

PhD Program in Theoretical Linguistics
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A Cross-Cultural Investigation of the Conception of Lie

Summary of the PhD Dissertation

by

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1. Introduction

Lying is commonly based on the falsehood of the statement. This means that someone is considered a liar if his or her statement is false or does not align with factuality. According to Online Oxford Learner's Dictionary, however, a *lie*¹ is defined as *a statement made by somebody knowing that it is not true*. This definition suggests that the speaker's knowledge should be taken into consideration. In other words, a lie should not be merely based on the falsehood of the statement, rather on the knowledge of the speaker.

Mahon (2015, 1) compiled four necessary conditions based on the definitions of lie provided by scholars: (1) The statement condition where a statement is being made by a person. (2) The untruthful condition, meaning that the person believes the statement to be false or the statement be untruthful.² (3) The addressee condition to signify that the untruthful statement is made to another person. And (4) Intention to deceive the addressee condition in which the person who stated a lie intends that the other person believes the untruthful statement is true. Most scholars in linguistics and philosophy (Bok 1999, Carson 2010, Fallis 2012, Heffer 2020, Lackey 2013, Marsili 2014, Saul 2012, Stokke 2013, Wright 2019) provide a definition of lie based on the second condition above, that is, the condition in which the speaker believes that the statement is false. Coleman and Kay's (1981) study in the perception of the English word *lie* is aligned with these scholars' definitions. Coleman and Kay's (1981) study has been replicated with groups of different languages and cultures, such as Arabic (Cole 1996) and Spanish (Hardin 2010, Eichelberger 2012), with results similar to ones of the original study.

The definition of lie might seem to be universal if only the scholars' definition and the results of the studies mentioned above are taken into consideration. However, the definition where lie is based on the speaker's belief should be challenged. This is because the way lie is defined and perceived might vary across different cultures. For example, in the Modern Chinese Dictionary,³ *huǎnghuà* 谎话 'lie' is defined as *untruthful and deceiving words*. And the adjective word in Indonesian *bohong*⁴ 'lying' is defined as *not in accordance with the actual thing (such as circumstances or others); not the real thing; fake*. In addition to the dictionaries' definition, Yoshimura's (1995) findings in the replication of Coleman and Kay's (1981) study

¹ https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/lie2_2

² In the Oxford Learner's Dictionary definition, the term *know* is used instead of *believe*.

³ The entry *huǎnghuà* 谎话 'lie' can be found in the dictionary on page 577. The dictionary is edited by Institute of Linguistics of Chinese Academic of Social Sciences and it was originally published in Beijing in 2016 by The Commercial Press entitled *现代汉语词典: 第七版 xiàndài hànyǔ cídiǎn: Dì qī bǎn (Modern Chinese Dictionary: the 7th edition)*

⁴ <https://kbbi.web.id/bohong>

with Japanese speakers demonstrate that the native speakers of Japanese considered the element of falsehood as the most important element of lying. According to these latter definitions and findings, lie is defined based on the objective falsity of the statement, unlike English based definition in which lie is perceived as a subjective falsity.

The dissertation intends to replicate Coleman and Kay's (1981) study by conducting research projects cross-culturally in order to reveal the possible differences in the perception of *lie*. This work contributes to the debate about the definitions of lie, including the feature of universality of the definitions, as well as gives elaboration regarding how lying is interpreted in different cultural settings and contexts. For this purpose, four empirical research projects were conducted with people from different lingua-cultural groups, namely. Indonesian, Chinese, Hungarian and Russian.

There are four research questions in the dissertation.

- 1) According to native speakers of different lingua-cultures, does the perception of the word *lie* in their respective languages involve the three prototypical elements; namely falsehood, belief, and intention as suggested by Coleman and Kay (1981)?
- 2) Assuming the three prototypical elements involved in the studied lingua-cultural groups, what is the order of the elements from the strongest to the weakest?
- 3) Are there any cultural or social factors involved in the interpretation of lying by different lingua-cultural groups?
- 4) How do Indonesian, Chinese, Hungarian and Russian lingua-cultural groups perceive different types of lie?

