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“I told you a fairy tale, and you call it falsehood?” Some concluding remarks

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"I told you a fairy tale, and you call it falsehood?" Some concluding remarks

« Je vous ai raconté un conte de fée, et vous appelez cela mensonge ? » Quelques remarques finales

Roberte Hamayon

I am grateful to Laurent Legrain for inviting me to take part in the conference on "lying" he organized in November 2014. The concluding remarks I made then are the basis of the present article. I thank Thomas Michael for polishing the English of a draft version of this paper.

- 1 Is that a lie or not a lie? Answering such a question rests on a more or less subjective evaluation of many such messages. Common sense would give roughly the same type of recommendation as pragmatism theories¹: the most important thing in interpreting a message is to identify its relevant context or the interaction in which it is spoken. Engaging these sorts of articulation, we should make the context of what we are saying clear to our listener and as a rule, we expect others to do the same. Collective expectation is essential both in direct communication as well as in social life more broadly. This is what is evident in the following sentence reported and commented on by the German philosopher J. G. von Herder (1744-1803)²: "You uncivil thing! I told you a fairy tale, and you call it falsehood?"
- 2 These are the words of an Amerindian in response to an inquisitive missionary, just after telling him a story, which the missionary immediately marked out as "false". The story belongs to the Amerindian's own oral tradition – a realm to be appreciated as such and to which reference to whatever "truth" is irrelevant –, whereas the missionary's condemnation rests on the Christian dogma. Not only are these two entirely distinct ideological frames of reference which can only entail distinct expectations, but they also differ in the following feature: the Christian dogma is a frame within which everything is defined by reference to an "absolute truth", and therefore all that is contrary to the dogma is declared a lie and morally condemned.

- 3 Such distinctions can be found in many languages and cultures. On the one hand, there may be frames of reference based on a specific rationality or logic where an absolute understanding of truth and falsity is immediately and spontaneously recognized, and this holds for religion³, law⁴, and even science⁵; such is the case in Mongolia where the couple lie/truth (*hudal/ünen*) are other frames of reference that depend on various kinds of subjective rationality, in which any evaluation can only be relative to the context so that "lying" is not morally condemned⁶.
- 4 More precisely, notions of falsehood and truth seem not to be appropriate when the relevant context is essentially subjective, as articulations both relational and emotional are. We do not say that someone "lies" when he or she is conforming to the codes of politeness appropriate to the circle in which he or she happens to be. Benjamin Constant argued in his time that applying the principle that lying is morally reprehensible "would, if taken unconditionally and singly, make any society impossible" (Constant, cited by Varden 2010); and C.-A. Sainte-Beuve seems to have confirmed this when he wrote half a century later: "if one spoke one's mind for just one minute, society would crumble" (Sainte-Beuve 1867). What makes "social dissimulation" possible⁷, as Rodney Needham remarked more recently, is the impossibility of really knowing someone else's inner state (Needham 1972, p. 101). Somewhat earlier, Marcel Mauss had highlighted the existence of "social pressure" on the "expression of feelings" (Mauss 1921) and acknowledged that simulation or dissimulation are often compulsory in order to create and reproduce social bonds in events and situations where one cannot be sincere but should conform to social expectations⁸. Then, if the emotions expressed are somewhat ambiguous, they can, nevertheless, contain a modicum of sincerity.
- 5 Thus, social dissimulation implies more than the use of verbal language alone, in particular bodily and other forms of non-verbalized language; it can also include secrecy or disinformation within the context of the overall situation. Besides, whether or not a person is telling the truth or lying, s/he desires to have the listener believe that s/he is telling the truth, unless of course the attempt to talk altogether fails. On the other hand, a person who lies should at the same time give his or her interlocutors the necessary signs to interpret what they are saying. For instance, in some contexts the liar's attitude or face should indicate that what they said is not a lie but a joke, in other words not to be taken seriously. Thus, in Mongol, at the end of a sentence, one may say "I was lying" (*hudlaa*) to indicate: "I was joking". But a subtle use of language can also make the evaluation of a message change, for language is much more than a tool of communication: it is a tool for mental operations in general:
- In this view, the role of language as a communication system between individuals would have come about only secondarily [...] Its primary function would rather have been the representation of a finer and richer reality, a way of handling more efficiently a greater amount of information [...] a way of symbolizing and coding [cognitive images] (Jacob [1982] 1994, p. 58).
- 6 In the Mongol tale of the "wise bride" (*tsetse ber*), the young woman speaks not to communicate but to demonstrate to her father-in-law how clever and wise she is by, for example, finding a way of getting out of absolute situations (coming neither by night nor by day, staying neither outdoors nor indoors, etc.) and by playing with words (coming at dawn, between the wall and the inner covering, etc.) (Hamayon & Bassanoff 1973).

