

Augustine on lying: A theoretical framework for the study of types of falsehood

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Abstract. This paper presents a theoretical investigation of the issue of lying from a semiotic perspective and its specific aim is the analysis of the theory of the lie as conceived by Aurelius Augustinus, bishop of Hippo (354–430 A.D.), also known as Augustine or St. Augustine. The latter devoted two short treatises to the issue of lying: *De mendacio* (On lying) and *Contra mendacium* (Against lying), written in ca. 395 DC and 420 DC, respectively. The paper will focus on duplicity and intention to deceive as fundamental and necessary features of the lie. Augustine’s chief contribution to the study of human deception was to have severed the assessment of what is a lie from factual falsity. For Augustine, at the kernel of the notion of lying lies the idea of intentionality. Following this line of thought, the paper singles out two types of intentionality, namely the intention to assert a falsehood and the intention to mislead. On the basis of this double nature of intentionality, the present paper seeks to outline a theoretical framework for the study of species of falsehoods. The outcome is a typology of untruthfulness that envisages a fourfold inventory of falsehoods based on the difference between jokes, errors, lies and pretences.

Keywords: St. Augustine, lying, deception, intentionality, typology of falsehoods.

1. Introduction

The article presents a theoretical investigation of the issue of lying, and its specific aim is the analysis of the theory of the lie as conceived by *Aurelius Augustinus*, bishop of Hippo (354–430 A.D.), also known as Augustine or St. Augustine. He devoted two short treatises to the issue of lying: *De mendacio* (On lying) and *Contra*

mendacium (Against lying),¹ written in ca. 395 DC and 420, respectively. These two *opuscula* present the core of Augustine's insights into lying and thus constitute the main object of analysis. The two short tracts specifically addressed the problem of lying and presented Augustine's firm veto against mendacity among mankind. The bishop of Hippo argued for an absolute prohibition of lying; for Augustine, it was not permitted to lie under any circumstances, even to save a friend's life. From this viewpoint every lie is thought of as inherently sinful, no matter how and why the liar engages in such sin, and regardless of the consequences of such blameful action. Augustine's condemnation of the lie stems from Biblical prohibitions, in particular Ps. 5.6–7 ("You hate all evildoers; you destroy all who speak falsehood") and Mt. 5.37 (Say, 'yes' when you mean 'yes' and 'no' when you mean 'no') and from the authority of the Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16). Augustine is usually remembered for his austere condemnation and inflexible opposition towards any kind of lie. What is perhaps less known is his taxonomy of graveness of lies. Notwithstanding Augustine's irremovable stance towards lying, that is, a lie is intolerable and always condemnable, he also argued that lies present different degrees of culpability (*De mend.* 14.25; 21.42). As the bishop pointed out in his "Enchiridion on faith, hope and charity":

To me, however, it seems to be obvious that every lie is a sin, but that it makes a great difference which is the intention underlying the lie and what are the objects about which one is lying. (Augustine 2007[1847])²

In *De mendacio* the Latin rhetor proposed an eightfold hierarchical classification of lies, ranging them from the most condemnable – lies about religious matters, to the most excusable, that is, lies told to avoid someone from being sexually assaulted.

Augustine's treatise on mendacity is one of the first attempts in Western scholarship to provide a systematic study of lying and to provide a concise, clear-cut and reliable definition of what constitutes a lie. This was certainly a priority for the author: to set forth a working definition of the lie that would have helped to distinguish the lie from what is not a lie, and would vigorously condemn all sort of lies, thus avoiding any misunderstandings. Hence, Augustine's first concern was to provide a valid definition of lying that would have clarified uncomfortable ambiguities around this matter. After having set forth the definition of lying,

¹ All citations in English of Augustine's *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium* have been taken from Augustine 1952, translated by S. Muldowney. Latin citations have been taken from Augustine of Hippo 1900. *De mendacio. Contra mendacium. De opere monachorum. De fide et symbolo*. Ed Iosephus Zycha. Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum, 41, Vienna: F. Tempsky.

² *Ench.* 18: "Quisquis autem esse aliquod genus mendacii quod peccatum non sit putaverit decipiet se ipsum turpiter, cum honestum se deceptorem arbitratur aliorum."

Augustine had to prove that instances of untruthfulness present in the Bible were not lies. Therefore, he provided counter-arguments to all tenets coming from advocates of the indulgency of lies who claimed that lying was indeed necessary or excusable if told under certain extreme circumstances, such as saving someone from death or avoiding defilement, and that lying occurs even in the Scripture.

Hence, for Augustine the definition of what constitutes a lie is the starting point before any further considerations can be introduced. His definition of the lie, namely “a false statement uttered with the intention to deceive” (*Contr. mend. X*) had a strong impact on theories of deception that followed, and his view about the morality of the lie is still present in Western thought and of course endorsed by many theologians and moral philosophers (Ramsey 1985: 514). As Silvana Vecchio (2000: 848) points out: “[T]he definition [of lying] formulated by St. Augustine is the definition *par excellence* and the inescapable starting-point for all medieval treatments of the problem of lying”. Similarly, Dallas G. Denery II (2007: 113) writes: “If lying has a history, it is a history that at first glance seems to have slowed to a crawl under the weight of Augustine’s authority”.

Having said that, I shall now briefly recall some authors who acknowledged the potential semiotic significance of Augustinian writings about lying. It is worth noting that *De mendacio* belongs to a period when Augustine devoted himself to the composition of writings about issues that today fall under the rubric of ‘semiotics’. The treatise was in fact written shortly before *De doctrina christiana* (started in 396), *Confessions* (397) and *De trinitate* (started in 399) – all books well known in Western scholarship for their semiotic import (Tagliapietra 2007: 37). Although the issue of lying as such seen from the Augustinian perspective was never thoroughly investigated from a semiotic vantage point, a few commentators foresaw hints pointing at the semiotic drift inherent in Augustine’s analysis of lying. Augustine’s semiotic import as to the theory of the lie is thus acknowledged, yet left open to future research. Marcia L. Colish (1978: 16), for instance, holds that the *De mendacio* and the *Contra mendacium* “contain Augustine’s most detailed analysis of the semiotic significance and ethical import of lying”. In the same vein, in his short history of semiotics, Omar Calabrese holds that Augustine’s treatment of the lie is remarkable for “it does not treat the lie from an ontological viewpoint but as a linguistic act”.³ Indeed, in a lucid yet intricate analysis Augustine demonstrated that “what matters for lying is not what is or not the case, but what the liar takes to be the case. Lying is a matter of belief rather than reality”.⁴ To put it another way, Augustine

³ “Agostino la tratta semioticamente, e non ontologicamente, in quanto vero e proprio atto linguistico” (Calabrese 2001: 49). My translation into English – R. G.

⁴ King, Peter. Augustine: The truth about lying. Paper presented at the UCLA Moody Conference on “Lies and Liars” (February 14, 2004). Available at http://individual.utoronto.ca/pking/unpublished/Augustine_on_Lies.pdf.

lifted up the discussion of lying from an ontological paradigm that had dominated in Greek culture and had tackled the problem of lying within the frame of objective falsehoods, to the metalevel of the interpreter's beliefs and intentionality. The latter is thus conceived as a conscious performer who willingly uses a deceptive mode of signification, that is, making use of signs in order to deceive. As it will be argued in what follows, the present study suggests a semiotic reading of Augustine's theory of lying for it envisages lying as an intentional act performed by an agent by means of signs with the specific purpose of misleading others. 'Agency' is hereby conceived as the capacity of an agent to act in the world.

Having said that, it is important to point out from the start that the present study does not proceed from any ethical and moral intent in the scholarly treatment of the phenomenon of lying. Rather, its focus is on the phenomenology of lying seen through a semiotic perspective. Our concern is semiotic not exegetical, and if Augustine dedicated much space to the latter issue, it does not follow that a semiotic investigation of lying inspired by Augustine is untenable on the ground of the author's religious inclination. Doubtless, Augustine was a man of faith and his main concerns were pastoral and exegetical in character. Nonetheless, his inclination and priorities did not preclude him from articulating a general theory of signs that centuries later was labelled as semiotic and recognized for its great import, as thoroughly studies on the topic have pointed out (Deely 2005; Manetti 1993; Todorov 1984). Hence, we ought to distinguish Augustine the theologian from Augustine the "proto-semiotician", to borrow an expression of John Deely (2005: 10). It is on the latter figure that the present account seeks to shed light.

2. Augustine on lying: definition and characteristics of the lie

The aim of the present section is to describe, explain and analyse Augustine's semiotics of lying as conceived in *De mendacio*. The chapter will focus on the Augustinian definition of lying and the salient characteristics of the lie. Occasionally, beside the analysis of the *De mendacio*, I shall consider additional Augustinian writings in order to support the theoretical background of the discussion.⁵ Now some preliminary notes about Augustine's thesis on lying are in order.

⁵ The "great question" (*magna quaestio*) of lying and the critique of mendacity are persistent themes in Augustine's works, a profound interest that transcends the two books mentioned so far. Undoubtedly, a thorough investigation of the Augustinian theory of lying necessitates a review and understanding of some of Augustine's other works. The bishop of Hippo refers to the issue of lying in several other writings: *De doctrina christiana*, *De magistro*, *De trinitate*, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide, spe et caritate*. However, to frame a coherent Augustinian theory of the lie, the primary sources used are Augustine's writings in which the topic of lying constitutes

De mendacio was written shortly after Augustine had been nominated coadjutor bishop of Hippo (395 DC) and it mainly consists of an enquiry into the following issues: “[T]he nature of lying, the question as to whether or not a lie is ever to be permitted, the discussion of several Scriptural passages pertaining to the subject, and finally, a list of various kind of lies” (Muldowney 1952: 47). For the sake of clarity and along with King (2004: 1 – see fn 4 above) we can succinctly sum up the three main questions addressed by Augustine in *De mendacio* as follows:

(1) What is a lie?

(2) What does the wrongfulness of a lie consist in?

(3) What are the circumstances in which lies are forbidden, permitted or enjoined?

The first issue is of crucial importance for it sets forth a definition of the object of study and therefore it constitutes the starting point from which any further investigation might be considered.