The dissertation is divided into nine chapters. In Chapter 1, the background and the purposes of the research are provided, followed by the presentation of the terminology commonly used in the dissertation, and then the organization of the dissertation. In Chapter 2, the critical review of the literature regarding the approaches to the definition of lie is given by discussing the philosophical approaches and contributed elements of the definition of lie. Since the nature of the dissertation is empirical, some cross-cultural empirical research is reviewed in the subsequent part of the chapter. The chapter also shows some factors involved in the interpretation of lying based on the previous research. And after that, different types of lie are elaborated. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the four projects in the dissertation which was mainly based on Coleman and Kay's (1981) methodology. Chapter 4, 5, 6, and 7 provide the replicated studies with different groups of respondents: Indonesians, Chinese people, Hungarians and Russians, respectively. Each of these chapters has similar organization covering six sections: a brief introduction of the research project, the adapted questionnaire,

the demography of respondents, results, discussion and conclusion for respective research projects. In Chapter 8, there are a cross-cultural discussion based on the study of Coleman and Kay (1981), the previous replicated studies and the present studies of the dissertation and also a discussion based on the results and the comments from the present replicated studies. Chapter 9 addresses and answers each research question, reviews limitations and provides some future directions of the research.

2. Theoretical Background

Most Western scholars are still not in complete agreement regarding what constitute a lie. In the field of philosophy, there are two main approaches (Meibauer 2019); (1) the approach of the speech act in which lying is a kind of speech act or communicative act, and (2) the speaker-meaning approach which is an approach based on Grice's theory of meaning and conversational implicature. The two approaches differ in the way that the speech act approach considers a lie as something *asserted*, whereas the speaker-meaning approach argues that a lie is something *said*. Regardless of the approaches, the endorsers of all approaches define lie based on the subjective falsity or the belief of the asserter or the speaker. In order to fully understand lying, it would be useful and appropriate to explore the definitions and perception of lying in other cultures, as well as the results of studies which attempt to replicate findings from Western cultures. According to Chinese and Indonesian dictionaries and the result from Yoshimura's (1995) replicated study, speaker's belief is either not mentioned or not in the focus as the main element of the definition of lie. Since assertion accounts for the expression of belief, it is more compatible to lean more on the argument that a lie is a said proposition.

Scholars are also divided in terms of the integration of the element of intention in the definition of lie. Mahon (2019, 33) classifies these scholars into two camps, namely deceptionist and non-deceptionist scholars. The deceptionists argue that the speaker lies when she makes a statement that she believes to be false with the intention that the statement be believed to be true. Scholars in this group are Bok (1999), Dynel (2018), Lackey (2013), Mahon (2008) and Meibauer (2014). Meanwhile, the non-deceptionists are scholars who argue that intention to deceive is not necessary for defining a lie, they are Carson (2010), Heffer (2020), Saul (2012), Sorensen (2007), Stokke (2013), and Wright (2019). Both camps, however, still agree that the element of belief or subjective falsity is necessary in the determination of lie. In fact, none of the previously mentioned scholars hold that objective falsity is important for a lie to happen. Most scholars arguing for the objective falsity as the most important element of lying take the empirical approach to lying, such as Turri and Turri (2015), Brown (2002) with

Tzeltal people of Mexico, Danziger (2010) with Belize people, and, Chen, Hu and He (2013) with Chinese people.

Coleman and Kay's (1981) study is possibly the most important piece of empirical research in relation to the dissertation. These scholars proposed a semantic analysis of the English word *lie* by isolating three elements that constitute a prototypical lie. The elements are as follows (Coleman and Kay 1981, 28). (i) The proposition (P) is false, (ii) the speaker (S) believes P to be false, and (iii) in uttering P, S intends to deceive an addressee (A). This study as well as its replicated studies also yield in some factors that might influence the interpretation of lying such as the relationship between the speaker and the listener, age, religion, and cultural understanding of the respondents of the research.

