

## Towards the Semiotics of (In)sincerity (A Few Preliminary Remarks)

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### Résumé de l'article

Dit simplement, la sincérité suppose l'intention d'exprimer la vérité, alors que l'insincérité suppose l'intention d'induire en erreur. Une personne sincère peut néanmoins être dans l'erreur et transmettre malgré elle une information fautive; de même, une personne non sincère peut transmettre une vérité malgré son intention d'induire en erreur. En outre, c'est la sincérité et non la vérité que vise à déceler un polygraphe. À preuve, une personne atteinte d'une déficience intellectuelle et qui croit être Napoléon échouera le test du polygraphe si elle répond par la négative à la question "êtes-vous Napoléon?".

Dans cet article, j'examine différents exemples textuels (tirés de divers genres : fiction littéraire, publicité, discours politique, plaidoirie, propagande) où l'on peut observer un tel clivage chez un énonciateur sain d'esprit : des auto- ou alio-accusations fantastiques sont présentées qui mettent en jeu des états mentaux de croyance et de non-croyance. Les principaux déclencheurs de ces clivages sont la peur et la colère – deux émotions qui se chevauchent souvent –, mais il existe également d'autres causes comme par exemple le désir érotique ou la licence esthétique.

# Towards the Semiotics of (In)sincerity (A Few Preliminary Remarks)<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Fact

Probably the most important changes in the humanities over the last half century concern how we now treat “facts”. Prior to that moment, there existed a common understanding that a fact was something both elementary and given, and that scholarly research began by gathering facts, interpreting them and making generalizations based on them. Consider, for instance, the domain of history with its many auxiliary sciences, such as archaeology, chronology, numismatics, source criticism, paleography and so on. All of these disciplines are concerned with identifying, sampling, describing and systematizing primary factual data, which, for a “true historian”, constitutes basic raw material. Historians can offer interpretations of different facts, formulate their own approaches to facts, but in principle they cannot manipulate or change them at will. With regards to factual data, theirs is a situation akin to a principle of journalism formulated in 1921 by C. P. Scott : comment is free, but facts are sacred.

The above state of affairs began to change during the 1960s in connection with the structuralist turn in the humanities and social sciences. Structuralists argued that reality is never immediately given, but is instead always already represented in some codified form. Even with such “pure” documents as photographs, we must keep in mind that the “what” and the “how” of such visual records always pertains to the photographer’s choice (angle, perspective, aperture, framing, etc., all affect what the “record” is and *how* it appears). The same holds true for verbal documents where decisions regarding what is important and worth “recording”, and what is deemed insignificant and thus consigned

to oblivion, relate to either the overarching cultural context or else, more simply, to the choices made by an author.

These topics were taken up by French structuralists, first of all Michel Foucault, as well as by representatives of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school (henceforth TMS). Foucault's books *The Order of Things : An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) are well known. In them, Foucault turns upside down the entire paradigm of the humanities. For him, archaeology (which now means excavation from the archives instead of digging the ground) concerns bibliographic description and recording; therefore, the archaeologist, for all intents and purposes, has turned into an archivist. Of central importance here is the idea that archaeology is no longer an auxiliary discipline providing merely a starting point for the historian; rather, it has become the crown jewel of historical studies. Lesser known, however, is the fact that Juri Lotman started to work on similar problems at approximately the same time, and although he never published a monograph on the topic, it is possible to find important related ideas in some of his short essays from 1966 (see Lotman 1966a, 1966b). Indeed, these themes have constantly attracted TMS scholars, and Boris Uspensky's short paper "*Historia Sub Specie Semioticae*" (1974) might be considered programmatic for this approach.

It is worth pointing out, however, that there are important differences in how these issues were treated and what conclusions were reached by the French scholars and by the TMS group, especially Lotman. For instance, in Foucault or Barthes reality dissolves itself in discourse : the researcher must endlessly move from one discourse to another, calling on different modes of discourse analysis. Reality peels off like the skins of an onion. For TMS scholars, on the other hand, the codified form in which facts make themselves known doesn't imply that they consist *only* of codes. To use an analogy, consider that the refracted light cast from a prism doesn't indicate that the prism is the source of this light; and, knowing the qualities of the prism, one may reconstruct how the light was before its refraction. For TMS scholars, the same can be applied to culture. Codes, attitudes, and so on, create the dispersion of facts; in order to reach them, one has to decode the utterances of discourse. Fact is not a given, elementary unit of the world, rather it results from efforts to reconstruct it. Neither Juri Lotman nor Boris Uspensky ever presented this theory in full; their goal instead was to use it as a working method. Nevertheless, some of the papers Lotman wrote in the second half of 1970s (1975 and 1979) contain not only case studies, but also include key methodological points.

