

The Pragmatic Characteristics of Lies

—A Case Study of Lies in the Movie *Catch Me If You Can*

HUANG Ni

School of Foreign Language, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

Lying is a kind of pragmatic phenomenon. From the perspective of the definition of a lie, a lie is a kind of speech act that deliberately conceals the facts or provides self-deemed false information to achieve the purpose of deception. The film *Catch Me If You Can* tells a story of an FBI agent chasing a talented young criminal. There are a variety of lies in the film, therefore this paper takes the lies in the movie as the main research material. Based on relevance theory, politeness principle, face theory in pragmatics, this paper analyzes the pragmatic features of lies from a pragmatic perspective, including gradability, subjectivity and flexibility. Using the communicative view, context view and relevance in the relevance theory can explain the subjectivity and flexibility of lies.

Keywords: lies, pragmatics, *Catch Me If You Can*

1. Introduction

Lies are common in our daily life, as well as in literature and art. As far as pragmatics is concerned, the interpretation of lies is a test of existing theories of pragmatics. As far as other disciplines are concerned, the study of lies is an interdisciplinary field of psychology, behavioral science and other disciplines. The study of lies from the perspective of linguistics can provide help for the research of other disciplines. This paper focuses on the lies in the movie *Catch Me If You Can* as an example to explore the pragmatic characteristics of lies. The film, *Catch Me If You Can*, tells the story of a cat-and-mouse contest between FBI agent Carl and Frank, a criminal who is good at forging documents. Frank disguised himself as a pilot, lawyer, and doctor one after another, and defrauded a large amount of wealth. In the course of his deception, he escaped the track of Federal Police Carl time and time again, but in the end he was arrested.

2. Literature Review

A number of scholars at home and abroad become aware of the phenomenon of lies, and they study lies actively so that a lot of results have come out. In Leech's Politeness Principle and Levinson's Theory of Face, they propose a special use of lies, which is to regard lies as a politeness strategy. Coleman and Kay (1981) studied lies from the perspective of prototype theory.

In general, the phenomenon of lying is gradually attracting the attention of many scholars in China, and many achievements have also been made. Domestic progress is mainly reflected in the selection of abundant

language materials by many scholars. However, there are still some shortages. First, the current research on lies in China is mainly focusing on the cause, classification and recognition of lies, and there may be a lack of in-depth research. Some scholars believe that if we broaden the experimental methods and research perspectives, the domestic research prospects will be considerable. Second, the research of scholars lacks theoretical basis. Third, the research of domestic scholars mainly focuses on the speech and psychology of the speaker, thus neglecting the group of the listener.

3. Pragmatic Characteristics of Lies

3.1. The Gradability

The politeness principle mainly means that in the process of communication, people should pay attention to other's feelings and express them implicitly, instead of directly hurting other's feelings. And Face theory holds the view that people follow the politeness principle because they want to save face for each other. These theories have the same effect with the white lies in the lies, in order to achieve good interpersonal relationship.

Integrating the above theories, I believe lies has the characteristic of gradability, which means lies are classified according to the degree of self-interest, that is, the higher the self-interest, the higher the level of the lie, and the lower the self-interest, the lower the level of the lie. So the hierarchical ranking of lies is: "self-serving lies", "relational-maintenance lying" and "other-serving lies".

3.1.1 Self-serving lies

Self-serving lies refer to the mind of the liar to protect themselves or to lie to protect their own interests. For example:

Brad: Are you selling encyclopedias? Yeah, he looks like a substitute teacher.

Frank: Quiet down, people! My name is Mr. Abagnale! That's Abagnale, not Abagnahlee, not Abagnaylee, but Abagnale! Now, somebody please tell me where you left off in your textbooks.

On the first day of school, Frank was laughed at by his classmates for looking like a substitute teacher. Then Frank had an idea. Why not pretend to be a substitute teacher? So he pretended to be a French substitute teacher for a week. According to the face theory, after experiencing the humiliation of his new classmates, Frank lied that he was a substitute teacher because he was defending his face and maintaining his dignity. This fully reflects Frank's self-interest psychology.