Augustine returned to the problem of lying almost a quarter of century later with a second thesis about lying, *Contra mendacium*. Being addressed to Cosentius, a Spanish bishop who specifically asked Augustine whether lying were permissible in order to convert Priscillianists,⁶ the tract presents a close examination of alleged cases of lying in the Old Testament. Augustine examines several cases of untruthfulness present in the sacred scriptures. After a close scrutiny the bishop concludes that instances of untruthfulness in the Bible are not to be considered lies as they present a metaphorical meaning and are therefore rather considered as allegories. Compared with *De mendacio*, the second book on lying presents a narrower view of the object of analysis for it focuses on a specific issue: whether one may feign heresy in order to discover heretics. The treatise’s main thrust is thus to tackle the issue of whether it is possible to lie about religious matters, lying to liars and heretics, and lying to convert someone else. The *opusculum* reiterates the main thesis and definitions that were anticipated and thoroughly investigated in the previous book on lying, namely *De mendacio*. As Boniface Ramsey (1985: 509) pointed out “the *Contra mendacium* adds little to the teaching of its predecessor”. Indeed, *Contra mendacium* is an open assault upon lying, whereas *De Mendacio* first proposes an attentive and subtle scrutiny about the nature of lying per se. Augustine himself mentioned the difference between the two *opuscula* in the first book of the *Retractationes*. Here the rhetor, reviewing his previous works, did not avoid self-criticism towards his own

the principal and only concern of the author, namely *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*. As additional sources those Augustinian works are considered that touch upon the topic of lying, albeit only tangentially or in an unsystematic fashion. To the list we shall also add the *Soliloquies* in which the doctor pointed out the difference between the mendacious and the fallacious, a distinction important in discerning intentional deception from other instances of falsehood.

⁶ For background on the Priscillianists, see Chadwick 1976.

first treatise *De mendacio*, for it appeared to be “obscure, intricate and altogether troublesome” (*obscurus et anfractuosus et omnino molestus*) (*Retr.* 1.27), and was left unpublished for this reason. Furthermore, Augustine confessed that due to the intricacy of *De mendacio* he had ordered to remove it from his collection of works. This request, however, was neglected. Only after Augustine had written his second treatise about lying, did he retract his criticism of his first book, noting that in *De mendacio* were “to be found some necessary things” that were not present in the other (*Contra mendacium*).⁷ This is the reason why Augustine decided to keep the book in the end.⁸

In the *De mendacio* Augustine differentiated between (1) a descriptive, and (2) a normative treatment of the problem of lying (Feehan 1988: 132). The former is concerned with the nature of lying as such; the latter instead refers to the morality of lying, that is, it engages in a consideration of whether and under which circumstances it is permissible to lie. Augustine made this distinction plain in the opening remarks of his *opusculum*:

The question of lying is important since it often disturbs us in our daily actions (1) lest we rashly blame ourselves for what, in reality, is not a lie, on the other hand, (2) lest we think that at times we must deviate from the truth by telling a lie through a sense of honor, of duty or even of mercy. (*De mend.* 1.1)⁹

The present section shall focus on the first theoretical issue leaving aside the problem of the morality of the act of lying.

Belief and intentionality are key terms in the conceptualization of the phenomenon of lying in an Augustinian fashion. Augustine pointed out that the characteristics of the lie are the split between thought and speech in the signification of

⁷ Augustine, *Retractationes* 1, PL 40.

⁸ Augustine’s insistence on the obscure and knotty nature of lying is a persistent theme in his writings. *De mendacio* is definitely uneasy reading as some commentators have pointed out (Feehan 1988: 131). Augustine remarked the difficulty of the matter in the opening chapter of his first treatise. In chapter 1.1 of *De mendacio* the father of the Church underscores the intricacy and the slippery nature of a topic that seems to be almost ungraspable. In order to explain these characteristics Augustine resorted to the anatomical analogy of a hand that cannot entirely grasp that which is holding. Furthermore, Augustine suggests the difficulty of the topic of lying as to be like the anfractuosity of a cavern, at one and the same time obscure and full of twists and turns: “It is, indeed, very full of dark corners, and hath many cavern-like windings, whereby it oft eludes the eagerness of the seeker; so that at one moment what was found seems to slip out of one’s hands, and anon comes to light again, and then is once more lost to sight” (*De mend.* 1.1).

⁹ *De mend.* 1.1: “*Magna quaestio est de mendacio, quae nos in ipsis quotidianis actibus nostris saepe conturbat ne, aut temere accusemus mendacium quod non est mendacium, aut arbitremur aliquando esse mentiendum, honesto quodam et officioso et misericordii mendacio*”.

the lie (duplicitous) and the intention to deceive.¹⁰ The liar's mode of signification is mis-informative and his discourse is the manipulation of the dupe's beliefs and knowledge.

3. The duplicitous character of the lie

For Augustine, the first element marking a lie is the incongruence between the internal thought of the liar and his external communication given by means of speech or other outer signs:

He lies [...] who holds one opinion in his mind and who gives expression to another through words or any other outward manifestation. For this reason the heart of the liar is said to be double, that is, twofold in his thinking: one part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be true, yet does not so express it; the other part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be false, yet expressed as true. (*De mend.* 3.3)

A lie thus entails a split between mind and speech. The liar presents a duplicitous character inasmuch as he has a "double heart" (*duplex cor*) and consequently a "double thought" (*duplex cogitatio*). Augustine's first characteristic of the lie is thus defined. As Paul J. Griffiths (2004: 25–26) pointed out:

The characteristic mark of the lie is duplicity, a fissure between thought and utterance that is clearly evident to the speaker as he speaks. [...] The lie has only to do with whether there is a mismatch, a gap, a contradiction, a fissure, between what you think is true and what you claim as true.

Leaving aside, for the present, the question of whether the sole duplicity constitutes the essential and sufficient mark of the lie, as Griffiths seems to suggest, let us pause briefly and ponder the nature of duplicity as a constituent characteristic of the lie.

Augustine contended that the liar has a "double heart" (*cor duplex*) and his duplicity is manifested in the hiatus existing between inwardly concealed believed-truth and outwardly expressed truth. Lying involves concealment to the extent that

¹⁰ The present study, along with Colish (1978; 1982; 1985; 2005), Feehan (1988; 1990; 1991), Swearingen (1991) and others, contends that the intention to deceive is a necessary element of the lie. This claim is at odds with Griffiths' take of the Augustinian theory of the lie. The latter contends that only the duplicity, conceived as split between what is in the mind of the speaker and what the speaker actually says, constitutes the essence and the necessary and sufficient condition of the lie (Griffiths 2004: 29–31).

one façade, so to speak, of the liar's thoughts remains concealed in the backstage of his mind, while another side of his thoughts is intersubjectively communicated to others by means of signs as if being believed truth by the liar – when a lie occurs thoughts and signs do not match each other in a sincere act of communication. As Ramsey (1985: 510) succinctly pointed out, for Augustine “lying or deceit is defined as the lack of correspondence between the thing contained in the mind and the thing expressed in whatever way”. In so doing, the liar pretends to signify that which he knows to be false as being true. He therefore expresses as being true what he takes to be false. Notably, ‘true’ and ‘false’ in this context refer to the liar's state of mind, namely what the liar believes or thinks to be true or false. To put it another way, these terms do not refer to an ontological conception of truth as correctness or correspondence between what is said and things in the world. Rather, they refer to a pragmatic conception of truth that is based on what the liar takes to be true, regardless of the adequacy of comprehension and the state of affairs.

The possibility of semiosis and communication available for interpreters of a given community is provided by shared conventional sign systems – natural language, for instance. The liar exploits this potentiality and possibilities of communication in order to pursue his own deceptive goals, that is, to model the dupe's beliefs according to a pattern that the liar himself is aware to be false. To sum up, lying entails duplicitous signification, conceived as split between inner thought and outwards manifested signs.¹¹

It is obvious that the ‘double heart’ is a lifelong concern present in Augustine's writings. From what has been said so far, it can be argued that in tackling the issue of lying Augustine stressed the role played by the liar's awareness in expressing something that is in contradiction with what the liar himself believes to be the case. This point can be formulated in the following terms. The liar's awareness plays a

¹¹ Augustine insisted on this tenet in several of his works. The bishop of Hippo reiterated the theme of the *duplex cor* in the *Contra mendacium*. The idea of the “divided heart” is also present in the *Enchiridion on faith, hope and charity*. Here Augustine once again returned to the difference between the one who errs by expressing something which is merely incorrect and the liar who willingly asserts something that he thinks or assumes not to be true, holding that: “[...] the former has not one thing in his mind, and another in his speech; but the latter, whatever in fact that which is said by him may be of itself, yet has one thing shut up within his breast, and another ready on his tongue; which is the special evil of lying.” Once again Augustine expressed the same tenet in *Sermon 133*, where he contends that the liar: “[...] thinks in himself one thing to be true, he gives out another for truth. He is a double heart, not single; he does not bring out that which he has in it. The double heart has long since been condemned. “With deceitful lips in a heart and a heart have they spoken evil things,” where is the “deceitful lips”? What is deceit? When one thing is done, another pretended. Deceitful lips are not a single heart; and because not a single heart, therefore “in a heart and a heart;” therefore “in a heart” twice, because the heart is double” (*Sermon LXXXII*).

crucial role in Augustinian semiotics of deception in as much as the liar is conscious that some sort of falseness is at stake. Griffiths (2004: 37) correctly noted that:

The speaker is the privileged authority on the question of whether he lies. Since the Augustinian definition of the lie is indexed to the speaker's understanding of the relation between her thought and speech, you will always know better than anyone else whether a particular utterance of yours was duplicitous.

In other words, the stress posed by Augustine in theorizing about lying is on “what is going on in the mind of the liar” (Evans 1982: 67). Griffiths holds that Augustine drew on Sallust's definition of the lie. This connection is quite plausible and the similarity between the two definitions is striking. Let us recall here then the definition proposed by Sallust:

Ambition led many to become false, to keep one thing concealed in the heart and to have another ready on the tongue, to judge friendships and enmities not as they are but in terms of benefit, to look good rather than to have a good character. (Sallust quoted in Griffiths 2004: 26)

It is worth noting that this tradition of talking about the lie in terms of duplex cor is still present and alive in 1265–1274 when Thomas Aquinas writes his *Summa theologiae*. The latter in fact acknowledged Augustine's principle of the duplicity inherent in the act of lying recalling the etymology of the term ‘lying’ (*mendacium*) that “derives from the lie's being speech *contra mentem*” (Aquinas 1971 *Summa theol.* Quest. 110). Thomas Aquinas takes this criterion of duplicity to be the moral and formal aspect of the lie and considers it so essential as to be the sufficient ingredient for a lie to be considered as such. A similar view is present in other commentators, such as Alexander Carpenter who writes that “to lie is to go against the mind, whence the lie, which is a sign false to the mind” (Carpenter quoted in Craun 1997: 40).¹²

Some authors have asked whether or not the English verb ‘to lie’ has a contrary (Anolli 2003; Bonfantini, Ponzio 1996). On the basis of Augustine's conception of lying as speech contrary to the mind, it might be argued that lying stays in opposition with being sincere. This claim is correct if we oppose mendacity to sincerity as proposed by Suzanne Stern-Gillet (2008). She has pointed out that Augustine poses a philosophical question of sincerity as being a quality of the subject:

¹² E. D. Craun refers to Carpenter (1516), *Speculum Morale* 1277: “*mentiri est contra mentem ire, & inde mendacium quo est falsum mentis signum*” (Carpenter, Alexander 1516. *Destructorium viciorum*. Paris: C. Chevallori).