One of the aims of the dissertation is to explore the perception of types of lie by different groups of lingua-cultures. Therefore, three types of lies are briefly described in the dissertation. The first type of lie is half-truth, usually referred as omission or withholding information. When making a half-truth statement, the speaker leaves the hearer in the state of ignorance regarding the information. Half-truth might be represented in story 6 of Coleman and Kay's (1981) study below. The second type is untruthful implicature or lying while saying the truth (Meibauer 2019). This type of lie occurs when a speaker makes a truthful statement, but the speaker does not believe the truthfulness of the implicature of that statement. There seems to be no clear line between half-truth and an untruthful implicature. Story 3 of Coleman and Kay's (1981) study can be taken into consideration of having an untruthful implicature. The third type of lie covered in the dissertation is a white lie and is depicted in Coleman and Kay's (1981) story 5.

3. Methodology

The dissertation is mainly based on Coleman and Kay's (1981) methodology. Data was collected through questionnaires adapted from Coleman and Kay's (1981) study. Each questionnaire contained at least eight stories⁵ which were modified to be linguistically and culturally appropriate for each lingua-cultural group of participants. The stories were formed relying on the permutation of the three elements of the prototypical lie as proposed by Coleman and Kay (1981, 28) and configured as [false], [belief], and [intent]. The positive [+] and negative [-] symbols after each story below signify the presence and the absence of the

⁵ There were three additional stories for the research project with Hungarian speakers to challenge Vajtai's (2013) findings.

elements, respectively. The original stories from Coleman and Kay's (1981, 31-32) study are as follows.

1. Moe has eaten the cake Juliet was intending to serve to company. Juliet asks Moe, 'Did you eat the cake?' Moe says, 'No.' Did Moe lie? [+ + +]
2. Dick, John, and H.R. are playing golf. H.R. steps on Dick's ball. When Dick arrives and sees his ball mashed into the turf, he says, 'John, did you step on my ball?' John replies, 'No, H.R. did it.' Did John lie? [- - -]
3. Pigfat believes he has to pass the candy store to get to the pool hall, but he is wrong about this because the candy store has moved. Pigfat's mother doesn't approve of pool. As he is going out the door intending to go to the pool hall, Pigfat's mother asks him where he is going. He says, 'I am going by the candy store.' Did Pigfat lie? [+ - +]
4. One morning Katerina has an arithmetic test she hasn't studied for, and so she doesn't want to go to school. She says to her mother, 'I'm sick.' Her mother takes her temperature, and it turns out to Katerina's surprise that she really is sick, later that day developing the measles. Did Katerina lie? [- + +]
5. Schmallowitz is invited to dinner at his boss's house. After a dismal evening enjoyed by no one, Schmallowitz says to his hostess, 'Thanks, it was a terrific party' Schmallowitz doesn't believe it was a terrific party, and he really isn't trying to convince anyone he had a good time, but is just concerned to say something nice to his boss's wife, regardless of the fact that he doesn't expect her to believe it. Did Schmallowitz lie? [+ + -]
6. John and Mary have recently started going together. Valentino is Mary's ex-boyfriend. One evening John asks Mary, 'Have you seen Valentino this week?' Mary answers, 'Valentino's been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks.' Valentino has in fact been sick with mononucleosis for the past two weeks, but it is also the case that Mary had a date with Valentino the night before. Did Mary lie? [- - +]
7. Two patients are waiting to be wheeled into the operating room. The doctor points to one and says, 'Is Jones here the appendectomy or the tonsillectomy?' Nurse Braine has just read the charts. Although she is anxious to keep her job, she has nevertheless confused the charts in her mind and replies, 'The appendectomy,' when in fact poor Jones is the one scheduled for tonsillectomy. Did Nurse Braine lie? [+ - -]
8. Superfan has got tickets for the championship game and is very proud of them. He shows them to his boss, who says, 'Listen, Superfan, any day you don't come to work, you better have a better excuse than that.' Superfan says, 'I will.' On the day of the game, Superfan calls in and says, 'I can't come to work today, Boss, because I'm sick.' Ironically, Superfan doesn't get to go to the game because the slight stomachache he felt on arising turns out to be ptomaine poisoning. So Superfan was really sick when he said he was. Did Superfan lie? [- + -]

Two remarks are in order concerning these eight stories. First, there are two controlling stories where respondents are expected to answer correctly. Story 1 containing all elements of a prototypical lie was created as a sample of an ordinary lie, whereas Story 2 without any element was constructed as an ordinary true statement. Second, respondents who answered wrong either of these stories would be considered as invalid and their responses would not be included in the analysis. This exclusion is based on the assumption that the particular

respondents might be unwilling or ingenuine to take the questionnaires. By this methodological decision, the present study follows Coleman and Kay's (1981) consideration.