- 7 This provides us with one more reason to assert that "lies" can only be explored if integrated within the understanding of communication or interaction, whether verbal or non-verbal.

Terms for lying are ambiguous in many languages

- 8 Now, not only is the evaluation of a message as "a lie" dependent upon the context, but the words for "a lie" are often themselves not exempt from ambiguity, as the examples of English "lie" and French "mensonge" show.

In English, "to lie [down]" and "to lie (to tell lies)" are presented under one and the same entry in dictionaries, which would nudge us to question the existence of an underlying semantic relation between these two meanings.

As to French *mensonge*, it comes from Latin *mentio* (*mentire*). The latter verb means on the one hand "to mention" and on the other hand "to lie" – as if the very fact of mentioning something could contain an untruth.

Likewise, English "falsehood" and French *faux* come from Latin *fas* "expression of divine will"; this is the root from which both *fabula*, "fable" and *fallacia*, "deception, delusion" come. Another Latin word for lying is *mendacium*, derived from *menda*, "spot or stain on the body, a physical defect".

- 9 Likewise, the Mongol term *hudal* deserves examination. It is comparable to our notion of lying in contexts where it can be opposed to "truth" (*ünen*), but this is far from being applicable to all types of contexts. Thus, *hudal* is not opposed to "truth" but to "correct", "right" (*zöv*), in contexts in which efficacy is relevant⁹. One of the translations that Kowalewski's dictionary gives for *hudal* is "inefficacious" (Kowalewski 1844-1849). In such contexts, *hudal* is to be understood as "it does not work" and would connect with wrongness or falseness, by contrast with *zöv* "right, correct, exact", which is understood as "it works", and would then connect with truth.

- 10 The noun *hudal* and the verb *hudlah* "to lie" are commonly acknowledged to be derived from *hud*, "marriage alliance partner", and *hudaldaq* "trade", from *hudlah*. Alan Wheeler examines this widely agreed upon etymology in a paper devoted to the Mongol notion of market expressed by the term *zah zee*¹⁰ (Wheeler 2004). He highlights the connotations of deception, cheating, and lying attached to the term *hudaldaq* and to the type of trading it denotes. And he rightly points to the kinship relation called *hud*, from which these terms are derived, in order to account for these depreciative connotations.

Whilst the link between alliance (*hud*) and trade (*hudaldaq*) is so often obscured by the perception of deceit (*hudal*) and trickery that is associated with Chinese merchants, it is arguable that this "trickery" also has roots in Mongolian marriage practices of the past (Wheeler 2004, p. 220).

- 11 However, Wheeler adds, certain researchers from Inner Mongolia now call this link into question, and maintain that *hudaldaq* is derived from *hud* and not from *hudal*. As evidence for this, he refers to the book *Social Organization of the Turco-Mongol Pastoral Nomads* by Lawrence Krader (Krader 1963, p. 36): "although the 'gift' for a bride may have been 'fixed', its amount was often treated 'as though it were a price for a piece of goods, in which much haggling and bargaining would be done to raise or lower it to the level desired by one side or the other'" (Wheeler 2004, p. 220)¹¹.

