRGN certifies that this document was written entirely by human intelligence

INSINCERITY, LIES, AND DELUSION: WHEN WORDS DON'T REFLECT REALITY

We all make slips of the tongue from time to time. This term refers to a slip of the tongue, *lapsus linguae*, which can also occur in writing, *lapsus calami*. Since the 19th century, linguists and psychologists have been interested in this phenomenon. In linguistics, a slip of the tongue can be considered a loss of control over speech. Fenoglio¹ analyzes the slip of the tongue as an utterance event caused by a failure to control the utterance. However, it is not solely a matter of expressive performance. According to Freud², it would be the expression of sudden bursts of the unconscious in speech. Latent, wandering images interfere with thought and the resulting utterance. This is why, following a slip of the tongue, it is not uncommon to see the speaker feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or ashamed. The unconscious mind seems to bypass the barriers of control and our own censorship. This would then be a revealing slip of the tongue. There is no shortage of examples of slips of the tongue in the political news. At the close of the NATO summit in July 2024, US President Joe Biden made several slips of the tongue that did not go unnoticed. In particular, he introduced Ukrainian President Zelensky by calling him “Putin.” He corrected himself by saying, “*I am so focused on beating Putin...*”³. In short, he justified his slip of the tongue before the assembly, certainly so that no one would read anything into it. Mario Rossi and Évelyne Peter-Defare⁴ have defended the idea that a slip of the tongue is a deviation from the speaker's intention, resulting in a change in the statement. In 2022, President George W. Bush publicly described the invasion of Iraq as “*brutal*” and “*unjustified*” before catching himself and explaining that he meant to refer to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He continued, “Iraq too... Anyway.”⁵ Journalists interpreted the former president's remarks as an admission. A slip of the tongue can be a verbal error, an unacknowledged disruptive thought, or an intrusion of the unconscious into language, but in all cases, it is involuntary and uncontrolled. It therefore disrupts the flow of discourse.

Language allows us to communicate and follows conversational rules. In 1975, Grice⁶ theorized four principles that govern conversations: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. These principles help structure communication and promote efficient mutual understanding. But what happens when they are not respected?

- 1 FENOGLIO, Irène. La notion d'événement d'énonciation : le « lapsus » comme une donnée d'articulation entre discours et parole. *Langage et société*, vol. 80, 1997, p. 39-71.
- 2 FREUD, Sigmund. *Psychopathologie de la vie quotidienne*. Éditions Payot, 2013, 350 p.
- 3 LA RÉDACTION with AGENCES. Les nouvelles gaffes de Biden au sommet de l'OTAN : le président américain appelle Zekensky... Poutine et Kamala Harris... Trump. *RTBF*, 12 juillet 2024.
- 4 ROSSI, Mario, PETER-DEFARE, Evelyne. *Les lapsus ou comment notre fourche a langué*. PUF, 1998, 176 p.
- 5 LE FIGARO. VIDEO - Une invasion «totalement injustifiée de l'Irak... je veux dire, de l'Ukraine» : le lapsus de George W. Bush [online video, 1'49"] [online]. *Le Figaro*, 19th May 2022. Available via: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/video-une-invasion-totalement-injustifiee-de-l-irak-je-veux-dire-de-l-ukraine-le-lapsus-de-george-w-bush-20220519>
- 6 GRICE, H-P. Logic and conversation. In : COLE, P. *Syntax and semantic*, vol. 3. NY Academic Press, 1975.

What psychological processes are likely to distort reality in speech? We first explore the unintentional mechanisms that distort reality in speech, then those in which intention is a component.

I) What falls under the unintentional

When faced with a speaker whose words seem false, the question of intent arises. In the absence of intent to deceive, it is natural to think of error. Error is an act of the mind that takes what is false to be true. In the sequence of mental operations we perform during a conversation, error can creep in at different levels. It can be an error of perception, encoding in memory, retention of memory, or recall of information. It slips into speech but can have significant effects, such as in testimony. Elisabeth Loftus, a cognitive psychologist, has extensively studied the malleability of memory and has conducted numerous studies on false memories⁷. In one of them, she led participants to believe that during a day at Disneyland, they had seen Bugs Bunny (the iconic rabbit from competitor Warner Brothers). Loftus' work has helped highlight the fragility of memory and eyewitness testimony in criminal investigations.

We make mistakes that sometimes lead us to state untruths, even though we are acting in good faith.

When being completely sincere, a speaker may say things that are completely incoherent or even irrational. Delirium is a mental disorder that causes the person suffering from it to lose all contact with reality; yet they express their view of the world with sincerity and conviction. Their words could therefore be described as true, but it is their view of the world that is distorted. When a patient tells their psychologist that they have bought Al Capone's jet and cannot say anymore because they are in contact with djinn, it can leave them speechless. Nevertheless, in this illustration, it is clearly a delusion that can be identified by certain characteristics: grandiosity marked by wealth and Al Capone's jet; dogmatic expression and magical abilities with the presence of Djinn, supernatural creatures from Arabian (pre-Islamic) mythology.