Sincerity is a quality of the self [...]. It designates a relationship of congruence or harmony between different parts, aspects or manifestations of the self. These includes not only thoughts, feelings and emotions, but also the awareness – or lack of it – that the subject has of them, as well as the manner in which he expresses – or fails to express – them. [...] Sincerity is the commendable disposition to match what we express to what we feel. (Stern-Gillet 2008: 3–4)

To put it another way and borrowing a formula used by Luigi Anolli, we are in presence of sincerity when a person “believes in what he says and says what he believes”.¹³ While this observation may seem trivial, as a matter of fact duplicity is a marker of mendacity, and however obvious it might seem, it is important to make this point.

In order to understand Augustine’s view on lying it might be helpful to have a brief and concise excursus on his theory of language. For Augustine lying is sinful to the extent that the liar breaks the rules of communication deviating from the common goal that language possesses, namely to communicate truthful knowledge, e.g., each speaker saying something according to his own mind. To put it another way, lying is a “sin of the tongue” (Casagrande, Vecchio 1987) for it displays incongruence between the mind and the tongue, so to speak. This is the first theoretical reason behind Augustine’s scorn of lies. Viewed through this prism, lying constitutes a breakdown of communication for it perverts the original and proper use of speech, namely to communicate one’s thoughts to another translating inner thoughts by means of speech. As Edwin David Craun (1997: 43):

To pervert words by using them to convey what is not in the mind, then, is to commit a fundamental injustice against other humans and against the natural order as reason perceives it. To lie is to violate the communion of mind which speech makes possible.

The perspective of lying as breakdown in communication brings about a consideration on Augustine’s view on the theory of knowledge and epistemology of language.

One of the *loci classici* of Augustinian disquisition about the function of language and the nature of communication is *De magistro* (*The teacher*) written in 389. There is not enough space in the present article to give a full account of Augustine’s theory of signification,¹⁴ but a brief excursus into the nature and purpose of language underscored by Augustine throughout his writings will certainly clarify

¹³ “Crede in quello che dice e dice in quello che crede” (Anolli 2003: 20). My translation – R. G.

¹⁴ For background about Augustinian theory of signification I refer to Colish 1982 and Jakson 1969.

the nature of lying, for the two issues are strictly bound to each other. I shall start with a consideration of the nature of language in the *De magistro*. It is based on a conversation between Augustine and his son Adeodato and investigates the role of language in teaching and gaining of knowledge. *De magistro* expresses Augustine's critique of language as instrument of teaching; also, the bishop of Hippo envisages language as an imperfect means of communication and lists the main functions of language: (1) the transmission of knowledge; (2) recalling information and to preserve it in time (Augustine 1962[389]). The position of the doctor of the Church as concerns the first function is contradictory. To be sure, Augustine does not hold the same position throughout the book, for on the one hand, he holds that knowledge is gained by means of signs and this contention is elaborated in the first part of the dialogue. On the other hand, the bishop confutes his previous thesis proposing a contrary tenet, namely, that nothing is learned by means of signs (*De magistro* X, 33), and this claim is held throughout the second part of the dialogue. In order to corroborate the latter stance, Augustine recalls the famous example of the word *sarabara*; a term that has no meaning for an interpreter if one does not know its referent before hand. As Gary Genosko (1995: 88) has pointed out: "One becomes acquainted, then, by means of the thing signified rather than by coming to know the thing from the sign". It is in the middle of this disquisition about the nature and function of language that Augustine mentions lying:

Hence words do not even have the function of indicating the mind of the speaker, if it is uncertain whether he knows what he is saying. There are liars too and deceivers, so that you can easily understand that words not only do not reveal the mind, but even serve to conceal it. I do not of course in any way doubt that the words of truthful people are endeavouring to reveal the mind of the speaker and make some claim to do so, and would do so, all would agree, if only liars would not allowed to speak. (*De mag.* XIII, 42)

Disclosure and concealment, opacity and transparency of the speaker's thoughts are mediated by means of speech. However, for Augustine the proper function of language is the communication of one's thoughts, and this attitude is present in 'truthful people', as the bishop has put it. On the contrary, liars contradict this principle inasmuch as they pervert language's communicative function and lying is to be seen as "deliberate subversion of the canons of truth which undergird language as a healthy, working medium of both thought and communication" (Swearingen 1991: 202).

Notwithstanding the imperfect nature of language as tool for communication and acquisition of knowledge, this is not to say that for Augustine human beings are allowed to bend the function of speech to serve their own evil purposes. It is possible

to suggest along with Augustine that the institution of language was established to provide men with the faculty of speaking with each other, for men lack the ability to look in one another's minds and perceive what is in their own hearts. Notice that Augustine distinguished the communication that goes on between man and God from communication between men. The latter are obliged to communicate their thoughts by means of speech or other outer signs, whereas the communication between God and man does not require words, while God is *cordis inspector*. This point is outlined by Augustine's *De mendacio*:

When a statement is made to God alone, then only in the heart is truth involved; but, when the testimony is given to man, then the truth must be expressed by the mouth of the body, because man cannot see the heart. (*De mend.* XXVII, 36)

Language can thus deviate from its original function and in this deviation lies the contradiction that lying displays. As Jan C. Swearingen (1991: 230) states:

Augustine extends an earnest truth-seeking language model in the doctrine that language should always be used to say what is in the speaker's heart – the *verbum cordis* – the word which expresses the truth that has been found by the reflecting mind seeking truth through contemplative thought.

Thus, lying is an infraction of the institution of the language. Never is Augustine more consistent in explaining the communicative function of language as in the following excerpt taken from the *Enchiridion on faith, hope and charity* (Augustine 2007[1847]):

Everyone who lies is contradicting what he thinks in his heart, with the intention to deceive. Language, however, is created not for the purpose that human beings deceive each other with the help of language, but for the purpose of mutually communicating their thoughts. Hence, using human language in order to deceive/mislead instead of using it according to the purpose language was created for, that is a sin. (*Enchir.* XXVIII).

Viewed from such a perspective, the communication context envisaged by Augustine, naïve as it might seem, is governed by a convention requiring truth-telling. It is the breaking of this convention that confers to the lie its sinful character.

Another important issue is whether the sole criterion of duplicity or double-mindedness is an indispensable and sufficient condition for lying. There is no general consensus as to whether the Augustinian lie is determined solely by the duplicity, conceived as a split, mismatch or contradiction between the content of the thought and the expression of it by means of signs. Griffiths (2004: 29) contends

that Augustine specifically indicated that the evil of the lie is to be duplicitous. It is quite peculiar, however, that the author ignores other quotations where the liar's intention to deceive is taken in consideration. In contradiction to Griffiths, the present study views the intention to deceive as the *conditio sine qua non* for lying. This is apparent from several indications given by Augustine throughout his works. By drawing on certain observations made in Augustine's *De mendacio*, we contend that the distinctiveness of lying resides in the speaker's intention to deceive. Now an excursus into the nature of deceptive intentionality seen through the lens of Augustine's theory is in order.

4. The intention to deceive

The contention that the distinctiveness of lying lies in the intention to deceive is based on Augustinian insights regarding intentionality as the essential feature of the lie. We aim at supporting the thesis that envisages deceptive intentionality as the pragmatic aspect of the lie, and considers it as one of the most important features of mendacity.

The first indication given by Augustine as concerns deceptive intentionality is pointed out when the bishop sets forth the difference between joking and lying at the outset of his treatise *De mendacio*. Augustine pointed out that jokes are not lies inasmuch as they are "accompanied by a very evident lack of intention to deceive" (*De mend.* 2.2). After this first indication, Augustine goes on to explain the difference between lying and errors and, on the basis on such differences, he provides his definition of the lie as speech contrary to the mind. Shortly after indicating the "double heart" as the first characteristic of the lie Augustine explicitly returns to the intention to deceive as a distinctive feature of the lie in the following passage:

For, a person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself. He who expresses the false as true because he thinks it to be true may be said to be mistaken or rash, but he cannot, in fairness, be said to be lying, because, when he so expresses himself, he does not have a false heart nor does he wish to deceive; rather, he himself is deceived. In reality, the fault of the person who tells a lie consists in his desire to deceive in expressing his thought. (*De mend.* 3.3)¹⁵

¹⁵ *De mend.* 3.3: "Ex animi enim sui sententia, non ex rerum ipsarum veritate vel falsitate mentiens aut non mentiens iudicandus est. Potest itaque ille qui falsum pro vero enuntiat, quod tamen verum esse opinatur, errans dici et temerarius; mentiens autem non recte dicitur, qui cor duplex cum enuntiat non habet nec fallere cupit sed fallitur. Culpa vero mentientis est in enuntians animo suo fallendi cupiditas, sive fallat cum ei creditor falsum enuntians, vel cum ei non creditor, vel cum verum enuntiat voluntate

Thus, Augustine conceives of lying as intentional deception. As Swearingen (1991: 203) pointed out: “Augustine emphasizes that the interior knowledge and intent which exists in an individual’s mind is the definitive criterion of deceit”.

Another important point to be inferred from the above passage, is that the focus on intentionality acknowledges a shift in the study of lying for it allows to prescind from the “falsity of the matter itself”, that is to say, from an ontological aspect of exactness or correspondence between subjective and objective truth, stressing the role played by subjective truthfulness in determining whether a lie actually occurs. To put it differently, Augustine underscored the difference existing between the truth of the things spoken and the speaker’s intentions.

Augustine returned to the point of intentionality in lying in several passages throughout his writings. The definition of lying singled out in the *Contra mendacium* reaffirms the point of intentionality as distinctive element of the lie made already in the *De mendacio*. In his late writing on lying Augustine stated the following: “Let no one doubt that it is a lie to tell a falsehood in order to deceive. Wherefore a false statement uttered with intent to deceive is a manifest lie” (*Contr. mend.* X).¹⁶

Hence, intentionality is Augustine’s crux in his attempt to define of what constitutes a lie. Marcia L. Colish (1982) suggested that the stress on intentionality embedded in the Augustinian treatment of the lie stems from the Stoics’ influence present in Augustine’s thought. The author claims that sign theory stemming from the doctrine of the Stoa had a strong impact on the ways in which a series of Latin thinkers, from Nigidius Figulus to St. Anselm tackled the issues of lying and false statements (Colish 1982: 19). The author claims that Augustine’s insistence on intentionality is a derivation of the Stoic theory of *lekta*. As the author explains, the latter is to be conceived as “intellectual intentions”, “one member of a quartet of entities called incorporeal, along with space, time and the void” (Colish 1982: 23). What is important for this analysis is the fact that Augustine’s take on the Stoic *lekta* yields a theory of signification based on the difference between words and intellectual intentions outlined by Augustine in *De dialectica*. Here the author distinguishes between *verbum*, that is words that possess an acoustic form, and *dicibile*, that is the meaning, “immaterial entity perceived by the mind and not by the hear” (Colish 1982: 25). Colish (1982: 25) further points out that “it is on the basis of this distinction between words and intentions that one can provide a Stoic explanation of linguistic ambiguities despite the natural derivation and significance of language; different speakers may be expressing different intentions through the same words”. It is exactly this move in the consideration of internal meaning in

fallendi quod non putat verum. Quod cum ei non creditur non utique fallit, quamvis fallere voluit, nisi hactenus fallit quatenus putatur ita etiam nosse vel putare eu enuntiat.”