About the link of lying to trading with in-laws

- 12 The use of the term *hud*, "in-laws", is characteristic of the form of marriage exchange called "generalised exchange" in kinship studies. Ethnographic data shows that this form itself is tainted with a touch of deceit. Can we unravel why? Generalised exchange clearly appears potentially deceitful when compared with the symmetric prescriptive form called "restricted" or "direct". Typical of the latter is marriage by "sister exchange" or "daughter exchange", in which reciprocity is carried out within the same or the next generation respectively. Such immediate or direct forms of reciprocity create confidence and security, with every group being wife-giver and wife-taker with regard to one and the same partner: both are called by the same name in Buryat, *anda* (Mongol *and*)¹².
- 13 By contrast, generalised exchange dissociates wife giving and wife taking (a man of clan A takes a wife from clan B and gives the daughter he has with her to clan C, i.e. a wife-taker clan gives its daughters not to the wife giver's but to another clan). This dissociation creates uncertainty about the return of a woman to the wife-giver, hence their anxiety and suspicion, and hence also the attention paid to discussions about the "bride price" that is aimed at giving the wife-giver something to compensate for the loss of a daughter¹³. And this can only generate a hierarchy between the two partners, which explains why, contrary to *and* (see just above and note 12), *hud* is not a reciprocal term: it is used for the groom's father; the bride's father being *hudgui* in Mongol, *hudgoi* in Buryat. On the other hand, the delay in return exchange is also what creates the temporal interval within which negotiations can be carried out; the latter are conventional but private and may imply some lying as one among many forms of cunning that negotiations can entail. Negotiations are initiated by the groom's father, i.e. the wife taker, who is in an inferior position as a "requestor" at the start (as is well known, the weaker can only use ruse if he is to have a chance of winning!). He usually sends a relative to call on the girl's father as a go-between in charge of discussing the "bride price".
- 14 However, the use of the verbal suffix of reciprocity, *-ld*, in the noun "trade" (*hudaldaq*), and the verb "to trade" (*hudaldah*), annihilates the hierarchical connotation found in the kinship relation; one should add "give" or "take" to distinguish "selling" (*hudaldazh ögökh*) from "buying" (*hudaldazh avah*). It is worth noting that, in former times (still in the late 1970s), discussions about the price of objects sold at the flea market *zah zeel* were carried out through the two partners' mutual finger pressures on each other's arms within their sleeves; their negotiations thus being kept secret.

About the link between lying and trading

- 15 As Adam Smith and other scholars have shown, a similar link between lying and trading is found in many other languages and cultures, and deception remains inherently tied to exchange. For Smith, exchanging is necessarily delusive. Only the self-illusion that things could be better incites people to take part in producing wealth and participating in exchange, which allows the object of exchange to increase in value. Smith implicitly acknowledges the vital part that deception plays in the functioning of any exchange system when he writes: "It is deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind¹⁴".