To some degree, then, all factual sources can be said to be unreliable. Yet, from even the most unreliable of sources, the reality that is reflected may be semiotically reconstructed. Indeed, whereas Foucault and the other (post)structuralist thinkers dissolved reality into an endless chain

of discourses, Lotman sought on the contrary to exhibit the reality embedded in discourses. This did not stop Lotman from acknowledging the *textual* nature of the entire domain of human activities and behavior. For instance, he argued that everyday behavior ought to be treated as text, and that, as such, it entertains complex relationships with various other texts. Indeed, if everyday behavior-as-text both reflects and is modified by reality, Lotman also considered how its interactions with a host of other texts and textual models (including artistic ones) can in turn influence behavior and everyday life. For example, consider biographies or hagiographies of ancient heroes, which can be conceived as idealized reflections of individual lives. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, such idealized reflections served as prototypes for people in the public eye; yet inversely, at the same time, it also became possible to interpret the most daily activities through the prism of ancient heroism (see, Lotman 1975b, 1976, 1979b and especially 1994 – a posthumous book that summarizes earlier works). Other semiotic reconstructions by Lotman deserve separate mention, as when he proceeds from a strange text by Gogol to a reconstruction of Pushkin's unwritten work (1979c), or else when he uses a single word from one of Pushkin's drafts to reconstruct the entire outline of an unfinished work (1979d).

As stated above, facts must be reconstructed on the ground of texts. However, up to now, textual value and credibility has been appraised solely in terms of 'truth vs. falsehood (or lie)'. In what follows, I wish to draw the reader's attention to a very important aspect for the assessment of texts as it relates instead to the *sincerity* of the speaker or writer who produces them. The problem of sincerity has been considered, though only in passing, by analytical philosophy, primarily in speech-act theory (Searle & Vanderveken 1985 : 18-19 and especially Mann & Kreuter 2009) and in logic (see the work of Raymond Smullyan, 1978). Surprisingly, this issue has not been paid any special attention by historians. When I presented an early version of this paper in September 2014 at the seminar "Truth and Proof" organized by Tallinn University, I had a discussion with Carlo Ginzburg who claimed that, in the case of historical sources, the sincerity of an author is a pseudo-problem. To put it simply, one merely has to determine whether the producer of a text is telling the truth or not. To me, such understanding seems perplexing, especially in the light of Ginzburg's own work on the Inquisition (for example, 1981). Surely the interrogations by inquisitors and the answers given by those accused cannot be reduced to just "truth" and "lie", since oftentimes those charged pleaded guilty to the most fantastic crimes imaginable and did so with complete sincerity. It would be an inadmissible simplification of the matter to conclude that they simply lied or else were mistaken (moreover, Freud has shown us that insincerity cannot be reduced to lying). Sincerity itself is not an elementary or axiomatic notion, one not in need of further explanation (as Smullyan would have it) : a person can sincerely claim something, but beneath this claim may lie about

its subconscious refutation. Indeed, there are plenty of examples that show how one and the same person can make adversative declarations with complete sincerity (some such examples will be discussed below).

Sincerity, therefore, is a more extensive problem than truth. There exists a plethora of texts and phenomena, which, as was already demonstrated by Bertrand Russell, cannot be adequately accounted for by the duality of 'truth' and 'untruth': works of fiction and works of art in general, fantasies and revelations, dreams and visions, etc. One cannot discard Thomas More's *Utopia* simply on the ground that it isn't truthful and that it refers to a place that doesn't exist. For More's *Utopia*, and similar texts, constitute very significant testimonials: they convey important information to researchers studying the history of ideas and thought. The problem of sincerity also surfaces in political discourse: politicians, it is well known, frequently formulate their utterances so that they can be interpreted in various ways (compare Zolyan 2015). In what follows, I will attempt to analyze different instances of sincerity and insincerity.