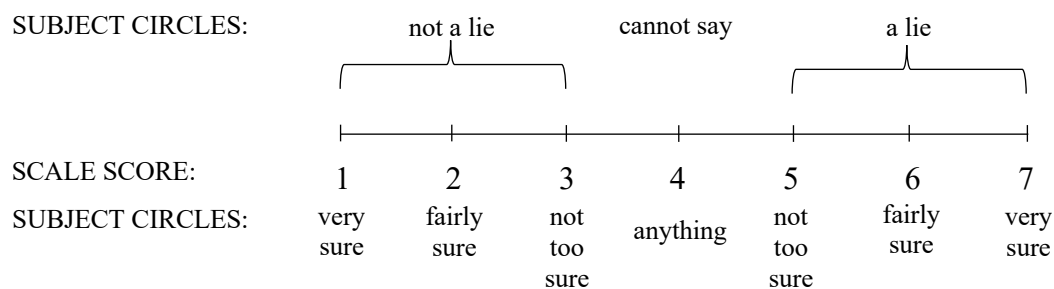
A scoring method used by Coleman and Kay (1981, 30) was also utilized in the present study. The scoring is based on the combination of responses from two questions. These questions are to evoke the scale of the degree of lying and degree of certainty. The questions were placed after each story and an optional comment section was also provided so the respondents could describe reasons underlying their responses. However, there was a small change made in the research project with Russian speakers.⁶ The change is about the comment section. Instead of being a non-obligatory separate section, the comment section was integrated into an option under the certainty part.

The original study (Coleman and Kay 1981, 30) comprises the following questions.

It was {a lie / not a lie / I can't say}
 I am {very sure / fairly sure / not too sure} most others would agree with the choice I just circled.

A 7-scoring scale was constructed by Coleman and Kay (1981) from the combination of the two responses above. The figure 1 below exhibits the 7-scoring scale obtained from the combination of the options given to the respondents. The 7-scoring scale was applied across all studies with speakers of different languages.

Figure 1 The 7-scoring scale



There were four lingua-cultural groups of respondents participating in four different research projects, namely Indonesian, Chinese, Hungarian and Russian. All respondents were

⁶ Due to misunderstanding, the comment section was made as one of the options. However, this change did not affect the results of the Russian study.

recruited to fill the questionnaire through an online platform *Google Form* in the studies with native speakers of Indonesian, Hungarian and Russian. Meanwhile, in the study with Mandarin Chinese native speakers, respondents were asked to fill the questionnaire using 问卷星 *wènjuàn xīng*. Each study successfully managed to reach at least 120 respondents, but the number of respondents that were taken into consideration for the analysis differed in the four studies: 102 in Indonesian study, 81 in Chinese study, 110 in Hungarian study, and 119 in Russian study.

Data was analyzed to reveal the mean score for each story for every research project. Tables were constructed to show the total and the mean scores. When the mean score is between 3.01 and 4.99, it is considered that the respondents have uncertain perception regarding the lie in the story. The lie is neither weak nor strong. Figures were also made to exhibit the stories in the lie-value continuum wherein a story appearing on the right side has a more lie-like situation, whereas a story on the left side has a less lie-like situation.

Another analysis was utilized to find out the order of the elements in terms of importance. To do this, central tendency and data frequency scores of the stories were compared. Therefore, another table with median, mode and data distribution will be displayed in addition to the mean scores from the previous table. After the table, comparisons were done based on the scores for each story. There were two levels of comparison: first, the comparisons of stories with one element which leads to a logical consequence that a certain element is stronger or weaker than the other; second, further comparisons of stories with two elements are expected to reinforce the previous logical consequence. A conclusion that one element is stronger is obtained in case of the element is consistently shown to be stronger in both comparisons. However, if there is any inconsistency in the comparisons, it will be resolved by referring to any other scores or the comments obtained regarding the element.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the lie-value or mean scores for each story from the research projects with different lingua cultural groups.

