

## I. ROZPRAWY I ANALIZY

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Bert Peeters

ORCID: 0000-0001-8422-4156

(Canberra/Brisbane, Australia)

(WHITE) LIES AND (*PIEUX*) *MENSONGES*:  
ETHNOLINGUISTIC ELABORATIONS  
ON NOT TELLING THE TRUTH

The fact that most European languages have a word similar to the verb *lie* has led many to believe that lying is a universal cognitive category, that all human beings have an intuitive understanding of what it means to lie, and that all forms of discourse involving a lack of truth can be analysed as forms of lying, wherever they occur. This is a myth. Within Europe itself, there are differences, and these become more outspoken once we move further away. Even a Melanesian creole such as Bislama, in spite of being English-based, has no strict equivalent to the verb *lie*; the closest it gets is by means of the verb *giaman*, which, unlike *to lie*, refers to a fairly common, sometimes even a necessary course of action. On the other hand, whereas, at least from an Anglo point of view, lying is mostly felt to be morally reprehensible, there are instances that are not as straightforward. In English, lies that are deemed less bad than others are often referred to as *white lies*. Other terms exist, but this one is by far the commonest and has a high degree of cultural salience. Does the concept exist in other languages, e.g. French? The phrase *pieux mensonge* comes to mind. I propose to show that *white lies* and *pieux mensonges* are overlapping categories, but that they carry different connotations, which I will spell out using a tool known as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

KEY WORDS: lying; white lies; *pieux mensonges*; Natural Semantic Metalanguage; cross-cultural differences

This paper is about lying, lies, white lies, and the latter's closest French equivalent, viz. *pieux mensonges*, which literally means 'pious lies'. Before attempting to make sense of white lies and *pieux mensonges*, it seeks to demonstrate that not everybody lies, and that some "lies" are not as bad as others. It also raises the question why the ones that are not as bad

are almost invariably called *white* in English and quite often *pieux* in French.<sup>1</sup>

### Not everybody lies

Those who say that “lying is universal” and that “to lie is to be human” (Phillips 2010) operate on the assumption that all human beings have an intuitive understanding of what it means to lie. The fact that, as Wierzbicka (2014: 58) puts it, “most, if not all, European languages have a word comparable in meaning to ‘lying’” lends further credence to that assumption, which can also be illustrated by the following excerpt from the abstract of a recent paper:

Without the lie, language would not be as complex as it is, linguistic communication would be much simpler, the cognitive requirement of language would not be so heavy, and its role in society would be radically different. [...] Lying and language came to be entangled in a never-ending co-evolutionary spiral, which changed the map of communicative relationships within communities, and participated in shaping our languages, societies, cognitions and emotions. We evolved *for* lying, and *because of* lying, just as much as we evolved for and because of honest communication. (Dor 2017: 44)

Did we really? The assumption that all humans operate with the notion embedded in the English verb *to lie* is one that cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, it needs to be challenged. Wierzbicka, for one, has repeatedly and forcefully done so, pointing out, for instance, that Russian “has two words, not one, corresponding, roughly speaking, to the English verb *lie* (*vrat'* and *lgat'*), and these two words don't mean the same thing” (Wierzbicka 2014: 58). Both are “widely used” (Wierzbicka 2002: 418) and coexist with “the common expression *govorit' nepravdu*” (ibid.), which at a literal level translates as ‘to tell un-truth’.

It could of course be argued (cf. Hilferty 1997) that, in English, there is more than one verb as well. The one that comes immediately to mind is *fib*, which appears however to be less widely used than *lie*. The two do not mean exactly the same either. Hilferty writes as follows:

*Fib* differs from *lie* in at least three respects: First, *fib* is the more colloquial of the two expressions and is therefore more suitable in the context of *informal speech situations*. Second, *fib* scores lower on a scale of relative importance than does *lie*; hence, it is considered to be a less-serious offense, in the sense that it is something that one could be more indulgent of, if need be. A third difference has to do with the fact that *fib* is

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<sup>1</sup> I am not lying when I say my heartfelt thanks go to the two reviewers of this paper, whose suggestions have been very helpful in making further improvements. Needless to say, all remaining imperfections are mine.

a subordinate concept of *lie*, rather than the other way around (that is, all fibs are lies, but not all lies are fibs). (Hilferty 1997: 56)

There is overlap between the verbs *fib* and *lie*, as there is overlap between the verbs *vrat'* and *lgat'* (Wierzbicka 1990: 352; 1996: 153). Gladkova (2011: 577–578) explains the difference between *vrat'* and *lgat'* as follows:

*Lgat'* refers to a conscious distortion of truth and has a strong negative connotation. *Vrat'* refers to a less serious distortion of truth which can be done for the sake of entertainment and is less negatively evaluated.