¹⁶ *Contr. mend.* XII, 27: “*mendacium est falsa significatio cum voluntate fallendi*”.

terms of intentions that explains how language and signifying systems may be used as means of falsification, for the “double capacity of words to signify both real things and inner intentions” (Colish 1982: 27).

Augustine did not take for granted the fact that lying presupposes an intention to deceive. Rather, the question as to whether lying presupposes the intention to mislead constitutes one of the main foci of the analysis carried out in the first part of *De mendacio*. Augustine states, “a very penetrating investigation may be made as to whether there be any lie at all when the deliberate will to deceive is lacking” (*De mend.* 3.3). In order to support his contention Augustine proposed an interesting analysis of two particular cases:

- (1) Telling something false without any intention to deceive;
- (2) Telling the truth with the intention to deceive.

In other words, Augustine attempts to separate the two criteria that constitute a lie in order to assess whether only one of them, either the will to tell a falsehood or the intention to mislead, can function as the sole sufficient element for a lie to occur. Augustine introduced the two cases with the example of the “skeptical friend”, namely, a listener who has no trust in the speaker. As Christopher Kirwan (1989: 197) pointed out, the two cases with reference to “a speaker who expects to be disbelieved” can be listed as follows:

- (i) [The speaker may] say what he thinks is true with the purpose of inducing belief in what he thinks is false; or
- (ii) [The speaker may] say what he thinks is false with the purpose of inducing belief in what he thinks is true.

We now shall turn to these case studies. The main theoretical question is the following: does the intention to deceive constitute an essential feature of the lie?

As it will become apparent in the analysis that follows, Augustine’s examples involve what Robert W. Mitchell (1986: 3) calls “awareness of another’s awareness on the part of the deceiver”. The latter distinguished four levels of deception. Mitchell’s (1986: 26) fourth-level deception involves the intention to deceive and also a modification of the deceiver’s behaviour or deceptive strategy “based on knowledge of the other’s past and present behaviour”. This is an important point to be made insofar as Augustine considers the way in which the liar models his behaviour/strategy of deception according to the knowledge of the dupe’s present attitude. Thus, at this level of deception, there exists, as Mitchell says, the “recognition of the other animal’s belief about actions” (1986: 25). Also the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1978; 1987) subscribes to a similar view holding that in order to intentionally deceive someone there must be a second-order intentional system, that is, the deceiver must have beliefs about the intended victim’s beliefs.

5. Two cases: asserting a falsehood without the intention of deceiving and asserting the truth in order to deceive

Augustine's first case study poses the example of the so-called 'skeptical friend':

In the first place, we have a person who knows or thinks that he is speaking falsely, yet speaks in this way without the intention of deceiving. Such would be the case of a man who, knowing that a certain road is besieged by bandits and fearing that a friend for whose safety he is concerned will take that road, tells that friend that there are no bandits there. He makes this assertion, realizing that his friend does not trust him, and because of the statement to the contrary of the person in whom he has no faith, will therefore believe that the bandits are there and will not go by that road. (*De mend.* 4.4)¹⁷

The first case study considered by Augustine refers to the situation in which someone asserts a falsehood without the intention to mislead. The expressed falseness is a factual falsity in the sense of objective falsity and it is believed to be false by the person who asserted it. In other words, Augustine presents a case of an expressed falsehood that matches both criteria of being, at one and the same time, an objective falsity (there actually are bandits in that road) as well a subjective falsity (he knows he is speaking falsely). This equals to say that that the *assertum* (what is asserted) neither matches the state of affairs in the world nor the state of mind of the liar. That is to say that the speaker does not believe the *assertum* as true.

Augustine further qualifies the reason behind such an expression of falsehood as concerning someone else's disbelief, namely the addressee. In other words, one asserts something false due to the hearer's lack of trust towards the speaker. Therefore, the latter is fully aware of the fact that the hearer will not believe him. This is rather a peculiar situation as it may be when the hearer mistrusts the speaker, say a friend, on account of his fame of being a well-known liar. What is more, in expressing a falsehood the speaker's final concern is the wellbeing of his mistrustful friend. To sum up, the conditions set up by Augustine for the analysis of the first case study are:

- (1) A factual and believed-falsity asserted by someone as being true;
- (2) The mistrust of the hearer towards the speaker;
- (3) The intention of the speaker towards the wellbeing of the hearer.

¹⁷ *De mend.* 4.4: "Unum qui scit aut putat se falsum dicere et ideo dicit ne fallat, velut si aliquam viam noverit obsideri a latronibus et timens ne per illam homo cuius salutem prospicit et eum scit sibi non credere, dicat eam viam non habere latrones ad hoc ut illac non eat dum ideo credit latrones ibi esse, quia ille dixit non ibi esse cui non credere statuit, mendacem putans".

The second case proposed by Augustine is the contrary of the first. If in the former case Augustine severed the assertion of a falsehood from the intention to deceive, he now poses the case in which someone is misled by means of truth. To wit, Augustine's second case study centres on the situation in which a person tells the truth in order to deceive. Holding the same conditions of the former example, that is the addressee's mistrust towards the addresser (2), Augustine reverts condition 1 and 3. The speaker says what is believed as true and it is factually true (e.g. the speaker knows or thinks that there are bandits on a certain road and this claim is congruent with the state of affairs). However, the speaker's intention is different to the extent that the person is willing to deceive the mistrustful hearer.

In the following passage Augustine provides an account of his second case study:

In the second place, there is a case of the person who, knowing or thinking what he says true, nevertheless says it in order to deceive. This would happen if the man mentioned above were to tell his mistrustful acquaintance that there are bandits on the road, knowing that they actually are there and telling it so that his hearer, because of his distrust of the speaker, may proceed to take that road and so fall into the hands of the bandits. (*De mend.* 4.4)¹⁸

In the second example, then, the speaker is consciously asserting something that he knows to be true in order to deceive. He strategically uses the truth to trick his audience though technically he asserted what his true, both subjectively and factually.

To sum up, the two cases considered by Augustine in the *De mendacio* may be grouped as in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Augustine's two case studies singled out from *De mendacio*.

	Speaker's belief	Speaker's assertion	Hearer's belief	Speaker's intention
(i) To say a falsehood without intention to deceive	True	False	True	Not to deceive
(ii) To say the truth in order to deceive	True	True	False	To deceive

¹⁸ *De mend.* 4.4: "Alterum autem qui sciens aut putans verum esse quod dicit, ad hoc tamen dicit ut fallat; tanquam si homini non sibi credenda dicat latrones in illa via esse ubi re vera eos esse cognovit ut ille cui dicit per illam viam magis pergat atque ita in latrones incidat, dum putat falsum esse quod ille dixerit".

Having underlined the conditions governing the two cases and having severed the intention to deceive from the expression of falsity, Augustine continues his argument asking whether or not in these two cases the speaker lies. The following quartet of options can be inferred from Augustine's disquisition:

- (1) if lying entails saying something with the desire to say something false, then a lie occurs only in the first case;
- (2) if lying entails saying something with the intention to deceive, then only the speaker in the second case actually lies;
- (3) if lying is an expression of any falsity, then both of them have lied: the first because he intended to say something false, and the second because by saying the truth he wanted to lead the hearer to have a false assumption;
- (4) if lying entails both the assertion of a falsehood and the intention to deceive, then neither of them has lied.

To conclude this, it is worth remembering that Augustine did not provide an ultimate answer to the questions arising from these puzzling cases. It seems that Augustine concluded his analysis by giving the reader topics for discussion and reflection, leaving the door open to the reader's interpretation. Augustine in fact concluded the chapter stating that:

However, no one doubts that he lies who deliberately says what is false with the intention of deceiving. It is clear, then, that a lie is a false statement made with the desire to deceive. But, whether this alone is a lie is another question. (*De mend.* 4.5)

What does occur in the aforementioned examples is a sort of reverse or topsy-turvy signification, where the speaker asserts 'yes' in order to say 'no' and vice versa. This is due to the lack of the convention of truthfulness between the partners of communication, that is, the speaker is fully aware that in the hearer's mistrustful interpretation of his words he will assume the contrary of what is expressed. What is peculiar is that in both examples there is already embedded a breach of faith since the communicative maxim of speaking truthfully is disregarded. If the convention of being truthful with each other is already missing, due to the speaker's dishonest attitude, the same trust cannot be broken again inasmuch as it is already absent. The examples Augustine referred to rather reduce lying to a sort of communicative game that resembles a joke told by Sigmund Freud based on a train conversation between two Jews:

Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a train station in Galicia. 'Where are you going?' asked one. 'To Cracow,' was the answer. 'What a liar you are!' broke out the other. 'If you say you are going to Cracow, you want me to believe you are going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you are going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me.' (Freud 1960: 137–138)

As Roberto Harari (2001: 104) points out, this joke “works on the capacity of the signifier to say something true by making one believe that it is a lie, in an attempt to deceive the other, which it fails to do in this joke”.

Some further points ought to be made here. First of all, the focus on deceptive intentionality provides a view of the lie as a wilful attempt of deception regardless of whether the deceit is successful or unsuccessful. A lie that is seen through is still a lie.

Furthermore, as it has been showed above, Augustine’s vision on lying is based mainly on the perspective of the liar. We have seen that Augustine gives great importance to the liar’s intentions and beliefs. However, when the bishop takes into consideration the two cases that have been discussed above, he bends his perspective to encompass a further element, that is, the dupe’s predisposition to believe the speaker. As Colish (1982: 32–33) has noted, here Augustine “has the rhetorician’s sensitivity to the importance of the speaker’s credibility as a factor affecting the function of his words as means of communication to the hearer”. By enlarging his view on lying to encompass also the dupe’s belief, Augustine’s perspective of the liar becomes biased in as much as he now considers a metalevel consisting of the listener’s lack of loyalty towards the speaker.

6. The intent to assert a falsehood

So far we have been using terms such as ‘signification’, ‘expression’, ‘utterance’ in an interchangeable manner in order to refer to the ways in which one conveys his thoughts to another by means of signs. However, in order to make this terminology more consistent and precise, the use of the terms ‘asserting’ and ‘assertion’ could be suggested. These terms shall indicate two order of things:

- (1) what is asserted, the *assertum*;
- (2) the liar’s belief about the *assertum*.

I propose the distinction by drawing on Thomas D. Feehan and Roderick M. Chisholm’s insights posed in their philosophical analysis of the intent to deceive (Chisholm and Feehan 1977). I contend that their view on lying, based on the definition of assertion, is compatible with Augustine’s stance on mendacity.