Delusions very often include the lexical-semantic field of persecution, magical abilities (the semantic field of grandiosity), the expression of visual or auditory hallucinations, or assertive, unverifiable dogmatic delusions.

In the 20th century, psychoanalysis attempted to demonstrate that despite its extravagance, incoherence, and irrationality, delirium could nevertheless have its own meaning for the subject. In 1911, Eugen Bleuler⁸ was the first to defend this theory and thus introduced the term *schizophrenia*.

Among the pathologies in which the concept of delirium is found, paranoia occupies a special place since it is based essentially on interpretations and a form of para-logic specific to the subject. Interpretation then becomes the central mechanism, and the themes of delirium mainly relate to persecution or malice.

Delusion takes over the subject and enslaves their entire mental life: thoughts, emotions, and cognition. Reasoning tends toward delusional beliefs. The subject is unaware that they are delusional, so they are not being insincere in what they say.

Fabulation comes from the Latin *fabula*, which means story. Although frequently associated with lying, it is defined as an imaginary story presented as real, but unlike lying, it is not always accompanied by the intention to deceive. As in delirium, the fabulator believes in his own statements. Fabulation is closely linked to psychopathology. It can be caused by a pathological condition that alters consciousness, leading to memory loss and spatial and temporal disorientation. Fabulations are often transpositions of plausible or previous real events, as in Korsakoff's syndrome, which combines amnesia for recent events, spatial and temporal disorientation, fabulations, and false recognition. In short, the subject fills in the missing memories with imaginary productions that they present as real memories.

II) The lie

Talking about storytelling leads us to mythomania, a kind of link between unintentional and intentional productions. The psychological contours of mythomania are still currently in the realm of hypothesis. In 1905,

7 LOFTUS, Elizabeth F., BERNSTEIN, Daniel. M. Rich False Memories: The Royal Road to Success. In : HEALY, Alice F. (éd.). *Experimental Cognitive Psychology and Its Applications*. American Psychological Association, 2005, p. 101–113.

8 BLEULER, Eugen. *Dementia praecox or the group of schizophrenias*. New York: International Universities Press, 1950.

Dupré⁹ coined the term *mythomania* to describe the constitutional tendency to distort the truth, to fabricate stories (imaginary narratives), and to simulate somatic conditions. Pathological liars are also characterized by a complete lack of self-criticism. Some cases involving pathological liars have made headlines, such as judge Patrick Couwenberg¹⁰, exposed during her appointment to the Los Angeles Superior Court or Tania Head, fake victim of the September 11 attacks. In France, the case of Jean-Claude Romand, a fake doctor, ended with him murdering his parents, his wife, and his two children when he thought he had been exposed. More recently, Alexandra Damien pretended to be a victim of the Bataclan attack.

What makes pathological liars stand out is often the lack of obvious reasons for lying. Their stories are usually extraordinary but plausible, which sets them apart from delusions. It's not uncommon to find elements of personal history, role, or social status in mythomania, to boost self-esteem or assert identity. Today, studies tend to consider mythomania as a pathology of narcissism. In current textbooks, it is found in megalomaniacal delusional disorders, or as a possible component of narcissistic or borderline personalities. In 2005, an in-depth literature review¹¹ presents the characteristics of mythomania: the speaker's belief in their own allegations, clear-sighted judgment of other subjects, an impulsive (and therefore unplanned) dimension, and a lack of motivation (such as financial gain, for example), making lying an end in itself. However, the question remains as to whether pathological lying is a distinct clinical entity, a syndrome, or merely a symptom¹².

The liar starts from a frame of reference that he believes to be true and deliberately gives a version of events that does not correspond to it. Lying is not fundamentally opposed to truth, but to sincerity.

It is common to associate lying with the manipulator's arsenal, but if we focus on Philippe Breton's definition¹³, "*manipulation involves breaking and entering*" into someone else's mind to plant an opinion or provoke a behavior without them realizing it. Manipulation and lying are therefore not always closely linked, but what they have in common is their insincerity. Manipulators act on their own behalf and in their own interests, and in fact it is not uncommon for them to use lies to achieve their ends. Socially skilled, they are gifted in the art of deception and appear confident and mischievous.

A typology of different types of liars has been proposed by Aldert Vrij¹⁴. During his studies, he identified four types of liars: the manipulator, the actor, the sociable liar, and the adapter. Unlike the manipulator, the adapter is uncomfortable in social situations and uses lies to compensate for his insecurity. The sociable type, on the other hand, is better at lying thanks to their extroverted temperament (linked to their social and interpersonal skills). Finally, the actor, as their name suggests, is more inclined to control their behavior and potential nervousness when lying, which essentially makes them a good liar.