At first blush, *lgat'* seems to cover the same ground as *lie*, which also refers to a “conscious distortion of truth”. The same cannot be said with respect to *vrat'* and *fib*, however. Wierzbicka’s (2002: 418) description of *vran'e*, the “widely recognized speech genre” related to the verb *vrat'*, clearly does not apply to the speech act of fibbing in English. Unlike *vran'e*, fibbing is not a form of “verbal art” (ibid.) and is never produced, in Gladkova’s words, “for the sake of entertainment”. On closer inspection, even *lgat'* and *lie* differ in meaning: the utterance *John lied to Mary, and I think he did the right thing* is perfectly alright in English, but its translation into Russian using the verb *lgat'* seems to be less straightforward. My Russian informant’s intuition (or rather lack thereof) was such she admitted to resorting to an internet search to help her make up her mind. There is thus no clear-cut one-to-one mapping between the English and the Russian verbs.<sup>2</sup>

What does this mean? Strictly speaking, it means that native speakers of Russian cannot “lie”. They cannot “fib” either. They may do so “from an Anglo point of view”,<sup>3</sup> but what they are doing from their own perspective is either *lgat'* or *vrat'* (or *govorit' nepravdu*). It also means that statements to the effect that traditionally, in Russian culture, “it is not regarded as acceptable to lie to another person under any circumstances” (Wierzbicka 2002: 404) and that, in Russian, “talk about lying and fibbing enjoys an exuberant vocabulary” (Pesmen 2000: 64) are shorthand at best. It would be more accurate to say that traditionally, in Russian culture, it is not regarded as acceptable to *lgat'* to another person under any circumstances and that, in Russian, talk about *lgat'* and *vrat'* enjoys an exuberant vocabulary – but such statements, of course, do not mean much to someone who does not understand Russian.

<sup>2</sup> On lying in Russian, see also Mondry and Taylor (1992).

<sup>3</sup> One of Wierzbicka’s favourite phrases, which she uses all the time and which others often do not, although they should, because their observations cannot be expected to reach any further. “Anglo” is a reference to Kachru’s “Englishes of the inner circle”.

On the other hand, if Russians wish to understand the exact meaning of the English verb *lie*, they need to be provided with a definition that makes sense to the greatest possible number of native speakers of English. In that regard, a paraphrase such as Meibauer's (2017: 33), according to which lying is "a cognitive ability serving the manipulation of the truth and the deception of interlocutors" (see also Meibauer 2014), is of little use: it is not a definition in the true sense of the word since it relies on complex language that, for the average native speaker, because of its complexity, is less meaningful than the relatively simple (but by no means universal) concept of "lying". Having been written in technical English, it can only be translated (if it can be translated at all) into technical Russian, which propels it beyond the reach of the average native speaker of Russian. To Meibauer's credit, it must be added that, later on in his paper, he proposes an alternative definition that goes as follows:

Lying is a speech act where a speaker *S* utters a sentence *o* with a propositional content *p*. Then, the following conditions hold:

- a. *S* does not believe that *p* is true.
- b. *S* wants the hearer to believe that *p* is true. (Meibauer 2017: 37)

This definition is not very different from the one proposed almost four decades ago by Coleman and Kay (1981: 28), whose idea of a "prototypical lie" involved a proposition *P* asserted by a speaker *S* to an addressee *A*, such that "P is false", "S believes P to be false" and "S intends to deceive A". In terms of intelligibility and translatability, it is a definite step in the right direction, even though there is still too much jargon in the introductory part: terms such as "speech act" and "propositional content", and their closest Russian equivalents, do not mean much to the non-expert.

The best definitions are those that are accessible to cultural insiders and outsiders alike, irrespective of their level of education. They are phrased in simple and easily translatable words and phrases that are as devoid as possible of cultural bias, which is something that cannot be said of definitions such as Meibauer's, nor of the very word *lie*, which – as was mentioned before – does not have an exact counterpart in every other language. Wierzbicka's "explications", formulated in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage or NSM for which she is known throughout the world, may not be perfect, but they have a much better chance of being universally intelligible. Compared to most other definitions in the scholarly literature, they are disarmingly simple. Prompted by Coleman and Kay's (1981) paper on "Prototype semantics: The English word *lie*", and improving on an earlier attempt in Wierzbicka (1985: 342), Wierzbicka (1990: 351-352; 1996: 152) proposed the explication in [A]:

[A] X lied to Y  
 X said something to Y  
 X knew it was not true  
 X said it because X wanted Y to think it was true  
 [people would say: if someone does this, it is bad]

A more recent explication (Wierzbicka 2006: 45) is provided in [B]:

[B] when X said it X was *lying*  
 X said something like this: "I want you to know that Z" to someone  
 X knew that Z was not true  
 X wanted this someone to think that Z was true

[A] and [B] are not meant to coexist, nor is either of them meant to coexist with the earliest attempt in Wierzbicka (1985): they are different takes on the same verb. This means we have to either make a choice, or compare the respective merits of each and come up with some sort of a blend. Overall, my own preference goes to something like explication [A]; what I do not like about [B] is the reference to "Z", a proposition in the first line of the explication that, all of a sudden, turns into a noun in the other two. At the same time, what I do like about [B] is the lack of an "axiological element" (Kalisz 1998: 187) or a "social evaluation" (Goddard 1998: 132; 2003: 408) reflecting "the people's view" on the act of lying, as in the fourth and last line of [A], where the square brackets indicate the information provided is of a secondary nature, not that it is "optional" (as assumed by Hilferty, 1997: 54). I am not convinced that such a component, whatever form it takes,<sup>4</sup> is part of the invariant meaning of the verb *lie*. As mentioned before, there is nothing wrong with the utterance *John lied to Mary, and I think he did the right thing*. Fleshing out the idea that lying is bad would result in ungrammaticality: *John lied to Mary, which is bad, \*and I think he did the right thing*. Replacing *and* with *but* removes the ungrammaticality and confirms the idea that lying is normally bad (but not on this occasion); however, the "*and* sentences" clearly indicate that lying is not *intrinsically* bad. How people *feel* about lying – what they *think* about it – has nothing to do with the meaning of the word; this kind of information should instead be