Table 1 The comparison of lie-values of studies with participants from various lingua-cultures

Story	Indonesian	Mandarin Chinese	Hungarian	Russian
1. [+++]	6.89	6.42	6.97	6.87
2. [---]	1.24	1.90	1.14	1.44
3. [+ - +]	5.05	5.56	2.35	3.55
4. [- + +]	3.27	5.45	5.68	5.28
5. [++ -]	5.25	4.42	5.37	4.96
6. [--- +]	3.22	3.26	3.82	3.66
7. [+ - -]	4.59	5.44	2.47	3.48
8. [- + -]	1.63	2.57	3.45	3.28

The scores in bold indicate that the mean scores for the stories are in the range of 3.01 to 4.99, which means that the respondents in the particular lingua-cultural group are not certain enough to judge whether the characters are lying or not. Some arguments arise from the table. First, both studies with Hungarian and Chinese speakers have less bolded main scores. This means that, compared to other groups, respondents of these two groups seem to be more confident in the categorizing of the stories regardless of whether the stories contain a lie. Furthermore, with the mean score of 6.97, Hungarians are the group of people who are quite sure that they share perception regarding the character lying in story 1 [+++], whereas native speakers of Mandarin Chinese are the group who are less certain about their common perception regarding the character in story 2 [---]. Meanwhile, the Russians show more uncertainties in their responses as indicated by five stories placed in the medium range. In addition, the Indonesian is the only group who are uncertain regarding the character in Story 4 [-++] as indicated by having the only bold mean score for this story in comparison to other groups. Second, even though results for story 5 [++-] from Chinese and Russian respondents obtain mean scores in the medium range, it is still possible to make an argument that all cultural groups have a tantamount result when it comes to story 5 where all perceive that the character creates a stronger lie. In addition, all groups also show the same tendency for story 6 [---+]. In this case, respondents of any culture are all unsure to consider a lie if a proposition has objective and subjective truths but no intention to deceive. Finally, contrasts between perception can be drawn especially for stories 3 [+ - +], 7 [+ - -], and 8 [- + -]. For these stories, there are similarities of results from studies with Indonesian and Mandarin Chinese speakers as opposed to results from the studies with Hungarian and Russian speakers. As it can be seen in the table, the studies with Indonesian and Mandarin Chinese speakers result in higher mean scores for stories 3 and 7, where both stories have the element of falsehood. In addition, the Indonesian and Chinese group assign lower mean score to story 8, the story with only

element of belief being present. On the contrary, the groups of European lingua-cultures obtain lower mean scores for stories 3 and 7, and higher mean score for story 8.

Table 2 below compares the rankings of all studies according to each story's mean score. Stories are ranked starting with the story with the lowest mean-scale score on the left to the highest mean-scale score on the right. The table below also strengthens the results regarding the story with the most prototypical lie, Story 1, and the story with the least prototypical lie, that is story 2.

Table 2 Order of the stories' mean scale scores (non-lie to lie)

Indonesian	2	8	6	4	7	3	5	1
Mandarin Chinese	2	8	6	5	7	4	3	1
Hungarian	2	3	7	8	6	5	4	1
Russian	2	8	7	3	6	5	4	1

Results from continental Hungarian and Russian studies are similar except for stories 3 and 8. Meanwhile, results from respondents of Asian lingua-cultures show a similar tendency for the weaker lies, where they both consider stories not having the element of falsehood to be on the left side of the order.

To answer the first research question, it is necessary to look at the mean scores of each story of each study, to consider the ranking of the stories in each study, and also to reflect on the comments given by the respondents in the studies. It appears that for Indonesian and Chinese people, the perception of lying might not involve all the three prototypical elements of lie. The element of belief might not be considered in their conception of lying. This element, however, might manifest as knowledge. Further research is necessary to understand the backgrounds and to confirm or deny this argument. Meanwhile, for Hungarians and Russians, it seems that all three prototypical elements of lie are present in their interpretations of lying.