The issue at stake may be stated in the following terms. As noted above, the point to be made here is that one’s belief may refer to two orders of things and consequently be seen from two perspectives, namely what is said and the intention of what is said. As to the first point, the liar wants that the dupe take what is said as true, hence believing the content of the liar’s assertion, the *assertum*. On the other hand, and this is the second point to be considered, to the extent that there exists a truth-telling convention among the participants of a process of communication, it is taken for granted that the liar says what he means. In other words, the liar wants

the dupe to believe that he himself believes what he asserts. To put it with Mahon (2008: 212), “[O]ne intends not only that others believe that what one says is true, but also that they believe that one believes that what one says is true”. For instance, if A says: “I will be going to London tonight”, A gives an informative account about his or her plans for the night and furthermore he or she conveys information about his/her belief towards that plan, “I believe that I will go to the party tonight”. To put it another way, we must discern the actual informative content of an assertion from the liar’s beliefs about that assertion. It is exactly the reciprocal trust existing between the partners in communication that is being exploited by the liar and used as a leverage to deceive the dupe. As Lilly-Marlene Russow (1986: 47) pointed out: “the deceiver must be able to have beliefs about the beliefs of the target of deception, must be able to represent the target as being a believer, and must be able to have beliefs about the causes of those other beliefs”.

Following this line of thought, I contend that this view is compatible with Augustine’s perspective on lying. Let us recall that for Augustine not only the institution of language has to serve the purpose of communication of thoughts between men who convey them through speech. Augustine pointed out that it is the speaker’s duty to express himself according to his own mind. He makes this point clear in the following passage, in which he recalls the Eighth Commandment to support the tenet that every man must speak truthfully:

[...] In the Decalogue itself is written: ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness’, in which classification every lie is embraced, for whoever pronounces any statement gives testimony to his own mind. (*De mend.* 5.6)

This passage is of crucial importance for understanding the Augustinian view on lying. According to this view, communication is not happening in a *vacuum*, but it is addressed to someone, in a particular context, to satisfy a specific purpose and all this is done with the presupposition of trust between the parties of communication. This reciprocal trust is based on the commitment of the speaker towards the listener in providing a “testimony of his own mind” in any act of communication. It is this quality of trust that someone becomes endowed with in an act of communication. A lie breaks it. This is why lying is considered to be unjust, for it is essentially equal to a “breach of faith” (Chisholm and Feehan 1977: 153). Augustine points out exactly this idea in the *De doctrina christiana*:

Everyone who lies commits iniquity [...] But no one who lies keeps faith concerning that about which he lies. For he wishes that the person to whom he lies should have that faith in him which he does not himself keep when he lies. But every violator of faith is iniquitous. (*De doc. chr.* I, XXXVI)

From the aforementioned passage it becomes apparent that lying undermines sociality to the extent that mendacity betrays the existent trust between the parties of communication in a given social context. The one who lies infringes on the convention of being truthful with each other. Paul Grice outlined his conversational maxims based on the co-operative principle so as to encompass a maxim of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity, and defined the first maxim as “Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice 1989). We will return to the issue of truthfulness. For the present, this issue may serve as a bridge towards the analysis of the concept of assertion with relation to lying.

There is a difference between utterance and assertion. The latter implies a constraint, a bind between the poles of communication. To explain the difference I draw once more on Chisholm and Feehan. The authors pointed out that:

What distinguishes lying as such from the other types of intended deception is the fact that, in telling the lie, the liar “gives an indication that he is expressing his own mind”. And he does this in a special way – by getting his victim to place his faith in him. The sense of ‘say’, therefore, in which the liar may be said to “intend to say what is false” is that of ‘to *assert*’. (Chisholm and Feehan 1977: 149)

Hence the authors distinguish lying from other types of deception on the basis of the assertive character embedded in the act of lying.

What is interesting and worth quoting here at length is the definition of assertion that comes from Charles Sanders Peirce, considered by Chisholm and Feehan (1977: 149–150) as the most appropriate and clear definition of what goes under the rubric of ‘assertion’:

What is the nature of assertion? We have no magnifying-glass that can enlarge its features, and render them more discernible; but in default of such an instrument we can select for examination a very formal assertion, the features of which have purposely been rendered very prominent, in order to emphasize its solemnity. If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it. Taking an oath is not mainly an event of the nature of a setting forth, *Vorstellung*, or representing. It is not mere saying, but is doing. The law, I believe, calls it an ‘act’. At any rate, it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. (Peirce, quoted in Chisholm and Feehan 1977: 150–151)

Every genuine assertion, as Peirce pointed out, assumes its own responsibility to an audience to the extent of the pragmatic effects that might derive from it; or, as

Augustine argued, every statement gives testimony to his own mind taking the responsibility of what has been asserted. Notably, Augustine sometimes used a formula that was customary during the Roman times and was used to express the taking of responsibility first towards the speaker's own faith and, consequently, towards the other, the hearer, the community. The expression I refer to is *ex animi sua sententia* that means with full conscience". Andrea Tagliapietra (2007: 36–37) traced the use of this formula to Cicero in his *De officiis*.¹⁹ Augustine himself recalled this formula when proposing the definition of lying in the *De mendacio*. He states: "*Ex animi enim sui sententia, non ex rerum ipsarum veritate mentiens aut non mentiens judicandus est*" translated by Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney as follows: "a person is to be judged as lying or not according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself" (*De mend.* 3.3). The liar thus intends to say what is false, and it is according to the intention of his own mind that a liar must be judged as such.

Bearing this in mind, two levels on intentionality can be described:

- (1) the intent to assert a falsehood;
- (2) the intention to deceive.

What is characteristic of the lie is the fact that it entails a double deception. The dupe is not only misled about the content of the assertion, he is deceived as concerns the intention of the speaker to disclose his mind in a trustful manner. This point is endorsed by Georg Simmel's (1906) definition of the lie outlined in "The sociology of secrecy and secret society":

Every lie, whatever its content, is in its essential nature a promotion of error with reference to the mendacious subject; for the lie consists in the fact that the liar conceals from the person to whom the idea is conveyed the true conception which he possesses. The specific nature of the lie is not exhausted in the fact that the person to whom the lie is told has a false conception of the fact. This is a detail in common with simple error. The additional trait is that the person deceived is held in misconception about the true intention of the person who tells the lie. (Simmel 1906: 445)

Drawing on Simmel, and Chisholm and Feehan who hold that "*stating* involves an intention about an intention" and that "If I state something to you, a part of my intention is that you have a belief *about* my intention and, indeed, that you have a belief about what it is that I intend that *you* believe" (Chisholm and Feehan 1977: 151) it can be argued that lying involves a double assumption to be imparted to the

¹⁹ Cicero, *De officiis*, III, 29: "For swearing to what is false is not necessary perjury, but to take an oath upon your conscience, as it is expressed in our legal formulas and then fail to perform it, that is perjury".

dupe, namely an assumption regarding what has been asserted and the intention of the assertion. In other words, the dupe believes what the liar says, and believes that the liar believes what he says.

Up to this point I have been advocating a reading of Augustine that stresses the first type of intentionality, namely the intention to assert a falsehood, as necessary for lying. Let us recall here another passage, this time taken from the *De doctrina christiana*, where Augustine underscored the first type of intentionality we are referring to. He reported that:

In a liar there is a desire to say what is false, and that is why we find many who want to lie but nobody who wants to be misled. Since a person lies knowingly but is misled unknowingly, it is clear enough that in any given situation the person misled is better than the one who lies, since it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. (*De doc. chris.* II, 86–87)²⁰

Before turning to the consideration of the intent to deceive, another point ought to be made. As indicated above, Chisholm and Feehan posed a distinction between lying and other species of deception on the basis of the concept of assertion. To make matters more clearer, the authors refer to a specific aspect of deception reported by Immanuel Kant. In this example a man may feign to be about to leave on a trip by simply packing his luggage. In other words, the man pretends to be leaving by displaying a certain behaviour (packing his luggage) with the purpose of making someone else to assume that he is actually leaving. This example goes under the rubric of simulation and in particular under the strategies of “pretending”. At this point deceiving as such can be separated from the intent to assert a falsehood, which is proper to the lie. For the present, let us leave aside the problem whether there is possibly a type of falsehood which entails the sole intention to mislead. We shall return to this point in the next sections.

7. Double intentionality as criterion for the distinction of species of falsehood

Lying does not stand in opposition to truth. If we are to conceive of the phenomenon of lying as simply possessing two dimensions, like two sides of the same coin,

²⁰ Green, On Christian Doctrine, trans. 49–51. *De doctrina christiana* I, XXXVI: “*Inest quippe in mentiente voluntas falsa dicendi, et ideo multos invenimus qui mentiri velint, qui autem falli, neminem. Cum igitur hoc sciens homo faciat, illud nesciens patiat, satis apparet in una eademque re illum qui fallitur eo qui mentitur esse meliorem, quandoquidem pati melius est iniquitatem quam facere*”.

respectively viewed as truth and falsity, we are on a wrong path: falsity has many shapes and truth has more than one counterpart.

Michel de Montaigne (1952: 16) pointed out the multifariousness of falsehood:

If *falsehood* had, like *truth*, but one face only, we should be upon better terms; for we should then take as certain the contrary to what the liar says: but the reverse of truth has a hundred thousand forms, and a limitless field, without bond or limit.

Montaigne was correct in noting that falsehood has many shapes and this point had not escaped the scrutiny of such a scrupulous investigator as Augustine. However, as the theologian pointed out, we should be careful in differentiating a lie from what is not one, insofar as falsehood exhibits manifold appearances and therefore not every falsehood is a lie (*De mend.* 2.2). In other words, the point to be made here is that lying and truth are not in a symmetrical relationship (Zupančič 2007).

The criterion of deceptive intentionality underpins the ground for a differentiation between modes of deception on the basis of two characteristics: intention to assert a falsehood and intention to deceive. It along with Augustine, the difference between lies, jokes and errors has been already noted. The present section shall provide a general framework for discerning types of falsehood on the basis of the criterion of the agent's intentionality.

8. On the difference between lying and joking

Already in the first page of his treatise, Augustine makes it clear that lies are not jokes. The criterion by which Augustine distinguishes the two is the intention to deceive. Augustine introduced the present distinction in the second chapter of the *De mendacio*:

In this treatise I am excluding the question of jocose lies, which have never been considered as real lies, since both in the verbal expression and in the attitude of the one joking such lies are accompanied by a very evident lack of intention to deceive, even though the person be not speaking the truth. (*De mend.* 2.2)²¹

It is therefore outside Augustine's enquiry to address jokes as such as in the joker's playful attitude there is no evidence of intention to deceive. Drawing on Christopher

²¹ Muldowney, "Lying," 54. *De Mendacio*, 2.2: "Exceptis igitur jocis, quae nunquam sunt putata mendacia, habent enim evidentissimam ex pronuntiatione atque ipso jocantis affectu significationem animi nequaquam fallentis etsi non vera enuntiantis."