<sup>4</sup> Goddard (1998: 132) proposes an explication that replaces the conditional *would say* of Wierzbicka's "social evaluation" with a simple *think* ("people think it is bad if someone does this"). Levisen (2016: 48) reproduces the explication he found on the Griffith University NSM homepage (<http://bit.ly/1XUoRRV>), which is by and large the work of Cliff Goddard. Its "social evaluation" component has been further expanded to read: "people think that it is bad if someone does *something like this*" (emphasis added, B.P.). There are other differences between the explications referred to here and those discussed above, but they are not immediately relevant to the argument.

captured in a cultural script (see below). I therefore believe the explication should run as in [C]:<sup>5</sup>

[C] X lied to Y  
 X said something to Y  
 X knew that it was not true  
 X said it because X wanted Y to think like this: “it is true”

[C] is easy to translate into other languages, much more so than Meibauer’s (2017) definitions; the risk of distortion is minimal because the explications rely on only the simplest words, empirically tested for translatability in dozens of genetically and typologically unrelated languages from all over the world. In some of these languages, there is simply no verb that comes semantically close to *lie*. In general terms, the further away we move from the “sphere of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman civilization” (Wierzbicka 2014: 59), the more salient the differences become. Thus, in Pitjantjatjara, a language spoken in the Australian Western Desert, the closest counterpart of *lie* is an adverb meaning, among other things, ‘false, wrong, untrue’ (ibid.). Even a Melanesian creole such as Bislama – in spite of being English-based – has no strict equivalent to the verb *lie*; the closest relevant Bislama verb is *giaman*, for which Levisen (2016: 53) has recently proposed a detailed NSM explication showing that *giaman* is fairly common, sometimes even necessary, and that it can be to someone’s advantage to engage in it. The author’s conclusion deserves to be quoted in full:

If speakers of Anglo-English understand *giaman* in terms of “lying” (as many missionaries did in the past, and many other Europeans in the Pacific with them), they unwittingly distort the Melanesian and neo-Melanesian linguistic worldviews, which do not operate with the “lying” model but with the “giaman model”, and, as we have seen, *giaman* is just as culturally constituted and constructed as *lying*. In my analysis, the neo-Melanesian speech act of *giaman* is not a category of “lying”, nor is it a Melanesian “way of lying”. The point is this: speakers without a category for “lying” do not “lie”, just as speakers without a category for “giaman” do not “giaman”. (Levisen 2016: 55)

### Some lies are not as bad as others, but they are still lies

Let us now narrow our focus and move on to lying from an Anglo point of view. Although, in Anglo culture(s), lying is mostly felt to be reprehensible, there are instances that are not quite as straightforward. Some lies are not as

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<sup>5</sup> The syntax of the explication has been brought in line with what is currently known about the universal combinatorial possibilities of the metalanguage’s conceptual building blocks, referred to as “semantic primes”.

bad as others, as attested by the acceptability of utterances such as *John lied to Mary, and I think he did the right thing*. Lies may even be unavoidable, as pointed out, for instance, by the American sociologist Harvey Sacks in one of his most famous essays, significantly entitled “Everyone has to lie” (Sacks 1975). There is no denying that this is a somewhat “blunt” assertion (Meibauer 2017: 34), which is why the following observation, made sixteen years later by Sacks’ quasi-namesake, social psychologist Leonard Saxe, may sound more acceptable to some:

An individual obsessed with being totally honest might, in fact, become a social isolate. From the time one wakes in the morning and responds to questions about how one feels, to our relationships with colleagues and friends, complete honesty could make relationships tedious, if not conflict laden. (Saxe 1991: 414),

For instance, it does not look like a good idea to tell all and sundry you do not want to accept their dinner invite, join them on their outing, etc. The preferred option is to make excuses, for instance by invoking a “prior commitment”: this is seen as a very commendable “escape”, it is totally innocent, and in fact culturally valued – so much so that, in English, there is a special word for this practice. Lies that are deemed less bad than others are often referred to as *white lies*. Other terms are used as well, but this one is by far the commonest, and it has a much higher degree of cultural salience than comparable (but by no means identical) terms such as *social lie*, *noble lie* and *pious lie*.

It has been argued (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1985, 1990, 1996) that social lies such as *What a lovely party!* and *How nice to see you!* (Wierzbicka’s examples, borrowed from Coleman and Kay 1981: 29) are not really lies. Presumably, a similar argument could be made with reference to noble lies, pious lies and white lies as well. Wierzbicka’s critics (e.g., Hilferty 1997; Kalisz 1998) were not convinced – and I believe, rightly so. The argument is based on the idea that lies are bad (or that lying is bad), whereas *social lies* etc. are generally felt to be morally less reprehensible (or even not reprehensible at all). However, if there is no room for an “axiological element” or a form of “social evaluation” in the explication for the verb *lie* (as I have argued), it is impossible to remove social lies etc. from the spectrum of lies. They *are* lies, precisely because they are uttered in the knowledge that what is said is untrue and with the intention of making the addressee think the opposite (i.e., that what is said is true). What makes a lie a social lie etc. needs to be spelled out. This will be done for so-called white lies in the next section.