Since belief is absent in the interpretation of lying by Indonesian and Mandarin Chinese native speakers, the results from the study with these groups of speakers contradict the philosophers' definitions, and the results of the original study (Coleman and Kay 1981) and of other replicated studies (Cole 1996, Hardin 2010, Eichelberger 2012). To answer the second research question, the order of the elements of each examined group can be seen in the table below.

Table **Error! No text of specified style in document.**-3 Comparison of the order of the elements from all studies

Order of the elements	Hungarian <i>hazugság</i>	Russian <i>lozh'</i>	Indonesian <i>bohong</i> , Mandarin Chinese <i>huǎngyán</i>
1	belief	belief	falsehood
2	intent	falsehood	intent
3	falsehood	intent	(belief)

Among the recent replicated studies, the studies with Hungarian native speakers and with Russian native speakers conclude that the word *lie* in their lingua-cultures involves three prototypical elements. Meanwhile, the studies with native speakers of Indonesian and Chinese people result in agreement that both groups might not even consider the element of belief when interpreting lie. Falsehood being the most important element for these groups makes this result aligned to a replicated study with Japanese speakers (Yoshimura 1995).

In order to answer the third research question regarding social and cultural factors involved in the interpretation of lying, it is necessary to refer to the comments that the respondents made. Similar to Arabic speaking people in Cole's (1996) experiment, Indonesians' interpretation of lying is also influenced by the religion of Islam as many Islamic terms and concepts emerged in the comments. As for the Chinese people, they take into consideration the relationship of the speaker and the hearer. The respondents from China have a more negative perception when the false statement is uttered by a child who intends to deceive parents. Therefore, age might also play a role in Chinese people's interpretation of lying. Meanwhile, the European groups rarely address such social and cultural reasons in their comments. In the current study, one of the respondents' comments indicated consideration of the personal relationship between the speaker and the hearer, supporting Vajtai's (2013) conclusion that such a relationship would affect the interpretation of a lie. The lack of social and cultural data from the European studies makes it hard to factor these issues into their interpretations.

As for the last research question, it can be answered by referring to stories 3 [+ - +], 5 [+ + -], and 6 [- - +] of the questionnaires in Coleman and Kay's (1981) and review the mean scores of each experiment. Story 3 is considered to contain untruthful implicature since the character does not believe the truthfulness of the implicature of the proposition. According to the mean scores' results, the respondents from Asia perceive it more lie-like. However, the judgement is mainly due to the presence of the element of falsehood for Asian respondents and

the absence of the elements of belief for Europeans. Thus, the European respondents consider it to be less lie-like. The categorization of the story 3 containing untruthful implicature might be inaccurate. Story 6 has been described containing half-truth and the results exhibit that all respondents in any experiment are uncertain to make the categorization. Finally, story 5 is commonly regarded having a white lie. According to the results for this story, all respondents are unanimous to categorize a white lie as a lie. In addition, all respondents agree that this type of lie is acceptable and permissible, and it is even suggested as a part of etiquette and polite attitude, and to bring harmony between the speaker and the hearer.

5. Conclusion

As the findings suggest, respondents from Indonesia and China are more concerned with reality and factuality in conceptualizing *lie*, rather than the subjective belief of the speaker. Therefore, a definition integrating the factive words *knowing* and *knowledge* are more applicable cross-culturally since both knowing and knowledge are equal or at least entail believing and belief. Wierzbicka's (1996, 153) argues, however, cultural models are reflected in the meaning of the words. The cultural models encoded in the meaning of Indonesian word *bohong* and Mandarin Chinese word *huangyin* are somewhat different from that encoded meaning of Hungarian word *hazugság*, Russian word *lozh*, and English word *lie*. Therefore, the interpretation of what constitute a lie and which situation can be considered as having a lie, might vary among different lingua-cultural groups. As Sakaba (2020, 53) suggests, in order to discuss the concept of lying, native speakers' point of view should be incorporated for valid cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analysis and conceptual imposition should be avoided.

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