D. Levenick's (2004) insights about the nature of joking in Augustine's writings, we shall now turn to the formal distinction between joking and lying and evaluate its importance and contribution in providing a more precise definition of what constitutes a lie.

So far, it has been argued that joking cannot be mixed up with lying for the former lacks any intent to mislead and a playful intent is signalled by the joker's mood. Gillian R. Evans (1982: 67) succinctly summed up this point:

The man who tells a joke makes it clear to his listener that he does not intend what he says to be taken seriously. His tone of voice, the sting in the tail of the joke, the revelation that he was jesting or teasing, when his listener has been taking him seriously, all make it impossible to confuse a joke with a lie, because the true state of affairs is made plain in the end.

On the basis of this evidence, jokes and lies cannot be confused. Although joking is not lying, the two phenomena have at least one feature in common: they both meet the criteria of dealing with falsehoods. For Augustine, joking is a type of untruthfulness in so far as it involves falsity, albeit it is not a lie. As Levenick (2004: 304–305) notes: “[A] joke, by its nature, involves the joker signifying something other than what he believes to be the actual case”.

In his early writings, in particular in *Soliloquies* 2.10, Augustine draws a sharp distinction between ‘fallacious’ (*fallax*) and ‘mendacious’ (*mendax*).²² The former refers to deliberate deception whereas the latter is “that which overtly presents harmless falsehoods for enjoyment” (Dox 2004:38). Falsehoods can thus be of two kinds: those that deliberately aim at deception and those whose purpose is to provide pleasure or enjoyment. Lies certainly belong to the first category, whereas jokes and jests but also fiction in general, poetry, literature and arts pertain to the second category. This distinction becomes apparent in the light of the following observation made by Augustine in the *Soliloquies* (*Soliloquia*):

Fallacious, strictly speaking, is that which has a certain desire to deceive and this cannot be understood apart from the soul. But deceit is practiced partly by reason and partly by nature; by reason in rational beings like men, by nature in beasts like foxes. What I call lying is done by liars. The difference between the fallacious and the mendacious is that the former all wish to deceive while the latter do not all wish to do so. Mimes and comedies and many poems are full of lies, but the aim is to delight rather than to deceive. Nearly all who make jokes

²² All English citations of Augustine's *Soliloquies* are taken from Augustine 1953. All English references to *Expositions on the Psalms* are from Augustine 1960. References to Augustine's *Sermons* are taken from Augustine 1997(1867).

lie. But the fallacious person, strictly speaking, is he whose design is to deceive. (*Soliloq.* 2.9.16)

In her treatment of theatre in Late Antiquity Donnalee Dox has pointed out that the difference between *mendax* and *fallax* was present also in Isidore of Seville. The author recalls the same distinction as it appears in the following quotation:

[...] Not everyone who presents a lie intends to deceive; so there are mimes, comedies, and many poems where delightful lies are written to amuse rather than with a desire to deceive. And almost everyone who jokes, lies. (Isidore quoted in Dox 2004: 38)

Augustine is clear and correct in making such a distinction. He clarifies it explaining that:

What I call the fabulous kind of falsehood (*mendax*), the kind which is committed by those who tell fables. The difference between deceivers and fabulists is this, that every deceiver wants to deceive but not everyone who tells a fable has the desire to deceive. (*Soliloq.* 2.9.16)

However, it is worth noting that, although jokes and other sorts of fictions lack the intention to deceive, they do involve intentionality to the extent that they are intentional significations although not intentional deceitful significations. The intentionality involved here concerns two levels. On the one hand, jokes involve the use of what Augustine called *signa data* (given signs), that is, signs produced with the intention of signifying something.²³ On the other hand, jokes involve intentionality to the extent that a will to assert a falsehood is nonetheless present. That is, the joker is aware of the false nature of his *assertum*.

This difference is apparent in Levenick's study of the nature of jokes in Augustine's writings. A joke, Levenick (2004: 308) says, is "a fictional transaction that is intentionally signified for the purpose of humour" (Levenick 2004: 308). Following Levenick another quotation can be pointed out that further qualifies the Augustinian point of view: "[I]n joking, there is not much perniciousness, for there is no deception, since [the audience] knows that what is said, is said as a joke" (Augustine quoted in Levenick 2004: 309). For the sake of the joke itself, that is, in order to be delightfully tricked, the audience is willing to "suspend the disbelief". As Levenick (2004: 309) succinctly pointed out: "The joker thus deceives, but only in a sense, for the deceit is mutually recognized (in that both the joker and the audience

²³ Given signs are "those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything that they have felt or learnt" (*De doc. chr.* II, 3).

are aware of it)". Jokes, considered as non-deceitful untruthfulness meet the wide definition of lying proposed by Oscar Wilde: "The aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society [...]" (Wilde 2004[1889]: 27).

Both the joker and the audience are aware that they are taking part in a joke and that there exists a prior notification and convention that grounds it. Augustine returned to the difference between lying and joking in *Quaestionum in heptateuchum* noting that: "[W]hen liars lie, they lie seriously, not joking; moreover, when they are spoken jokingly, they are not lies and not reckoned as lies" (Augustine quoted in Levenick 2004: 310). Augustine reiterated this point in *Expositions on the Psalms* 5. Once again, we find a distinction made on the basis of the intention to deceive:

In fine, there are two kind lies, in which there is no great fault, and yet they are not without fault, either when we are in jest, or when we lie that we may do good. That first kind, in jest, is for this reason not very hurtful, because there is no deception. For he to whom it is said knows that it is said for the sake of the jest. But the second kind is for this reason the more inoffensive, because it carries with it some kindly intention. (*Ex. Ps.* 5.7)

As concerns our immediate purposes, let us focus on the first kind of lie in which the audience is informed that the joker is teasing and there is an agreement upon the ludic, playful nature of the joke. Both the joker and the audience are fully aware of this. Augustine points out in the *De mendacio* that the fact that "the joke is a joke", so to speak, is signalled by some signs that make the jocular intention clear. These signs are the tone of voice and the affection of the soul of the speaker (the joker) (*De mend.* 2.2). In other words, the joker presents some meta-communicative markers that signal that what is going on is a joke and must be taken as a joke. As Gregory Bateson (1987 [1972]: 139) has observed, in such jokes there is an exchange of "signals that would carry the message *this is play*". Being aware of the nature of a joke is a tacit consensus in being playfully deceived, and this feature thus invalidates one of the principles upon which lying bases its strength, that is the incongruence between the two parties (the liar and the dupe) as concerns knowledge and believing. Lies are generally based on a knowledge disparity between the parties of the communicative act as the liar knows something more than the dupe and the situation is therefore unbalanced. On the contrary, in jokes, both parties share the same knowledge of participating in the here and now of a joke and both agree upon this convention. All these forms of falsehood involve the "suspension of the disbelief" and therefore they lack any intent to deceive. Consequently they do not constitute a lie on Augustine's account. As Paul Ekman (1985: 27) pointed out:

In a lie the target has not asked to be misled, nor has the liar given any prior notification of an intention to do so. It would be bizarre to call actors liars. Their audience agrees to be misled, for a time; that is why they are there.

A similar view is the one of Roger Caillois (2001[1958]: 19):

All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe. Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.

To put it another way, jokes, jests and fictional products lack the pragmatic aspect of the lie. Umberto Eco underscored this point when, in assessing the difference between fiction and deceit, he noted that the former “has the semantic aspect of the deceit, but not the pragmatic one”.²⁴ This claim is congruent with the differentiation of the three aspects of the lies (ontological, semantic and pragmatic) sketched out in the previous chapter. Indeed, jokes meet the criterion of intended falsehood but do not meet the additional criterion of intentional deceit.

9. On the difference between lying and errors

Having excluded jokes from the object of his study, Augustine devoted himself to another, more important concern, that is, “whether he may be considered as lying who does not actually tell a lie”.²⁵ The question Augustine poses is whether or not lying involves falsity. The point at stake is the distinction between lies and mistakes, or to put it differently between deceiving others and “self-deceiving”, as the bishop puts it. Augustine notes that:

The first problem, then, centers upon the question as to what constitutes a lie, for the person who utters a falsehood does not lie if he believes or, at least, assumes that what he says is true. (*De mend.* 3.3)

²⁴ “[Il fare finta] ha tutto l’aspetto semantico dell’inganno, ma non ne ha quello pragmatico” (Eco 1997: 37). My translation – R.G.

²⁵ *De men.* 2.2: “[...] *exceptis ergo jocis, prius agendum est ne mentiri existimetur qui non mentitur*”.

Lying does not necessarily entail falsity. Cases may occur when persons, albeit expressing something false, do this according to their own beliefs or assumptions and thus it does not fall under the category of lying. Let us take, for example, some scientific discoveries taken for correct until they were later confuted. As Umberto Eco has noted, assuming that Copernicus, Galileo Galilei and Kepler were right, Ptolemy affirmed for all his life that which was not the case (Eco 1997: 33). However, the latter did not lie, inasmuch as he professed his creed with good faith, that is, he was expressing his ideas and beliefs according to his own mind. They might have been wrong, but they were not lies. Therefore, Ptolemy was not lying. He was unwillingly mistaken. It is worth noting that someone else than the one who mistakes is usually the person who points out errors. In other words, in order to consider falsity as an error it is needed a reality check or a further knowledge, more accurate or advanced, that allows to confute the previous paradigm and hence marks the former as wrong or incorrect. With reference to our example, Copernicus' heliocentric model confuted the previous geocentric paradigm, that is, only further knowledge is able to surpass and correct the previous paradigm pointing at it as 'wrong'. The one who mistakes is not aware of being in error. He is rather convinced, either by beliefs or by assumptions, that what he says corresponds to what he thinks and eventually to the state of affairs. In other words, he speaks sincerely and mistakes unwillingly. On the contrary, as we shall see in what follows, the liar is fully aware of his mistake but nevertheless he intends to induce someone else to fall in error, making the latter believe what the liar himself does not believe.

Augustine proposes an interesting example of falsity with reference to heresy. The heretic, insofar as he believes or assumes something to be true that is not the case, simply errs. Augustine goes further analysing the case of a Catholic who, in order to convert a heretic, disguises his beliefs pretending to be what is not (*Contr. mend.* 3.4; 7.18). As Colish (1982: 35–36) points out:

The Catholic who dissimulates his faith is a worse sinner than the heretic. The heretic sins unknowingly, the Catholic knowingly, 'the former against science, the latter against conscience'; despite the lying Catholic's good intention of saving the heretic's soul his words are false both objectively and subjectively. [...] The Catholic's beliefs are true and in denying them he lies three times over, sinning against what is, against what he believes, and against the heretic whom he tries to deceive.