Does the concept of a white lie exist in other languages? After what was said in the early parts of this paper, it should not come as a surprise that, in Russian, at least according to Wierzbicka (2002: 404), “there is no expression

[...] corresponding to the English ‘white lies’”.<sup>6</sup> What does exist, at least in traditional Russian culture, is a cultural script, referred to by Wierzbicka (2002: 408) as the “PRAVDA script”, in recognition of the fact that it details, in NSM, the traditional Russian approach to truth (*pravda*) and untruth (*nepravda*). The script in [D] is identical to Wierzbicka’s PRAVDA script, except in lines (c) and (e), where “wants to say” has been replaced with “says”.<sup>7</sup>

- [D] The PRAVDA script (in universal human concepts)
- a. people can say two kinds of things to other people
  - b. things of one kind are true
  - c. it is good if someone says things of this kind to other people
  - d. things of the other kind are not true
  - e. it is not good if someone says things of this other kind to other people
  - f. it is bad if someone wants other people to think that these things are true

The PRAVDA script is subsequently (Wierzbicka 2002: 419) referred to as the “Russian ‘truth and untruth’ script” and repeated *verbatim*, with the exception of the verb *can* in the first line, which has gone missing. The earlier version, revised as in [D], is probably slightly better, as the idea is not to describe what people actually do say, but what they “can say” (if they want to). More importantly, though, whereas from a traditional Russian cultural perspective the PRAVDA script may seem “quite natural” (*ibid.*), it is anything but universal: as it turns out, “there are many societies in which this script would seem far too extreme, far too polarized, and in which people would not wish to identify with it at all” (*ibid.*). Many of today’s Russians may find it too extreme as well, a view that is certainly also widely shared in Anglo culture(s), where the notion of a white lie is salient and white lies are not merely condoned but culturally valued. In Anglo culture(s), the common occurrence of the collocation *white lie* shows that ‘speaking the truth’ is not the “absolute nonnegotiable moral imperative” (Wierzbicka 2002: 412) that it is (or may once have been) in Russian culture. “From an Anglo point of view, the universe of discourse is not as black-and-white as it is from a [traditional; B.P.] Russian point of view but contains many colors and many shades” (*ibid.*).

<sup>6</sup> My Russian informant, however, drew my attention to the two expressions *lozh’ vo spaseniye* and *svyataya lozh’*, which she found documented by Russian lexicographers. The noun *lozh* is related to the verb *lgat’*. The first of the two expressions refers to a *lozh’* made “for the sake of salvation”; the second, to a “holy” *lozh’*.

<sup>7</sup> It seems a little curious to say that what is good (or not good) is that people simply *want* to tell other people things that are true (or not true); what really matters is what they actually say, especially in view of what is said in line (f), where, for people to think that certain things are true, they must actually have been said rather than intended to be said.



What about other European languages? Do they have a term that is equivalent to the English *white lie*? According to Wierzbicka (1991: 103), German, French, Italian and Polish do not. It did not take long for that claim to be both endorsed and qualified by Béal (1993: 104–105), who, in a comparative study of French and Australian cultural values, confirmed the French do not talk about *mensonges blancs*, but instead refer to *pieux mensonges*.<sup>8</sup> Béal was thinking of European French, though. The term *mensonge blanc* does exist, but appears to be used in Canadian French only, where it is in all likelihood a calque from American English and is treated accordingly by lexicographers such as Parmentier (2006: 24), who recommend *pieux mensonge* as a better alternative. Neither Béal nor Parmentier establish a link between the terms *pieux mensonge* and *pious lie*, which are likely to share a common ancestry. Both are no doubt translations of the Medieval Latin term *pium mendacium*; the latter has also given rise to the German phrase *fromme Lüge*, which has lost its currency in favour of the more common term *Notlüge*, and to the Spanish phrase *mentira piadosa* (Travis 2006).

How different are *white lies* and *pieux mensonges*? In what follows, we formulate full-fledged explications for both that show that, in spite of considerable similarity, there are some differences as well. The explication for *pieux mensonge* may well apply to *mentira piadosa* as well, but that question shall not be pursued here.

### Making sense of white lies

White lies are widely discussed, both in serious scholarly work (Malloch 2001; Bryant 2008; Argo and Shiv 2012; Erat and Gneezy 2012; Biziou-van Pol et al., 2015; etc.) and in the media, whether traditional or online. Here are some examples, taken from the internet:

Oftentimes a white lie can seem the perfect tool to keep the world around you balanced.

“Do I look OK in this outfit?” The answer should always be yes, we’re told.

“Do you want to meet up for drinks tonight?” When we’re reluctant, we deliver a cover up story – “I’m behind on work!” or “I’m not feeling well” – because it avoids hurt feelings.

(<http://www.businessinsider.com/the-right-and-wrong-time-to-use-a-white-lie-2016-6?IR=T>; accessed 11 Dec 2017)

Sometimes you’re running late and you don’t want your friend to rethink hanging out, so you tell them you’re much closer than you actually are. Then you get there and

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<sup>8</sup> *Mensonge pieux* is used as well.

pretend to look a little exasperated. Maybe throw in a “Stupid trains are never on time” just for good measure. It’s a tiny white lie, so what’s the harm?

