1970

On liars, logic, and linguists

David D. Thomas
SIL-UND

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers>

Part of the [Linguistics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas, David D. (1970) "On liars, logic, and linguists," *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 14, Article 11.

DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol14.11

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol14/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

ON LIARS, LOGIC, AND LINGUISTS

by David Thomas

Epimenides the Cretan said, "All Cretans are liars." And he had been one-upped already 700 years previously by King David, who said, "All men are liars." Both of these paradoxes are demonstrably normal non-paradoxical statements in Greek, Hebrew, and English. And it would seem that many other logical paradoxes can probably also be shown to be linguistically either unnatural or non-paradoxical.

1) General logic appears to deal mainly or solely with discrete entities and quantities, and linguistics has painted itself into quite a few corners in following suit. I feel that it would be better in discussing languages to talk in terms of distinct but not discrete entities, in terms of clear nuclei and fading-off or fuzzy peripheries, with frequent peripheral overlap and indeterminacies in phonology, grammar, and semantics. Only the foci (or peaks) are contrastive. This in turn leads to degrees of truth or falsehood in natural languages.

Liars and truth-tellers thus are not sharply contrasting sets of people, but one may be known as a liar from telling only one untruth, though he tells the truth all the rest of the time, and one may be known as a truth-teller, though he tells only part of the truth, not the whole. The semantic nuclei of 'liar' and 'truth-teller' are distinct and contrastive, but do not indicate whether specific statements are lies or truth.

2) General logic seldom recognizes or uses grammatical rules above sentence level. Linguistics requires the formulation of rules on up to the discourse level, including ellipsis and intonation rules.

Apparently paradoxical statements thus can often be reconciled by calling on paragraph or discourse requirements to show their non-paradoxical or else non-grammatical character. Note the discourse requirements in the following:

"I am lying." - This as a total utterance would be unnatural in English; perhaps we could say it is non-communication or nonsense, because in English lying is a marker of a Response utterance which requires a verbal antecedent. It requires an immediately preceding or surrounding statement to which it refers and regarding which it is a value judgment. It requires completion (overt or covert) in some such form as "I am lying when I say that ...", just as, for example, non-final intonation requires completion by

LLL 1

another clause.

"You are lying." - This is common as a total utterance, but it requires an immediately previous assertion by a different speaker. This sentence can be a total utterance, but not a total discourse.

"I was lying when I said that ..." - This is normal.

"I will lie to him." - The subject matter of the proposed lie must normally be in the context.

"I am telling the truth." - This also requires completion by a previous assertion, on which this statement is a value judgment.

Similar to these are sentences such as "Why?" or "I know.", which require completion by a previous statement, i. e. they are bound response forms, not free assertion forms. And this brings us back to our paradoxes:

"What I am saying now is false." - If this is said in total isolation with nothing either before or after it, the natural English-speaking listener's response, after a pause waiting for the expected assertion to be made, would be, "But you didn't say anything." The grammatically required completion or resolution was absent.

Similarly with statements like at 4:35 saying, "What I say at 4:35 is false." They lack the required (stated or obtainable) completion. The simplest form of completion would be, "I am lying when I say ..." This type of completion when applied to statements such as the foregoing can lead to uncompletable infinite regress as "I am lying when I say that I am lying when I say that I am lying when ...", which is obviously unacceptable as an English sentence. This and similar paradoxes are clearly not natural English when seen in this light.

Perhaps Russell's intuition,¹ which is sound, can be re-

¹Russell, Bertrand. An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth.
New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1940.

stated to say that in languages (not "in language") many words have syntactic requirements and restrictions. Words with no syntactic requirements can stand alone freely as single word discourses (these are mostly exclamation words). Many other words require that there be a clause present or in ellipsis (most of our nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs would fit here, i.e. most of Russell's object words). Some other words require the presence of two clauses (mostly conjunctions, hence many of Russell's logical words). A few other words require the presence of an additional utterance in full, in ellipsis, or in embedding (words like true, false, lying, why?).

Thus invoking higher-level grammatical rules we can main-

tain that a language is basically a single unity with a single set of rules. What we learn from Russell and the liar is not so much the need for saying that English is an infinite set of different languages, but the need for recognizing the importance of stating the syntactic requirements of words as part of their basic description, along with the form, the meaning, the lexical co-occurrences, and the syntactic slot capability. With this factor in mind, one could not then say in English in isolation, "I am lying."

And with the recognition that in English all does not always mean 'every', and that liar does not mean 'always lying', one can then say honestly, linguistically, logically, and non-paradoxically, "All men are liars,"

David Thomas
Summer Institute of Linguistics
CORDS/REF/VOLAG
APO San Francisco, Calif. 96243
Submitted December 1969