From what has been said hitherto, it can be argued that there exists at least a double meaning of falsity: (1) false for us; and (2) false for others. It is clear, therefore, that the burden of falsity is balanced differently in the two cases. In the case of falsity 'for us', namely lying, the weight of mendacity is carried by the liar. That is to say

that the liar's awareness plays a crucial role in as much as the deceiver is conscious that some sort of falseness is at stake. On the contrary, in the second case, that of errors or mistakes, the weight of falseness is entirely carried by the receiver, in as much as the one who mistakes is totally unaware of it. Undoubtedly, a corollary of the described relation is the fact that in the aforementioned cases the eventual disclosure of truth is inverted. To wit, in the case of lying, the liar first knows the truth and only after that is he able to fake it. Indeed, the liar's cognitive condition is determined by the fact that he can count on a full account of what is falsity and truth for himself, whereas the dupe has access only to half of this. In the case of mistakes the relation with knowledge is inverted to the extent that the eventual discovery of truth is a follow up of an initial, unknown state of ignorance towards a particular issue or state of affairs. Drawing on Paul J. Griffiths we have noted that "the speaker is the privileged authority on the question of whether he lies" (Griffiths 2004: 37). To borrow Griffiths' terminology, it can be affirmed that in the assessment of whether a mistake actually takes place the other is the "privileged authority". Of course, it can happen that a mistake is pointed out by the same person who had been mistaken. However, what is needed is always a step further that shows either the correspondence or the incongruity between what is said to be the case and what actually is the case in relation to the state of affairs.

Above I have considered what separates lies from mistakes, now we ought to contemplate what unites them. To a certain extent lies and mistakes present a degree of familiarity. The issue at stake might be stated in the following terms: what lies and mistakes have in common is the fact that both traffic in falseness. However, a substantial difference separates them. It is possible to single out at least two dimensions of falsity: an objective dimension of falsity and a subjective dimension. Errors attain to the former, lies to the latter.

To put it in Gabriel Falkenberg's (1985: 17, emphasis in the original) words:

[...] What people say can diverge from *what they think*, or believe: linguistic appearance need not conform to the psychological reality behind it [...]. What people say can diverge from *how things are*: linguistic representation need not conform to the reality out there.

At this point one could ask what constitute falsehood for Augustine. In the examination of errors or mistakes Augustine adheres to a definition of falsehood as objective untruth, that is, a definition of falsehood as non-correspondence to facts, or things as they are. In the *Enchiridion to Laurentius on faith, hope and charity*, Augustine drew the same distinction between lies and mistakes as outlined in the *De mendacio*. In the former, he investigated the nature of errors. His definition of somebody who errs and the errors *qua* such are both present in the following passage:

[...] It does not follow that he straightway errs whosoever is ignorant of any thing; but whosoever thinks himself to know what he knows not; seeing that he approves what is false as true, which properly belongs to error. [...] To err is nothing else than to think that true which is false, and what false which is true. (*Ench.* XVII)

One who speaks according to what he thinks or believes to be true can be mistaken, but he does not lie. This is an important distinction underscored by Augustine and acknowledged by many commentators. Jacques Derrida (2002: 31) says in *History of the Lie*:

One can be mistaken, one can be in error without lying; one can communicate to another some false information without lying. If I believe what I say, even if it is false, even if I am wrong, and if I am not trying to mislead someone by communicating this error, then I am not lying.

It is therefore a question of good faith that counts here and a matter of awareness of being mistaken. This point is apparent in Augustine's thought: "Whoever gives expression to that which he holds either through belief or assumption does not lie even though the statement itself be false" (*De mend.* 3.3).²⁶ Augustine reiterated the same point in other writings. In *Sermon 113*, for instance, he made a similar point arguing for the difference between being deceived and lying. He states:

He is deceived who thinks what he says to be true, and therefore says it, because he thinks it true. Now if this which he that is deceived says, were true, he would not be deceived; if it were not only true, but also knew it to be true, he would not lie. He is deceived then, in that is false, and he thinks it true; but he only says it because he thinks it true. The error lies in human infirmity, not in the soundness of the conscience. But whosoever thinks it to be false, and asserts it as true, he lies. (*Sermon LXXXIII*, 4)

Notably, in the aforementioned passage Augustine speaks of errors in terms of being deceived or self-deceived. However, this is not to say that he considered cases of self-deception. He simply meant that one might be unwillingly tricked when he falls in error. The one who mistakes does not know he is telling a falsehood for it takes it as if it were true, hence he deceives himself in the sense of being mistaken. As Paul Ekman (1985: 26) pointed out:

²⁶ Muldowney 1952: 55.

Many people – for example, those who provide false information unwittingly – are untruthful without lying. A woman who has the paranoid delusion that she is Mary Magdalene is not a liar, although her claim is untrue. (Ekman 1985: 26)

The importance of the split between mistakes and lying lies in the fact that the latter prescind from whether the things expressed are true or false for it is from the intention to deceive that a liar must be judged. On the contrary, errors, as we have seen, in order to be thought of as mistakes need a comparison between paradigms or the gaining of further, more qualified knowledge about the world. Mistakes entail a conception of truth based on ontological exactness. Lies instead are assessed considering the condition of truthfulness, that is to say, the coherence between thoughts and words expressed and the agent's intentionality. Lies thus are assessed irrespectively of the falsity of what is stated or signified. We have seen that the Bishop of Hippo returned to the distinction several times throughout his writings as for instance in the *De doctrina christiana*. The same point is firmly expressed in the *De mendacio*:

[...] A person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself.²⁷

The difference between lies and mistakes can be formalized as presented in Table 2.

Hence in assessing a mistake we hold to the ontological conception of truth for we need to assess the correspondence of what has been expressed to the things of the real world. In lying this condition is missing, for lies are assessed according to a mismatch between what is thought and what is expressed, regardless of the ontological truth of the things stated. Proceeding from this distinction it is possible to tell the truth while lying and express falsehood without lying.

Table 2. Summary of Augustine's distinction between mistakes, lies and asserting the truth as outlined in *De mendacio*.

	WHAT I THINK	WHAT I SAY	FACTS
MISTAKE	FALSE	FALSE	TRUE
LIE	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE OR FALSE
TO SAY THE TRUTH	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE

²⁷ Muldowney 1952: 55.

10. Pretending, acting and non-verbal deception

Drawing on Augustine's insights about lying we have been observing the intention to say a falsehood and the intention to deceive. As we have seen, jokes lack the intention to deceive, but do present an intention to express falsehood. Errors, instead, do not meet any of the suggested criteria for they occur as if speaking truthfully, that is out of ignorance and with good faith. The Augustinian lie, on the contrary, meets both the criteria of being a believed – falsity asserted in order to mislead. What has been left out is a consideration of the cases in which there exists an intention to deceive without the intention of asserting a falsehood.

Lying entails the usage of signs and signs used in order to mislead do not necessarily have to be words. This article has been supporting a perspective on lying as intentional deception realized by means of signs, no matter their nature. Along with Jerzy Pelc (1992: 248), we hold the view that lying does not necessary have to be a verbal behaviour, for “faces, gestures, activities, silence, refraining from action, the presence or absence at some point in space in time, all these may be lies in certain conditions”.

It is worth recalling, once again, the definition of lying outlined by Augustine in *De mendacio*:

He lies [...] who holds one opinion in his mind and who gives expression to another through words or any other outward manifestation. [...] The fault of the person who tells a lie consists in his desire to deceive in expressing his thought. (*De mend.* 3.3)

The point to be made here is that, according to the abovementioned definition, it is apparent that for Augustine one can lie either through words or by signs of whatever kind. Colish (1982: 33), who stressed the role that silence may play in lying, acknowledged the present claim:

One can lie or bear false witness by remaining silent, in a situation where silence conveys an understood message. Silence, like speech, is eloquent, and its power to communicate one's intentions rests similarly on the prior relations between the questioner and the man who makes a silent response.

However, throughout his life Augustine devoted much more space to the study of words than of other signs. This preference was germane to his general design, that is to teach exegesis, and the signs used in the Bible are conventional verbal signs. The supremacy of the word among other signs is a tenet underscored by Augustine in *De doctrina christiana*. Here, Augustine outlined his general theory of signification and singled out two classes of signs, *signa naturalia* (natural sign) and *signa data*

(given sign). In the second book of *De doctrina christiana* Augustine pointed out the preponderance of words among other signs used by men stating that:

[...] Words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone. [...] Nevertheless, a multitude of innumerable signs by means of which men express their thoughts is made up of words. And I could express the meaning of all signs of the type here touched upon in words, but I would not be able at all to make the meanings of words clear by these signs. (*De doc. chr.* II, 3)

This passage underscores two important Augustinian tenets. The first concerns the importance of words for communication and semiosis among mankind. The second concerns the nature of that supremacy. As Gary Genosko (1995: 91) pointed out: “verbal signs are the means by which all other varieties of semiosis may be expressed, but not vice versa” (Genosko 1995: 91). To put it another way, for Augustine language is a primary modelling system, “a system into which any other semiotic system can be translated” (Manetti 1993: 196).

Augustine’s stance concerning the overwhelming importance of words may have important consequences for the study of lying. It might be argued that, inasmuch as he envisaged words as the most suitable signs designated for human communication, lying may be seen as a phenomenon that is entirely confined to written or spoken words. Griffiths (2004: 33) endorses a similar view:

Nonverbal actions cannot be lies. It is possible to make public one’s thought without words (by gesture or other nonverbal sign), and it is also possible to choose to misinterpret what one thinks in these ways. But such cases lie outside Augustine’s definition. He is, for the most part, concerned only with speech (or writing). He does say that one can lie with nonverbal signifiers. But once having said so, he scarcely returns to such cases. (Griffiths 2004: 33)

I hold that this claim is untenable. On the contrary, it is possible to deceive by means of non-verbal signs as long as there is a sign system with a shared convention and the intention to deceive.

Undeniably, Augustine conceived of words as having a special place among signs. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Thomas Aquinas, this is not to say that one cannot lie non-verbally. Aquinas writes:

As Augustine says, among all signs words occupy the first place. In the saying, then, that lying is a false meaning in words, by ‘words’ every sort of sign is meant. Hence were one intend to convey something false by nodding he would not be innocent of lying. (*Summa theol.*, 2a2ae, 110, 1.3)

Along with Augustine and Aquinas, we subscribe to the view that lying entails a sign function, regardless of the nature of signs that are involved. As we have seen, the criteria for discerning whether there is a lie concern the intention to signify and the intention to deceive, regardless of the nature of the sign as such. It is the usage of signs made by the interpreter, and the agent's intention to play a crucial role in qualifying whether a lie occurs or not.

A broad definition of lying was outlined by Sissela Bok (1999[1978]: 13) who held that one may deceive “through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence” and that lying may occur “verbally or in writing, but can of course also be conveyed via smoke signals, Morse code, sign language, and the like” as long as these messages are stated. Even broader is the definition of lying drawn by David Livingstone Smith as “*any* form of behaviour the function of which is to provide others with false information or to deprive them of true information” therefore “breast implants, hairpieces, feigned illnesses, faked orgasms, and phony smiles are just a few examples of nonverbal lying” (Smith 2004: 14, italics in original). Notably, the Platonic *Hippias minor*, in an attempt to single out the difference between lying with intention of deceiving and lying unwillingly, referred to a case of fake limp that is an example of nonverbal deception.