([http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/national-honesty-day\\_n\\_7184412](http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/national-honesty-day_n_7184412);  
accessed 11 Dec 2017)

White lies were not always as salient in Anglo cultures as they are today. Like the decline of performative phrases (such as *I ask you*) and the avoidance of bare imperatives, gradually replaced with “indirect speech acts” and “suggestions”, etc., the rise of the white lie is no doubt related to changes in modern Anglo culture, where the emphasis is on smooth interpersonal relations, linked with the need “not to be unpleasant” to the many people one comes in contact with, rather than on saying in a straightforward manner what one really thinks and feels (Anna Wierzbicka, personal communication). Wierzbicka (1991: 104) captured this “Anglo-American attitude to truth” “very roughly” as in [E]:<sup>9</sup>

[E] The Anglo-American attitude to truth

- a. it is usually bad to say what is not true
- b. sometimes it is good to say what is not true
- c. if nothing bad can happen to anyone because of this

According to the introduction to the second edition (2003) of Wierzbicka (1991), the idea of cultural scripts had not yet been formalized in the early 1990s, but has since “come into its own as a full-fledged theory” (p. xvii). [E] is one of these cultural scripts *avant la lettre*. It can be fleshed out as in [F], which builds on the same template as [D] and integrates elements from Travis’s (2006: 209) cultural script for “being untruthful in small ways” in Colombian Spanish, where the concept of *mentira piadosa* is arguably as culturally salient as the concept of a white lie in Anglo cultures.

[F] A cultural script for the Anglo attitude to truth

- a. people can say two kinds of things to other people
- b. things of one kind are true
- c. it is good if someone says things of this kind to other people
- d. sometimes, it can be good if someone does not say things of this kind to someone else
- e. if this someone else can feel something bad because of it
- f. things of the other kind are not true
- g. it is not good if someone says things of this other kind to other people
- h. sometimes, it can be good if someone says things of this other kind to someone else
- i. if this someone else can feel something good because of it

Components (a), (b) and (f) are common to all cultural scripts for attitudes to truth, including the (traditional) Russian script in [D] and the Anglo script in [F], since there is no (inhabited) place in the world where

<sup>9</sup> The adverb *usually* in component (a) has never been regarded as a prime.

people cannot say two kinds of things to other people: things of one kind that are true and things of another kind that are not. Even components (c) and (g) retain the wording used in [D]. They pitch the norms about what is good and not good to say (or not to say) at the individual level (*someone*) rather than at the level of the entire community (*people*), since they can only apply at the community level provided they are upheld by sufficiently high numbers of individuals *within* the community. The norms are arguably the same, but the degree to which they are upheld varies from one languaculture to the next, as spelled out for Anglo cultures in components (d)-(e) and (h)-(i).

[G] is an attempt at explicating the meaning of the term *white lie* against the backdrop of the cultural script in [F].

[G] “a white lie”

- a. something of one kind, something people say
- b. people often say something of this kind to someone when they think like this:
- c. “I do not want this someone to think something bad about me
- d. I want this someone to feel something good”
- e. when people say something of this kind to someone, they think about it like this:
- f. “I know that it is not true
- g. I want this someone to think like this: «it is true»
- h. it cannot be bad if I say something like this to this someone now
- i. it is good if someone says things of this kind to someone else
- j. if this someone else can feel something good because of it”

Component (a) spells out that white lies are speech acts. This is the first part of the explication.<sup>10</sup> The remainder specifies what people think (though not necessarily at a conscious level) when they “say something of this kind to someone”. Components (b)-(d) are a reference to the importance of either establishing or preserving smooth interpersonal relations, something that can be promoted by the creation of good feelings in the addressee. All of this provides the impetus for a well-meant lie, with components (f)-(g) referring to the latter (i.e., the lie) and components (h)-(j) to the fact that it is produced with good intentions. Components (f)-(g) are a reminder of the definition of what it means to lie, as spelled out in explication [C] above.

<sup>10</sup> Although relative clauses (with the exception of those involving the relative pronoun *where*, as in *a place where many people live*) are avoided in current NSM, since they are believed to be non-universal, a decision has been made to maintain the *something people say* sequence in component (a). If necessary, the component could be rephrased as *people say things of many kinds; this is one of these kinds*. The matter requires more research.

## Making sense of *pieux mensonges*

*Pieux mensonge* is the French term suggested by French-Canadian lexicographer Michel Alfred Parmentier (2006: 24) for the Canadian French loan translation *mensonge blanc* in a sentence such as *Il arrive à tout le monde de faire un mensonge blanc pour ne pas faire de peine à quelqu'un* ('Telling a white lie so as not to upset someone is something that happens to everyone'). Bilingual dictionaries, too, posit the two terms as translational equivalents. In its ninth edition (2010), *Le Robert and Collins*, for instance, translates *pieux mensonge* as *white lie* (p. 707) and *white lie* as *pieux mensonge* (p. 2151). Monolingual French dictionaries typically propose definitions such as "mensonge fait à quelqu'un dans l'intention de lui épargner quelque chose de pénible" ('lie told to someone with the aim of sparing them something unpleasant'; *Trésor de la langue française*), "[mensonge] fait dans l'intérêt de la religion ou pour éviter un chagrin, une peine à autrui" ('lie told in the interest of religion or to spare someone sorrow, pain'; *Le Robert dictionnaire de la langue française*), "[mensonge] fait dans l'intention d'être utile ou agréable, d'éviter un chagrin, une contrariété à quelqu'un" ('lie told with the aim of being useful or pleasant to someone, to spare someone sorrow or vexation'; *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition). These are once again very similar (with the exception of the not entirely unexpected religious theme in the second one) to the way *white lies* are defined in English dictionaries. Examples of the latter include *Merriam-Webster's* "lie about a small or unimportant matter that someone tells to avoid hurting another person", the *Cambridge English Dictionary's* "lie that is told in order to be polite or to stop someone from being upset by the truth"; and *Collins's* "[lie] made to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to avoid trouble, and not for an evil purpose".