Children begin experimenting with lying at the age of three, as this is when theory of mind develops, i.e., the ability to understand that other people have mental states that may differ from their own. Children's first lies are self-centered, for example, to avoid punishment. Between the ages of four and adolescence, lying generally decreases. However, prosocial lying is still observed. The social fabric is peppered with so-called altruistic lies, which are a guarantee of politeness or an expression of good manners. "*Not all truths are good to tell, not all truths are good to believe*"¹⁵, said Beaumarchais in *Le Mariage de Figaro*.

Jankélévitch¹⁶ theorized different mechanisms of lying: concealment (hiding the truth), alteration (changing the facts), transformation (minimizing or exaggerating one's words), fabrication (inventing, imagining), and *antinomy* (which is completely opposed to the truth).

9 DUPRÉ, Ernest. Mythomania. Psychological and forensic study of lying and morbid fabulation (opening lecture of the forensic psychiatry course, 2nd year). In: *Bulletin médical*, Paris: print. of J. Gainche., 1905, 68 p.

10 LAMBERT, Philippe. La vraie nature du mensonge. Athena [online]. *Le magazine*, n° 348, september-october 2020, p.17. Available via: <https://athena-magazine.be/magazine/le-magazine-n348/la-vraie-nature-du-mensonge/>

11 DIKE, Charles C., BARANOSKI, Madelon, GRIFFITH, Ezra, E.H. Pathological Lying Revisited. *J. Am. Acad. Psychiatry Law*, 33, 2005, p. 342-349.

12 HAUSTGEN, T., BOURGEOIS, M.-L. L'évolution du concept de mythomanie dans l'histoire de la psychiatrie. *Annales Médico Psychologiques*, 165(5), 2007, p. 334-344.

13 BRETON, Philippe. *La parole manipulée*. La découverte, 2020.

14 VRIJ, Aldert. *Detecting lies and deceit : the psychology of lying and implications for professional practice*. Wiley, 2000.

15 BEAUMARCHAIS, P- Caron de. *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Gallimard, 1784.

16 JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir. Le mensonge. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 47(1), 1940, p. 37-61.

According to a study by B. de Paulo¹⁷, men and women lie with equal frequency, but there is a difference in the type of lies they tell. Women tell more prosocial lies, while men tell more selfish lies.

When it comes to not telling the truth, many subtleties of language can be employed. If the speech goes against the principle of quantity, it may be a lie by omission. By not giving enough information to the other person, the speaker plays with the truth.

It may also be that we lie to ourselves... Léon Festinger¹⁸ theorized cognitive dissonance following an immersive experiment within a cult in 1954. The cult predicted the end of the world, but it never came. The cult members had to find an explanation. According to them, they had produced so much light by gathering that the “Guardians” had spared them, so they had to become messengers of this good news. This rewriting of history allowed them to avoid radically renouncing their beliefs and reduced their psychological tensions. When two contradictory pieces of information about one's own representation of the world coexist, it creates a situation of psychological discomfort that the brain must resolve. Internal processes are activated to reduce inconsistencies, and the result can be the creation of an interpretive narrative that protects one's image of oneself or others. It is possible to lie to oneself by selecting certain parts of the narrative or skewing certain information, and to believe in this truncated autobiographical narrative.

The choice of words, the way they are arranged in a sentence and spoken can say something about oneself, one's relationship to the world and to reality. However, we sometimes transform our speech, invent, distort reality, or fall victim to errors, or to our own latent thoughts that find their way into the sentence in the form of slips of the tongue. Francis Descarpentries¹⁹ writes: "*Delusion has nothing to do with lying. Fabrication is not deliberately misleading. Mythomaniacs are not always acting in bad faith. False speech and insincerity are not mutually exclusive.*" When a professional listens to the words of a delusional person, it is important to remember that they do not really believe that the person bought Al Capone's jet, and therefore consider them to be lacking in credibility, but they may still consider them to be sincere.

Samantha BORDES is a psychologist, scientific project manager in intelligence psychology at the CRGN, doctoral student in psychology (under a research training agreement in administration – COFRA), and reserve officer in the French National Gendarmerie.

Translated by Second Lieutenant Joshua JAMES.

The content of this publication should be considered as belonging to its author and does not engage the responsibility of the CRGN.

17 DE PAULO, B. M., KASHY, D. A., KIRKENDOL, *et al.* Lying in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(5), 1996, p. 979–995.

18 FESTINGER, Leon, RIECKEN, Henry W., SCHACHTER, Stanley. *When prophecy fails*. Pinter & Martin Publishers, 2008, 256 p.

19 DESCARPENTRIES, Francis. Vérité et insincérité : mensonge, délire, fabulation, mythomanie, et mauvaise foi. *Le Journal des psychologues*, 367, 2019, p. 66-71.