3.1.2 Relational-maintenance lies

There is also a common form of lying called "relational-maintenance lying", which involves lying to maintain a harmonious social relationship. For example:

Frank's mother: You're a better dancer than your father, Frankie.

Frank: You hear that, Daddy?

In the film, we can see that Frank has no dancing foundation, but his father's dancing posture is more skillful and graceful. However, Frank's mother praised him as a better dancer than his father. This example fits in approbation maxim in the politeness principle: try to minimize the denigrating of the other party, try to maximize the praise. So here, the mother lies in order to express her doting affection for her son and to maintain the mother-son relationship.

3.1.3 Other-serving lies

Other-serving lies are “liars to lie psychologically in order to protect another person or for the benefit of another person”. For example:

Frank: Carl, when do I get to call my father?

Carl: Until then, just sit there. Be quiet. You can call him when we get to New York.

Carl promised that Frank would speak to his father when he returns to New York, tacitly assuming that his father was still alive. But in fact, Frank’s father had already died of illness. Carl followed the sympathy maxim of the politeness principle (try to minimize the boredom of the other person, try to maximize the compassion of the other person). Therefore, taking into account Frank’s feelings Carl could not tell Frank this painful truth.

3.2. The Subjectivity

Relevance theory studies the generation and understanding of discourse in language communication, which mainly includes three aspects: communicative view, contextual view and relevance. The communicative view refers to that the listener learns the speaker’s information intention after receiving the “ostensive stimulus” and then understands the speaker’s communicative intention. Relevance theory holds that context is a “contextual hypothesis” which is composed of a series of assumptions.

“Subjectivity” is the expression component of the speaker’s “self” in the discourse, that is to say, the speaker expresses his attitude and emotion while saying a sentence or paragraph, thus leaving his self-imprint in the discourse. It can be summarized in the following two aspects: (1) The speaker’s feelings; (2) The speaker’s knowledge.

3.2.1 The speaker’s feelings

In verbal communication, when people convey information, they always carry certain emotions and attitudes. The choice of discourse form is the result of complying with their emotional factors. In the phenomenon of lies, if the speaker has a friendly or sympathetic attitude towards the listener, the purpose of his lying is to be polite or to safeguard the interests of the listener or both parties, he will often choose a white lie. However, if the speaker only seeks some benefits for himself, he will often choose malicious lies, and he will try to cover up his true feelings and intentions. For example:

Frank: Hey, it’s okay. Stop crying. I wouldn’t worry about it. You know, these doctors, you know, they don’t know everything.

Brenda: It’s my first week, and I think they’re going to fire me.

Frank: No, no, nobody’s going to fire you. I bet you’re good at your job. I bet if I asked you to check on the status of my friend Lance Applebaum, that you could do that for me in a second.

Frank: You see that? No problem.

In this communicative action, the doctor got angry with Brenda, Brenda felt injustice and cried, Frank immediately comforted her. This sentence is a white lie in order to appease Brenda. On account of Frank’s ability of sympathy, Frank recognized Brenda’s psychological states, understands and feels sorry for her situation.

3.2.2 The speaker’s knowledge

“A man’s whole cognitive environment is the sum of all the facts he can feel. It is his physical environment and his own cognitive capacity, including all the facts in the physical world that he already knows and all the facts

that he can learn further”. When he is exposed to new things, remembering facts as part of his cognitive ability can improve his ability to perceive new things. Even in the same physical environment, because different cognitive subjects have different identities, experiences, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, etc. The cognitive contexts constructed by people will also be different. Therefore, the cognitive contexts vary from person to person. For example:

Mr. Mudrick: I don't want to hear your story. This is two checks that bounced. You know how much trouble I'm in?
 Frank: No, but listen, the bank, they made the mistake. I'll write you another check right now!
 Mr. Mudrick: What, do I look like I was born yesterday?
 Frank: Please, I mean it's my midterm next week and my books were stolen.
 Frank: Please, it's just five dollars. No one would have to know.