But are the two terms, *white lie* and *pieux mensonge*, really equivalent? The following occurrences of the latter, gleaned on the internet, suggest they are:

Si, par exemple, quelqu'un me demande comment je trouve son nouveau t-shirt (moche) et que je lui répons qu'il est joli et qu'il le porte bien, est-ce un pieux mensonge ou de l'hypocrisie? ('If, for instance, someone asks me how I find their new t-shirt (ugly) and I answer that it looks good and they look good in it, is that a *pieux mensonge* or is it hypocrisy?')

(<https://fr.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100818090048AAoqdoi>;  
accessed 11 Dec 2017)

Vos amis se sont donné beaucoup de mal mais vous n'aimez pas du tout ce qu'ils ont préparé. La parade? Un pieux mensonge. Dites, par exemple, que vous êtes désolé mais que vous êtes allergique à l'ingrédient principal du plat ou qu'il n'est pas compatible avec

vosre régime alimentaire. . . (‘Your friends went to a lot of trouble but you don’t like at all what they’ve cooked. How to get out of it? A *pieux mensonge*. Tell them, for instance, that you’re sorry but you’re allergic to the main ingredient of the dish or else that it isn’t compatible with your dietary requirements. . .’)

(<http://plusmagazine.levif.be/societe/petits-diners-entre-amis-evitez-les-situations-qui-fachent/article-normal-460597.html>, accessed 11 Dec 2017)

Béal, however, claims the two concepts *are* different:

Le “mensonge blanc” diffère du *pieux mensonge* en ce qu’il n’est pas inspiré par la compassion et peut fort bien servir les desseins de l’intéressé. Il est cependant souvent inspiré par des considérations de tact et de politesse. (‘White lies differ from *pieux mensonges* in that they are not driven by compassion and can very well be intended to serve the interests of the liar. They are, however, often driven by considerations of tact and politeness.’) (Béal 1993: 105; cf. also 2010: 380)

The dictionary definitions provided by Larousse (“mensonge inspiré par un sentiment de générosité, de pitié”, ‘lie inspired by a feeling of generosity or pity’) and by Quillet (“[mensonges] faits dans un but charitable”, ‘lies told with a charitable aim’) also suggest there is a difference. In NSM, this difference can be captured by replacing components (c)-(d) of explication [G] with a single component, as in [H]. The idea of self-interest (“I do not want this someone to think something bad about me”) that is part of *white lies* but not of *pieux mensonges* is gone, and the compassion that is part of *pieux mensonges* but not of *white lies* is expressed in terms of “I do not want this someone to feel something bad”, rather than “I want this someone to feel something good”.

[H] “un *pieux mensonge*” [partial explication]

- a. something of one kind, something people say
- b. people say something of this kind to someone when they think like this:
- c. “I do not want this someone to feel something bad”

[. . .]

Tact and politeness, on the other hand, are as much part of *mensonges pieux* as they are of *white lies*. However, they do not rank as high in the French ethos as they do in much of the English speaking world. I have tried to capture this by removing the adverb *often* from component (b), which now reads “people say something of this kind” rather than “people often say something of this kind”.

As a general rule, the need to approach everyone with tact and politeness is less keenly felt among the French, who deem *franchise* (‘frankness’) to be more important, especially among people who know one another really well. This, in turn, explains why the term *pieux mensonge* is less salient, and less commonly used, than the term *white lie*: the speech act referred

to as a *pieux mensonge* is itself not as common among the French as is, in much of the English speaking world, the speech act referred to as a *white lie*. I have written this into explication [I], which contains two entirely new components, (b) and (c). Components (f)-(k), on the other hand, are identical to components (e)-(j) in [G], as they reflect the thoughts or inner convictions of the speaker *when* (and only when) a *pieux mensonge* is uttered. These thoughts are the same as for *white lies*. What differs is: 1) how often they occur – this is expressed in components (b)-(c); and 2) what the motifs are behind them – this is expressed in components (d)-(e).<sup>11</sup>

[I] “un pieux mensonge”

- a. something of one kind, something people say
- b. people often say something of this kind to someone when they do not know this someone well
- c. they sometimes say something of this kind to someone when they know this someone very well
- d. people say something of this kind to someone when they think like this:
- e. “I do not want this someone to feel something bad”
- f. when people say something of this kind to someone, they think about it like this:
- g. “I know that it is not true
- h. I want this someone to think like this: «it is true»
- i. it cannot be bad if I say something like this to this someone now
- j. it is good if someone says things of this kind to someone else
- k. if this someone else can feel something good because of it”

One area where compassion may eventually become an overriding factor in favour of producing *pieux mensonges* is health care for the permanently disabled or the terminally ill. This is not an area where the term *white lie* is commonly used,<sup>12</sup> but it is one where the term *pieux mensonge*, on the other hand, is well established. It is perhaps the only area in which there exists scholarly work specifically devoted to the concept of *pieux mensonge*. French medical anthropologist Sylvie Fainzang’s *An Anthropology of Lying*, published in 2016, is the English translation of a book originally released in French as Fainzang (2006). In it, she describes and attempts to make sense of the widespread practice of doctors to hide the truth from their patients and in some cases even their families when that truth is potentially too distressing to be faced. She refers to this practice as a form of lying, using the term *pieux mensonge*, which “aims to strip the lie of any negative value”, thus providing “justification for the doctor’s lies” (Fainzang 2016 [2006]: 54). She notes that this justification “is also found in the English term the ‘noble lie’ (‘noble’ because it is accomplished for a good cause)” and that English

<sup>11</sup> The phrase *know someone* in components (c) and (d) is a so-called lexico-syntactic molecule. It is not part of the basic valencies of the prime KNOW in NSM.