- 16 This question was the topic of a conference that brought together economists and anthropologists in Vienna in 1996. Caroline Gerschlager initiated the conference to call into question mainstream economic theory. According to this theory, exchange does not take place unless both parties mutually gain from it, and therefore deception is regarded as something irrational that violates the rule of the market where exchange and deception seem to be mutually exclusive. To challenge this view, Gerschlager invited several anthropologists to explore the role that deception plays in exchange from an anthropological point of view: deception appeared to operate as a tool to negotiate interactions and to help exchange relations to function as social phenomena (Gerschlager [ed.] 2001).
- 17 Gerschlager has all the more thoroughly examined Smith's theory since she, as a native speaker of German, had a beautiful example of such a link in her mother tongue; this example is provided by the couple *tauschen/täuschen*, "to exchange"/"to deceive" – both of which are placed under the same entry in dictionaries¹⁵. The French expression "donner le change", literally "to give change", actually means "to pull the wool over somebody's eyes"; such expressions can help to explain the semantic link between the two notions (*tauschen/täuschen*)¹⁶. Gerschlager quotes following saying from Grimm to this effect (Gerschlager 2001, p. 8, 22 n. 16): "He who has the desire to exchange has the desire to deceive¹⁷".
- 18 I would like to stress here that this apparent ambivalence does not mean polysemy: the two meanings are tightly tied to one another, as they are in many other cultures and languages¹⁸. This is usually accounted for by the idea that maintaining relationships matters more than what is exchanged or communicated. Mauss develops a similar argument in *The Gift*: gifts are meant to appear voluntary and disinterested, but in fact they are obligatory and based on self-interest, and in all contracts each partner tries to gain more by giving less: exchanges and negotiations rest on persuasion, seduction, and possibly a touch of cheating. Several papers in Gerschlager's edited book illustrate the wide range of behaviours that, far from blocking transactions, contribute to make exchanges and negotiations function.
- 19 This is particularly evident in ritual practices aimed at requesting spiritual protection, aid, or blessings from immaterial beings treated as exchange partners. Such practices rely on the principle of substitution, whether they are called offerings, ransoms, sacrifices or something else. The most famous case of such ritual substitutions is seen in the Nuer sacrifice of a wild cucumber in place of an ox described by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his *Nuer Religion* (Evans-Pritchard 1956). There, practices resting on substitution imply a particular conception of the offerings' spiritual receivers: are the latter gods or spirits conceived of as particularly tolerant or as unaware of being deceived? My own research on certain types of shamanic rituals and on the use of euphemisms in Mongol and Buryat "traditional" cultures has shown that the spirits of dead people are conceived of as liable to be duped (Hamayon 2016, pp. 242-244)¹⁹.
- Trickery and ruse seem to work particularly well as long as they are applied in relation with imaginary partners. The obvious coupling of exchange with deception in ritual exchanges [...] does not constitute a threat to the repetitive nature of exchange. (Gerschlager 2001, p. 17).
- 20 While deceit by trickery, cheating or lying should in principle put the perpetuation of exchange in danger, it is remarkable that it does not. Commenting on the fool's role in Magar rituals (Nepal), Anne de Sales argues that seduction is the pleasant version of

deception (or deception the dark side of seduction): he who makes the other laugh makes them lose control of themselves, thereby providing an opportunity to obtain something from them against their will by transforming their loss into a kind of satisfaction, so that even the loser is happy. Here lies the exchange's real dynamic and it is embodied by the fool (Sales 2001, pp. 122-123). Remarkable also are deceptive operations in which no one feels deceived (Lépinay & Hertz 2005), ceremonial gifts for example, since these are not about goods but about social recognition (Hénaff 2005).

- 21 The interdependence of exchanging and deceiving finds a clear illustration in the dual figure of Hermes in ancient Greek mythology: both merchants and thieves claim him as their god. He steals a herd of cows belonging to his elder brother Apollo by making them walk backwards so that their tracks lead Apollo in the wrong direction. Apollo's first reaction is to send hounds to track the thief, but he soon is charmed by the music Hermes plays. Hermes finally becomes the protector of herdsmen and thieves, merchants and conjurers, roads, boundaries and travellers. His art is above all that of *metis*, cunning and elusiveness (Detienne & Vernant [1974] 1991, pp. 10, 49, 287-288). Odysseus, too, is a liar and a thief. On top of being one of the strongest among the Achaeans, and probably the best archer, his main attribute and nickname is *polymetis*, "[man] of many tricks". In Homer's *Iliad*, he wins the war against the Trojans by tricking them into bringing a "horse" full of his soldiers into their city. Examining other Greek mythical examples, Martin Trembl highlights the role that ruse and cunning play in the development of exchange; he shows that, in Euripides' tragedies, men confronted with the constraints that any law of exchange represents resort to ruse and cunning in order to maintain an advantage over their partners (Trembl 2001, pp. 149-163).
- 22 Ruse and cunning are inherent in any practice that involves bargaining. Avoiding haggling in a situation where it is usually expected may even arouse suspicion, as in *The Life of Brian* (by the Monty Python crew 1979): while running away from his pursuers, the hero crosses the market place where, at a stall, he immediately proffers the price demanded of him, and his lack of hesitation provokes a protest from the vendor²⁰. In Romania, gypsy horse-dealers create the trading situation by gestures and jokes; haggling means for them opposing the dominant ethics, that of work (Steward 1994, p. 113).