In the example above, Frank lied three times in order to cash a fake check. The first time Frank claimed that the bank had made a mistake, a naive lie that was soon seen through by Mr. Mudrick. The second time Frank wanted to cash a fake check to buy her a birthday present. The third time Frank lied about losing his schoolbag. But all of these lies were dismissed as not convincing enough to move the hearts of the listeners. At that time Frank was just a young boy and had no social experience. These examples show that lying has something to do with one's knowledge.

3.3. The Flexibility

Sperber and Wilson (1995) argued that “the speaker must make some assumptions about the listener's cognitive ability and contextual resources”, which can be specifically exemplified in the phenomenon of lies. The speaker must consider the cognitive abilities of the listener in order to determine how best to manipulate the information for the purpose of deception. Relevance theory holds that context is a “contextual hypothesis” constructed by a series of assumptions. The communicator's understanding and grasp of context is the first condition for successful communication. Moreover, context is not a fixed factor known to both sides of communication, but a dynamic variable. Communicators should adjust, choose and adapt to the context with the understanding of speech in communication.

Flexibility means that liars must change their strategy and language in accordance with context of situation. In many cases, the reason why a liar can make the other party believe his words and realize his cheating intention is that he is very good at predicting the psychology of the hearer. In addition, liars are also very good at observing people's facial expressions, and change their lying strategy if they notice a mistrustful expression on people's faces.

3.3.1 The recognition of context

In verbal communication, context plays an important role in the generation and detection of lies. The dynamic nature of context determines that the speaker needs to recognize the constantly moving context.

Carl: Shut up! Just pop out the ball. Put your hands on your head!
 Frank: Relax. You're late, all right? My name is Allen. United states secret service. My partner has him in custody downstairs.
 Carl: Let me see some credentials.
 Frank: Yeah, sure. Take my whole wallet. Come over here. Hey, look, just do me a favor. Look out the window. My partner is walking him to the car as we speak... Look.

This is one of the most classic scenes in the film. Carl tracked down the hotel where Frank was staying for arresting him. At this point, Frank came out of the hotel bathroom and pretended that he was a member of the US intelligence community. In order to gain Carl's trust, Frank handed over his wallet, and also pulled out an old man to be his scapegoat. In this scene, Frank takes advantage of the situation and flexibly adjusts his language and identity according to the tense situation at that time, successfully escaping Carl's chase again.

3.3.2 The change of strategy and language

The generation of lies needs to go through a dynamic cognitive process. In this process, relevant contextual factors need to be selected, contextual assumptions are formed, discourse forms are selected according to the assumptions, and discourse is finally generated.

Brenda's father: Was that snake Hollingsworth still teaching there?
 Frank: Grumpy old Hollingsworth? Meaner than ever.
 Brenda's father: Tell me, what was the name of his little dog?
 Frank: I'm sorry. The dog was dead.

In this episode, Frank lies about the fact that he studied law at Berkeley, but what he does not realize is that Brenda's father went to Berkeley. Brenda's father tested Frank by asking him if he remembered the teacher's dog's name. Frank had an idea that the dog was dead, and the focus shifted from the name to the pain. The clip also shows Frank's flexibility in adjusting to the context of that moment.

Conclusion

Lying is a cognitive pragmatic phenomenon in essence. Taking the lies in the movie *Catch Me If You Can* as the main research material, this paper studies that lies have the characteristic of gradability. Lies can be classified into self-serving lies, relational maintaining lies, and other-serving lies. In addition, lies takes place in a certain context, which requires the liar to flexibly change his lying strategies and language according to the context, therefore the flexibility of lying comes into being. What's more, the degree of cognition, psychology, emotion and consciousness of the communicator has an important influence on the generation and understanding of the lie, which makes the lie have the characteristic of subjectivity.

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