<sup>12</sup> “‘Lying’ to terminally ill people to spare them mental anguish can be viewed as genuine lying” (Wierzbicka (1985: 342).

“makes a distinction for so-called ethical lies between *white lies* and *noble lies*” (ibid.). White lies, she says, are “lies that aim to not cause harm and have low moral implication”, “lies in which nothing important is at stake” (ibid.). This is obviously not the case of either noble lies or *pieux mensonges*, at least in the doctor-patient relationship.<sup>13</sup>

Fainzang is not the only French-speaking scholar to have used the term *pieux mensonge* in the context of the doctor-patient relationship. Equally well-known is Grmek’s (1964) historical review of the patient’s right to know the truth; in it, the author, a Croatian-born professor of medicine and of medical history, argued that the *pieux mensonge* “was a legitimate way of managing a patient” (Jutel 2016: 94). Another often quoted study is the one by Geets (1984), a psychologist who used the term a couple of times. He acknowledged that those who call for more truth in the relations to the terminally ill are numerous, and their calls well-founded, but that nonetheless it was not clear “which truth is [to be] spoken and which demands it makes on the one speaking it as well as on the person who hears it”.<sup>14</sup> The term *pieux mensonge* is also used in shorter texts aimed at a broader public (e.g., Devers 2001; Nau 2017). However, what makes Fainzang’s work stand out is that it looks at the two sides of the doctor-patient relationship, stressing that not only do doctors lie to patients, but that patients also lie to doctors (e.g., by telling them they have been taking their medication even when they have not). Significantly, her use of the term *pieux mensonge* is limited to the former type of lies, i.e. that of doctors lying to patients. They are the ones driven by compassion, not the patients.

### Why “white”? Why “pieux”?

The explications in the previous two sections are both different from and similar to more traditional, lexicographical definitions. They differ from what is found in dictionaries in terms of their reliance on a limited vocabulary consisting of 65 semantically simple and universal building blocks, each with its own combinatorial properties. This makes them easy to translate into

<sup>13</sup> In Russian, the verb *vrat'* (the less negatively valued of the two verbs corresponding to the English verb *lie*) may be etymologically related to the noun *vrach* (‘physician, medical doctor’). According to Mondry and Taylor (1992: 142–143), who entertain the possibility that the link is merely “of folk-etymological status”, “[t]he conceptual link between ‘lying’ and ‘doctor’ would be provided by the notion of ‘word’. *Vrat'* is to spin out words, while the predecessors of present-day physicians pronounced magical incantations”.

<sup>14</sup> Quote taken from the English abstract on [http://www.persee.fr/doc/thlou\\_0080-2654\\_1984\\_num\\_15\\_3\\_2057](http://www.persee.fr/doc/thlou_0080-2654_1984_num_15_3_2057).

other languages, where the same 65 building blocks are found, but it also makes them much longer than the definitions compiled by lexicographers. They are similar to what is found in dictionaries in terms of their failure to account, in an explicit way, for the adjective *white* in *white lie*, and the adjective *pieux* in *pieux mensonge*.

Why are *white lies* called *white*, and *pieux mensonges*, *pieux*? Should this information be reflected in the explications? I believe it should, but we need to distinguish between components of meaning shared by all speakers who are familiar with the terms *white lie* and *pieux mensonge*, and components that may only be known to some.

All those who know and use the term *white lie* are aware of the various components in explication [G], but do they also know that *white lies* are called *white* because, in the Western world, white is traditionally seen as a symbol of innocence, purity, goodness etc.? Many, no doubt, do. However, we cannot be sure everyone does; for some people, it may be no more than a phrase that, like so many others, remains unanalysed. This is the reason why, in the expanded explication in [J], component (k) contains a suitably modified subject: no longer “people”, as in components (b) and (e), but “many people” (“at the same time, when they think about it, *many people* can think like this”):

[J] “a white lie” [complete]

- a. something of one kind, something people say
- b. people often say something of this kind to someone when they think like this:
- c. “I do not want this someone to think something bad about me
- d. I want this someone to feel something good”
- e. when people say something of this kind to someone, they think about it like this:
- f. “I know it is not true
- g. I want this someone to think like this: «it is true»
- h. it cannot be bad if I say something like this to this someone now
- i. it is good if someone says things of this kind to someone else
- j. if this someone else can feel something good because of it”
- k. at the same time, when they think about it, many people can think like this:
- l. “for a long time, people have thought like this:
- m. when something is called [m] white [m], this something cannot be bad”

No reference is made to innocence and purity; enough is said, I think, by referring to the idea that *white lies*, like many other things that are associated with the colour white, “cannot be bad”. “Be called” and “white”, both used in component (m), are semantic molecules, i.e. “complex, but relatively simple, meanings which function alongside semantic primes as building blocks of meaning” (Goddard 2018: 127) and need to be explicated separately. “Be called” is better established as a molecule than “white”, which



is however also treated as such by Habib (2011; 2017), in his carefully crafted explication of the category *angels* in Christianity.

