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Lying to yourself and lying to others: Social desirability and language features

Alastair J Gill,
Universite de Bourgogne,
Dijon, France

Jeffrey T Hancock,
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY, USA

Jon Oberlander, Elizabeth Austin
University of Edinburgh,
Edinburgh, UK

Presentation preference: Paper
Presenter:
Alastair J. Gill
LEAD-CNRS UMR 5022
Pôle AAFE - Esplanade Erasme
BP 26513 Université de Bourgogne
21065 Dijon, Cedex
France

Tel: +33 (0)3 80 39 39 68
Fax : +33 (0)3 80 39 57 67
E-mail : A.Gill@ed.ac.uk

Abstract (75 words max)

We investigate influence on language use of an individual's propensity to deceive, rather than deception by assignment to condition, as measured by EPQ-R Lie Scale.

Using previously collected e-mail data and author information, we analysed High and Low sub-groups using corpus comparison methods which allowed identification of higher-level information.

We discuss our findings in relation to the deception literature. Generally there are consistencies in strategies (namely, shifting focus from self), however we note additional features.
**Lying to yourself and lying to others: Social desirability and language features**

Invariably, when presenting themselves to others, individuals try to modify how they come across and how other people think of them. It may be that this is done for selfish reasons, such as creating the impression of being more intelligent or sophisticated; or the reason for the lies may be a little more ambiguous combining self interests with those of others in the case of avoiding disapproval or disagreements, or saving the feelings of others. DePaulo et al (2003) note the following:

‘Occasionally people tell lies in pursuit of material gain, personal convenience, or escape from punishment. Much more commonly, however, the rewards that liars seek are psychological ones.’

Consequently in such cases of deception, the devil appears to be in the detail. The focus of this study, rather than examining the grander cases of deceptive behaviour, is to investigate this devil and to try and unravel some of the details in the language of individuals who are more likely to resort to such deception in their self-presentation.

Previous studies of deceptive language have gathered data by assigning participants to truth or lie conditions whilst undertaking tasks such as writing about a person who is significant to them, or a topic upon which they hold strong opinions, like abortion, in monologue or dialogue settings (e.g., Newman, et al., 2003; Hancock, et al., 2004). Language features of deception revealed by such studies have related in particular to pronouns, indicate avoidance of reference to self, and the use of second- and third-person pronouns (although different studies have indicated increased or decreased use of each of these features). Additionally, deception has been related to increased use of language relating to the emotions and senses, possibly in order to make their stories more ‘realistic’, and the decreased use of prepositions and conjunctions used in more complicated sentence construction. Finally participants in deceptive conditions have been found to use fewer words compared to truth-tellers.

Similar linguistic studies have been applied to texts written by authors of different personality types, and these have proved successful in uncovering linguistic characteristics relating to traits such as extraversion and neuroticism (Pennebaker and King, 1999; Oberlander and Gill, in press). In the current study we adapt such an approach to the study of Lie Scale which is measured as part of EPQ-R personality assessment (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). This scale asks a series of questions which indicate the truthfulness of a participant’s responses, and is related to aspects of social desirability and impression management. Differing both in its measurement of deception and collection of deceptive data, this approach uses naturally occurring (monologue) language written by individuals more likely to deceive, and indeed who may well be better experienced at deception. Our hypotheses are therefore:

1) *Is it possible to detect propensity to deceive from an individual’s language, and;*

2) *Is the language of propensity to deceive the same as language collected in deceptive conditions.*
These hypotheses were tested as follows. Using previously collected e-mail data and associated author EPQ-R information (N=105, total word count approx 65,000 words, with each author producing two texts, each around 250 words), we assembled sub author groups from greater than +/- SD from the L Scale mean (M=3.48; SD=2.22) to represent high and low L scorers (high L authors N=21, low L authors N=22). Analysis of the language data from High and Low sub-groups used a corpus comparison method which allowed identification of higher-level information (Wmatrix; Rayson, 2003; 2005) and measured significance using log-likelihood. (all sigs p<0.001). This produced the following findings: The High L Scorers used more personal names relating to people and places, and also addressed the other person directly using 'you'. They also talked more about topics related to business and buying, which appeared to be mainly related to shopping. In contrast, Low L Scorers used more words relating to 'Mental Object: Means, method' such as 'way', 'ways', 'system', 'method', 'pattern', 'tactical', 'set-up'.

The findings show that propensity to deceive is linguistically realised, and furthermore suggest that the language strategy of individuals more likely to deceive is related to that of individuals placed in deceptive conditions, although the two are not identical. In particular, the High L Scorers' shifting of conversational focus from themselves to others in their increased use of second person pronouns and personal names, is consistent in general with the (at times inconsistent) literature. The fact that we found actual references to other people (and in some cases places) in the form of proper names (Richard, Kathy, London), rather than third person pronouns (he, it, they), may indicate an attempt to reinforce the plausibility of the author's message by grounding it in a tangible context of people and places.

The two other findings appear to be novel: The Low L Scorers' use of Mental Object words relating to means and method and the High L Scorer's use of words relating to business and buying, with neither apparently easily explained by the deception literature. A possible explanation may relate to the social desirability of these topics, with the High L Scorers more acutely aware of their significance, for example talk of shopping being more socially desirable than talk of tactics or method. Indeed given the theory that High L Scorers view self presentation and their use of language as strategic activities, it could well be that discussion of such topics would be a little too close for comfort.

Selected References