Having said that, a point that certainly deserves attention is the existing difference between ‘simulation’ and ‘lying’ and ‘fake’ and ‘fictitious’. Simulation is a “behavioural form of lying”²⁸; it can be fake or fictitious and thus entail either deceptive or being non-deceitful character.

As to the distinction between ‘fake’ and ‘fictitious’ it can be said, along with Marina Mizzau (1997) and Umberto Eco (1997), that the difference between the two terms lies in the fact that the former does not display the signs of being fake, therefore pretending to be taken as authentic or true. On the contrary, the latter – the fictitious – exhibits the signs of being untruthful. For instance, the theatrical masking is fictitious inasmuch as it does not pretend to be taken as serious, in other words the audience is aware of the fictional character of the theatrical masking. In this respect the fictitious has a similar logic to play and jokes that, as we have seen, exhibit the signs of their fictional character.

On the other hand, faking involves an intention of being taken as genuine and to hide the signs that are evidence of fakery as, for instance, a woman's wig, for it aims at being taken as real. From the aforesaid it is apparent that the fictitious is ruled by the logic of the ‘as if’. As Umberto Eco pointed out, acting ‘as if’ being someone else by wearing a mask on a theatrical stage is different than putting on a mask of Diabolik and faking to be another person in order to rob a bank (Eco 1997: 33). To put it differently, the fictitious and the fake belong to the family of ‘pretending’, considered in a broad sense. In both cases, faking and fiction, there is the pretence of being someone else

²⁸ “Simulare è una forma comportamentale di menzogna” (Eco 1997: 34). My translation – R. G.

or something else. The difference lies in the fact that the latter, the fictitious, does not involve any intention to deceive, whereas the former, the fake, does involve the intention to mislead. Another way of tackling this issue would be to draw a difference between 'pretending' and 'acting', the former conceived as "an intentional deceptive move obtained through counterfeiting that which the hearer is intended to assume" as for instance "by limping, one can counterfeit lameness" (Vincent, Castelfranchi 1981: 754–755). On the other hand, 'acting' can be seen as "the non-deceptive sister of pretending" inasmuch as the one who acts and the addressee of such action are "accomplices in a game which involves the entertainment of two contradictory worlds: one, the real world, where x is false (a pretence), and the other, a fictional or imaginary world, where x is true" (Vincent, Castelfranchi 1981: 755).

Having distinguished acting from pretending on the base of the criterion of intentionality, it is clear that pretending, inasmuch as it involves a certain degree of intentional deception, share this feature with the Augustinian lie. However, what distinguishes them is the first criterion that we have indicated as being germane to lying, namely the intention to assert a falsehood. To put it another way, what is missing in pretending as a form of deception is the character of assertion that we have seen to be important for the definition of the lie.

The last point to be considered is whether one can lie by means of silence and concealment. Augustine raised the question of whether one may lie through silence in several passages of the *De mendacio* and the *Contra mendacium*. The issue at stake is the capability of non-verbal signs in the signification of lying. Colish has raised the issue in an article entitled "St. Augustine's rhetoric of silence revisited" (1978). She takes issue with an earlier article dealing with the issue of silence in Augustine published by Joseph A. Mazzeo (1962) who neglected the possibility that one can lie by remaining silent. The issue of silence in relation with lying occurs with respect to Augustine's examination of the situation in which a man is asked about the whereabouts of another man who is hiding from a murderer. Augustine writes:

If a murderer flee to a Christian, or if the Christian see where he has fled, and be questioned about this matter by one who seeks the murderer to bring him to punishment, should the Christian lie? [...] Will you remain hesitant and uncertain between the charge of false testimony and of betrayal, or, by keeping silent or by asserting that you will not answer, will you avoid both charges? (*De mend.* 13.22)

The point Augustine made here is that one actually lies or bears false witness if remaining silent when one is asked a question to which one knows the answer equals a concealment of the truth and there is an intention to deceive. This is not to say, however, that every sort of silence involves concealment with the intention to mislead. A point to be made here is the difference between secrets and lies. The

former entails concealment, as well as the case when one lies by means of silence. The difference lies in the fact that silence, in other words, can be lying by omission. Secrets, on the contrary do not aim at deceiving. Hence we have to distinguish the intention not to say something (concealing) from the intention to omit something in order to deceive (lying by omission).

On the ground of the differences outlined in the present section, and taking into consideration the two Augustinian characteristics of the lie we can propose a fourfold inventory of falsehoods, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Fourfold typology of falsehood based on Augustine’s criteria of double intentionality.

<i>Type of falsehood</i>	<i>Intention to assert a falsehood</i>	<i>Intention to deceive</i>
Lie	+	+
Joke/Fiction	+	-
Error/ Mistake	-	-
Pretending/Omission	-	+

11. Conclusion

The present study has proposed a semiotic account of mendacity and its major drift has been to point out the relevance that topics of lying, deception, mendacity and truthfulness may have for semiotics. Drawing on Augustine of Hippo’s insights about lying, the current study has sought to look at the phenomenon of human deception in order to show its semiotic import.

The two books Augustine dedicated to the lie, in particular *De mendacio*, present a special laboratory for the semiotician to the extent that they provide specific theoretical insights about the nature of lying as such. In scrutinizing the nature of lying Augustine cannot avoid touching on some important points that are of critical importance for the semiotician. One may argue why and to what extent Augustine’s theory of lying is to be considered as semiotic. All in all, Augustine was a man of faith, a theologian, and it can be argued that his main concerns were religious, apologetic, and pastoral. To be sure, Augustine never mentioned the word ‘semiotic’ in the two *opuscola* that treated the issue of lying, since he was concerned with other kinds of issues, as we have already indicated in the introduction. Nonetheless, the way in which he sets forth the definition of the lie and the significant role given to the liar’s intentionality fall under the rubric of what today is called ‘semiotics’. I refer to at least three reasons that ground such claim:

- 1) lying makes use of signs. From this inescapable principle we can underpin what I called, following Umberto Eco (1975) and Jerzy Pelc (1992), the *semiotic foundation of lying*;

- 2) lying has nothing to do with objective reality, or better with truth as correspondence of a statement with objective reality. As we have seen, for Augustine it is possible to lie while telling the (objective) truth. Rather than truth, lying engages with *truthfulness*, conceived as perceived, believed or assumed truth by an interpreter;
- 3) the *intention to deceive* is a fundamental and necessary feature of the act of lying. This tenet bears important consequences for the pragmatic aspect of the lie and it also brings to the table the role of the agency in performing an act of lying.

The paper's focus on the Augustinian theoretical treatment of the lie is to be considered as a choice that allowed tackling three kinds of issues. The first one concerns the lack of attention and ink spilled by semioticians on the issue of lying. We believe that the significance of lying and deception to others has been downplayed in the past research and underestimated by semioticians. Hence, the present work's ambition is to be considered as a humble attempt to overcome the aforementioned theoretical lacuna. Furthermore, this study aimed at removing the topic from being a special concern of moral philosophers and psychologists, placing it under the scrutiny of a semiotic perspective. What the present study has sought to achieve is the relevance for semiotics of the topic of lying and a suggestion to consider it not only as a corollary of the bold claim that semiotics has to do with everything that can be taken as a lie (Eco 1976), a definition that has become almost an empty formula to be quoted in handbooks of semiotics. The paper's chief contribution is to be found, instead, in its insistence on the importance that the usage of signs has for its interpreters. This is to say that, the study of a topic such as lying viewed from an Augustinian perspective has brought into consideration the pragmatic dimension of semiosis conceived as the relationship between sign and sign users, a point that was acknowledged by Charles Morris (1971) forty years ago, has been almost neglected in contemporary semiotic scholarship. The third point to be considered is the choice of sources. That is to say, focusing mainly on the analysis of the works of one author, namely Augustine of Hippo, may be seen as a narrow approach on a topic that certainly deserves a more extensive perspective. Nonetheless, the focus on the Augustinian view on lying has provided an opportunity to delimit the object of study in an appropriate way, and to establish a discussion starting from a milestone publication, although almost neglected in contemporary semiotic scholarship, in the treatment of human deception. Indeed, Augustine was one of the first thinkers who provided a systematic study of lying and lies – the bishop of Hippo has been remembered in the history of Christianity and in the history of Western thought for other achievements. Nonetheless, the present work has attempted to give a small contribution in the revival of the *De mendacio*, which has received scant consideration among scholars.

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Августин о лжи:

теоретическое обрамление для изучения типов неправды

В статье дается теоретический обзор проблемы лжи в семиотической перспективе. Конкретной целью является анализ теории лжи Святого Августина (354–430). Он посвятил этой теме две короткие заметки: “De mendacio” (О лжи) и “Contra mendacium” (Против лжи). В статье выделяются в качестве фундаментальных и необходимых признаков лжи удвоение и желание обмануть. Главным вкладом Августина в изучение лжи было разделение оценочной и фактической неправды. Развивая эту мысль, автор статьи различает два типа интенциональности – намерение подтвердить ложь и намерение ввести в заблуждение. На основе этого разделения предлагается типология лжи, в которой различаются шутка, ошибка, ложь и притворство.

Augustinus valetamisest:

Teoreetilise raam ebatõesuse tüüpide uurimiseks

Käesolevas artiklis vaadeldakse valetamise probleemi teoreetiliselt semiootilisest perspektiivist ja käsitluse konkreetseks eesmärgiks on analüüsida valetateooriat, nagu selle esitas Hippo piiskop Aurelius Augustinus (354–430), tuntud ka Püha Augustinusena. Ta pühendas valetamisele kaks lühikest kirjutist: “De mendacio” (Valetamisest) ja “Contra mendacium” (Valetamise vastu), kirjutatud vastavalt ca 395. ja 420. aastal. Käesolev artikkel keskendub silmakirjalikkusele ning petmistahtlusele kui valetamise fundamentaalsetele ja vajalikele omadustele. Augustinuse peamine panus inimliku petlikkuse uurimisse oli see, et ta lahutas hinnangu selle kohta, mis on vale, faktilisest ebatõesusest. Augustinuse jaoks on valetamismõiste tuumaks tahtluse idee. Järgides seda mõttelõnga, eristatakse artiklis kaht tüüpi tahtlust, nimelt tahtlust väita midagi ebatõest ning kavatsust kedagi eksitada. Tahtluse sellise kahetise olemuse põhjal püütakse käesolevas artiklis visandada teoreetilist raami ebatõesuse tüüpide uurimiseks. Tulemuseks on ebatõesuse tüpologia, milles visandakse neljatine jaotus, mis põhineb naljade, eksituste, valede ning teeskluse vahelisel erinevustel.