The case of *pieux mensonge* is different. The adjective *pieux* primarily describes people whose life and thinking is dictated by religion, in particular (but not exclusively) by Christian ideals. By extrapolation, the adjective is used to refer to a form of human behaviour, a way of life, and also to the concrete actions of, or attributed to, people described as *pieux*. A *pieux* person lies *pieusement*, hence produces *pieux mensonges*.<sup>15</sup> But how many native speakers of French would associate *pieux mensonges* with a Christian way of life? Some might, and this is what I have tried to reflect in explication [K]:

[K] “un pieux mensonge” [complete]

- a. something of one kind, something people say
- b. people often say something of this kind to someone when they do not know this someone well
- c. they sometimes say something of this kind to someone when they know this someone very well
- d. people say something of this kind to someone when they think like this:
- e. “I do not want this someone to feel something bad”
- f. when people say something of this kind to someone, they think about it like this:
- g. “I know it is not true
- h. I want this someone to think like this: «it is true»
- i. it cannot be bad if I say something like this to this someone now
- j. it is good if someone says things of this kind to someone else
- k. if this someone else can feel something good because of it”
- l. at the same time, when they think about it, some people can think like this:
- m. “some people want to live with God [m], they want to do everything as God [m] wants
- n. these people can say things of this kind
- o. I can do the same”

It is worth noting that, as a matter of fact, the Catholic Church, in its teachings, rejects all forms of lying, no matter what the purpose may be. At the same time, only the most “pious” of Catholics are likely to adhere to that particular teaching. For most if not all native speakers of French, whether Catholics or not, *pieux mensonges* are no doubt very much part of day-to-day life, even though they are likely not to be as culturally salient as *white lies* in the Anglo tradition.

### Concluding remarks

While real in most cases, the distinction between *white lies* and *pieux mensonges* is not always clear-cut. Consider the following examples:

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<sup>15</sup> *Mentir pieusement* is an existing verb phrase in French, unlike \*to lie whitely. *White lying*, on the other hand, does exist.

Dissimuler volontairement son âge, le nombre de ses années est un pieux mensonge qui cache très souvent le besoin d'être aimé. ('To voluntarily hide one's age is a *pieux mensonge* that very often hides the need to be loved')

(<http://www.bienchezvous.be/bien-vivre-avouer-son-age/>, accessed 11 Dec 2017)

"Avez-vous l'intention d'avoir prochainement des enfants?" C'est la question que l'on posa à Brigitte S., 29 ans, lors d'un entretien d'embauche [...]. Prise de court, elle répondit non - alors qu'effectivement, elle envisageait d'avoir bientôt son premier enfant. [...] Brigitte S. a eu du mal à faire son pieux mensonge. ("Do you intend to have children in the immediate future?" This is the question Brigitte S., 29, was asked during a job interview. Taken by surprise, she said no - even though she envisaged to have her first child soon. Brigitte S. found it difficult to tell a *pieux mensonge*.)

(<https://www.monster.ch/fr/conseil-carriere/article/entretien-d-embauche-les-mensonges-sont-permis-29330>, accessed 11 Dec 2017)

Perhaps, the days of the *pieux mensonge* in which self-interest plays no role are counted. The phrase may well be on its way to becoming opaque, significantly more so than its English counterpart *white lie*, which for most people remains relatively transparent. Like so many other languages, French is exposed to continuous influence from English. It does not have to borrow words *and* meanings; sometimes, surreptitiously, its speakers just borrow meanings and impose them on existing French phrases that, originally, meant something at least a little different.

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ANGIELSKIE (WHITE) LIES I FRANCUSKIE (PIEUX) MENSONGES.  
ETNOLINGWISTYCZNE ROZWAŻANIA O NIEMÓWIENIU PRAWDY

Fakt, iż w większości języków europejskich istnieją słowa podobne do angielskiego *lie* ‘kłamać’ sugeruje, że jest to uniwersalna kategoria poznawcza. Może się zatem wydawać, że wszyscy ludzie intuicyjnie rozumieją, czym jest *lying* ‘kłamstwo’ i że wszelkie formy dyskursu, w których ma miejsce mijanie się z prawdą, bez względu na ich pochodzenie, można uznać za formę *lying*. To jednak mit – różnice istnieją nawet w Europie, a w miarę, jak się od niej oddalamy, stają się coraz wyraźniejsze. Na przykład w opartym na angielszczyźnie melanezyjskim kreolskim języku bislama nie występuje ścisły odpowiednik angielskiego *lie* – najbliższym słowem jest czasownik *giaman*, który w przeciwieństwie do *lie* oznacza dosyć powszechnie akceptowany, czasami wręcz konieczny sposób postępowania. Z drugiej strony, przynajmniej z anglocentrycznego punktu widzenia, chociaż *lying* najczęściej odbierane jest jako moralnie naganne, istnieją przypadki, gdzie nie jest to oczywiste. Niektóre kłamstwa uznaje się za nie tak złe, jak inne – określa się je jako *white lies* ‘białe kłamstwa’ (istnieją także inne sformułowania, jednak to jest najczęstsze i najbardziej wyraziste kulturowo). Czy pojęcie to występuje w innych językach, np. we francuskim? W języku tym istnieje wyrażenie *pieux mensonge*, dosł. ‘pobożne kłamstwo’. W artykule staram się wykazać, iż semantyka wyrażen *white lies* i *pieux mensonges* częściowo się pokrywa, lecz także, że mają one inne konotacje, które opisują za pomocą Naturalnego Metajęzyka Semantycznego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *lying*; *white lies*; *pieux mensonges*; Naturalny Metajęzyk Semantyczny; różnice międzykulturowe