Misunderstanding massive nouns for lies

- 23 In the above-mentioned cases, ruse, cunning and cheating do not hinder exchange; neither does substitution of small for big diminish the "efficacy" of ritual offerings aimed at obtaining aid from spiritual beings. If we examine these cases more carefully, we observe that the spiritual beings concerned are all of human origin or humanized. According to data from Siberian societies subsisting on hunting, substitution would be absolutely inconceivable with respect to the spirits of wild animal species hunted for food. The latter societies perform long collective shamanic periodical rituals to obtain "luck", i.e. promises of game from the spirits of wild species. Their shaman should get as many promises of game or animal "vital force"²¹ as possible during the major part of the ritual, and promise the spirits as little human "vital force" as possible in return at the end of the same ritual. In their view, this is not being disloyal; on the contrary, this is proving skill in the exchange of vital force with animal spirits, thought to be fair play. What matters is that the shaman respects the nature of what is exchanged ("human life force" in exchange of "animal life force"); lessening the amount is perceived as a loyal ruse on

his part; this is the kind of cleverness that is most expected from the shaman. Whatever their amount, the spoils of the hunt will be shared between the members of his community following rules that may vary from one community to another and concern the parts of the pieces of game (i.e. head, legs, etc.) rather than their quantity. Sharing guarantees both the survival and the morality of the community.

- 24 In many cultures, there are goods considered as not liable to be counted (measured or weighed) whether they are destined to be shared or not; they constitute a specific morphological category, called "mass or uncountable nouns" (French: « noms massifs ou indéénombrables »). They are always singular and require singular verbs. This is the case with game, and if we are to count, we say "pieces of game". In English, sugar, tea, rice, water, and many goods, including reindeer and cattle, are uncountable. Uncountable goods also exist as a morphological category in Russian (game *dich'*, cattle *skot*, tea *chai*, etc.).
- 25 While there are also uncountable goods in Mongol and Buryat cultures, they do not constitute a properly morphological category in their languages²². Nevertheless, they exist as a conceptual category, and this may account for the cases when people seem to give untrue answers to questions about quantities.

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NOTES

1. C. S. Pierce, W. V. O. Quine, L. Wittgenstein, P. Grice, D. Wilson & D. Sperber and many others (for an overview, see Origgi 2011). Paul Grice defines the cooperative principle that makes people interact with one another as follows: "I expect a partner's contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction" (Grice 1975, p. 47). This is a way of explaining the link between utterances and how they are understood.
2. Herder's conclusion was the following: "conceits of this sort are not philosophy, but rather a sensual illusion of sensual people". And he continues: "[...] crises stimulated all early peoples to consult soothsayers for assistance in making decisions" (quoted by Flaherty 1992, p. 146). In his

Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit, Herder says calling the shaman a trickster or deceiver is useless: what matters is his ability to reach people's imagination (*ibid.*, pp. 147-148). To him, using cunning is better than using brute force.

3. In the Judaeo-Christian environment in which Western anthropology developed, lying cannot be analysed separately from truth; however, the relationship between the two concepts has been explored mainly from the standpoint of "truth", which has been more thoroughly debated and for a much longer time.

4. Lying may be punished by law in the USA. Taking an oath in a court of law is a sworn declaration to tell the truth.

5. Even in science which could be considered as a sphere of objective rationality, only facts are usually called "true" or "false", not theories, which also depend partly on subjective rationality or logics: scientists would refrain from claiming their theory is "true"; they would only say it can be held to be valid as long as it has not been proved "false".

6. In such case, an adjective would often be added, as for instance "white lie" in English, *pieux mensonge* in French, to indicate that such a lie is not reprehensible.

7. The inability to hide, to dissemble, to deceive and to lie is currently said to be a sign of autism in a child.

8. At the theatre, we expect that the actors express the character's feelings, not their own, even if we don't go as far as Diderot did in the pamphlet *The Paradox of Acting* published after his death. He argued that the best actors are all the more capable of moving the audience precisely because they do not feel the emotion themselves: "If [an actor] is endowed with extreme sensitivity [...] he will either play no more or play ludicrously poorly" (Diderot [1830] 1883, p. 102).

9. Grégory Delaplace noticed this opposition during the conference in November 2014.

10. The term *zah zeel* designated the flea market held outdoors just on the boundary of the city Ulaanbaatar on Sundays at the time of my fieldwork under the communist regime (from the late 1960s until the late 1980s). Thanks to Laurent Legrain for bringing Wheeler's article to my attention.

11. The next pages of the article are devoted to the way the Soviet regime provided legitimacy for the state's take-over of virtually all aspects of life, including commercial transactions. Follows a discussion about another term for trade, *naimaa* (commerce, trade), borrowed from Chinese, and about the notion of *zah zeel* from a standpoint of morality in economics.

12. "To exchange belts" (*Buhe andaldaha*) is still used to speak of marriage in Buryat. Mongol *and* designates mainly the hunting partner (be it another hunter or a dog); it designates the partner with whom one swears perfect friendship in *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Rachewiltz 2006) and other historical sources.

13. Epics and ethnographic data show that the Buryats living at the West of Lake Baikal fluctuated between direct and generalised forms of exchange by the end of the XIXth century (Hamayon 1990, pp. 344-364). We find an expression of their hesitation in the use of the paired verbs *andaldaha hudaldaha* to designate the marriage agreement concluded between the epic hero's father and his bride's father in their childhood. Both verbs are formed with the suffix *-ld*, which indicates reciprocity.

14. Quoted by Caroline Gerschlager 2001, p. 27.

15. For another Indo-European root combining the notions of exchange and lie, see Benveniste 1966, pp. 99-100.

16. This also brings to mind the Latin expression *dolus bonus* (I thank P. Palussière for calling my attention to it). In French law, it is understood as "the merchant's sales talk, the pedlar's exaggeration; it does not allow nullity; on the contrary, *dolus malus* is a serious lie allowing action in nullity" (« le boniment du marchand, l'exagération du camelot ; il ne permet pas la nullité ; le *dolus malus* a contrario est un mensonge grave permettant l'action en nullité »). In American English, the M. Webster dictionary defines *dolus bonus* as "simple cunning or sagacity in

bargaining or in other transactions that is not actionable or punishable as fraud or misrepresentation or ground for rescinding the transaction induced by it".

17. "Wer Lust hat zu tauschen, hat Lust zu täuschen" (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, cited by Gerschlager 2001).

18. Marcel Mauss points to a similar ambivalence with the term "gift": "The danger represented by the thing given or handed on is doubtless nowhere better sensed than in the very ancient Germanic law and languages. This explains the double meaning of the word Gift in all these languages - on the one hand, a gift, on the other, poison" (Mauss [1923-1924] 1990, pp. 80-81). "Gift" is the translation of Latin *dosis*, "dose of poison" (*ibid.*, p. 186, n. 122).

19. Practices based on the principle of substitution are widespread in those religious forms of the type currently called paganism and polytheism. By contrast, Abrahamic monotheism introduces the idea that God, the Almighty, sees and hears everything humans do, and is in principle not liable to be deceived. He is Truth. Hence, lying is reserved for humans. Is that what incited Montaigne to write the following: "If it be well weighed, to say that a man lieth is as much to say, as that he is brave towards God and a coward towards men?" (« Si on y fait bien attention, qu'est-ce qu'un menteur, sinon un homme couard à l'endroit des hommes et brave à l'endroit de Dieu ? »).

20. The street vendor tells Brian: "No, no, no. Ten? You're supposed to argue. Ten for that, you must be mad!"

21. Animal meat that feeds the human body is seen as carrying animal vital force that feeds the human soul. Rituals performed on hunted animals are aimed at reducing hunting to merely taking meat.

22. The suffixes held to make the words plural in fact designate a collection of concrete individual members of the category. Here is a Mongol example, *nom avsan*: he bought book(s), *nomuud avsan*: he bought several books.

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