## 2. Lie

I will begin with a slice of autobiography. When I was in elementary school, around the age of six, I had a number of misunderstandings with my classmates. On one such occasion I said something whose truth they doubted (I do not recall what it was, but I remember for certain that I was not lying). What was thought-provoking, however, was my classmates' reaction: when I denied their accusation of lying, they demanded that I show them my hands. I complied with the request, and the boys immediately seemed at a loss: they carefully examined my hands to see if I had my fingers crossed, and since they were not, this evoked cognitive dissonance to them. Yet even then they could not believe me and, resentfully, they left me alone. I could clearly hear them raising a hypothesis that I had my toes crossed (in Russian, toes are also fingers). I recall being quite perplexed by what had just happened; I could not understand it at all. It was only some time later that I learned that children believe that if you keep your fingers crossed while lying, your statement isn't really a lie or, at least, the lie isn't as bad. But this was a different scenario: my schoolmates believed that lying is automatically reflected in a bodily state. Such understanding seems peculiar, but a lie-detector works on the same principle and inquisitors also proceeded from this same premise. And we know that modern interrogators don't limit their observations to what a suspect says: they also observe their body language in the hopes that the latter will betray a lie. Yet in all these cases, it seems obvious that what is at stake isn't so much the uncovering of the truth (or of lies), but rather the detection of sincerity. Keeping this in mind, it would seem that a lie-detector device might be more aptly be called a "sincerity-detector". And should anyone harbor any misgivings about this, let them consider the following anecdote

from R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self*: "There is the story of the patient in a lie-detector who was asked if he was Napoleon. He replied, 'No'. The lie-detector recorded that he was lying" (Laing 1990 : 35). I will return to this story in section 5.

### 3. What is Truth?

This is the question Pontius Pilate asked Jesus and which was met with a silent answer. It is undoubtedly one of the most painfully difficult questions in all of philosophy. Most times it is avoided, and the problem is handled in a palliative manner, as with Aristotle who, instead of telling us what truth is, gives us conditions under which a given proposition can be called "true". The semantic theory of truth as correspondence was famously reworded by Alfred Tarski, and is now one of the leading approaches to this conception of truth in philosophy. According to Tarski's "material adequacy condition", a proposition "p" is true if and only if the situation in the world (or "state of affairs") is p. His example is as follows : "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. Tarski explains :

Let me point out that the phrase 'snow is white' occurs on the left side of this equivalence in quotation marks, and on the right without quotation marks. On the right side we have the sentence itself, and on the left the name of the sentence. (Tarski 1944 : 343)

Yet the matter at hand is not as simple as Tarski makes it seem. Truth – and this holds for Tarski's theory as well – does not depend on the language which serves to express it. Consider that Tarski first developed his "Convention T" theory in Polish before translating it into German, where the corresponding proposition is : "*Der Schnee ist weiß*". The meaning of "*Der Schnee ist weiß*" must be the same as "Snow is white". Consequently, if we use the German phrase as the name of the sentence "snow is white" ("*Der Schnee ist weiß*" is true if and only if snow is white), the theory still holds. However, if the German phrase is placed into a non-autonymic position, we clearly have a problem : "Snow is white" is true if and only if *Der Schnee ist weiß*.

### 4. Speech Acts

An understanding of truth as something which stands independently from (or beyond) language, or else precedes it, creates a number of difficulties. According to such a view, truth is a quality of the world (*i.e.*, of reality or something like it) and does not depend on how we express it in one language or another. Yet we know of instances – which were philosophically elucidated by J. L. Austin (1962) – where a given utterance neither reflects nor describes reality, but instead creates it or transforms it. I have in mind declarative speech acts and performative utterances, as well as declarative effects that can arise with utterances that possess other primary illocutionary aims. Another difficulty with

the idea of some text-independent or language-independent truth comes from the obvious, though largely unnoticed, fact that everything we know about the world, all the truths we possess, necessarily hold in some form or other of utterance.

Wherever truth is concerned, therefore, I hold it necessary to distinguish between four components : first, there needs to be a text or an utterance which serves to express a certain perspective with regards to some aspect or other of reality; second, there is the reality which this utterance expresses; third, there is the author/speaker who creates or emits the text for some purpose or other; and, fourth, there is the text's receiver(s) who have their own strategies for interpreting it. Strictly speaking, however, only the second component is relevant in matters of truth. Therefore, when discussing the third and fourth components we should instead speak of sincerity : is the speaker sincere in producing his utterance?; is the receiver doing all that he can in order to sincerely understand the message? If we come across an utterance, for example, 'snow is white', we must first understand the purpose that it serves for the speaker, the reason why it was expressed. For Tarski, this utterance is true if and only if it expresses a situation in the world (a "state of affairs"). Yet Tarski's actual purpose for writing down this statement wasn't to describe the quality of the snow, which was of no particular importance to him in this instance; rather, his aim was to solve a philosophical problem and thus exemplify his theory. It was Schleiermacher whose hermeneutics most firmly stated the principle that in seeking to understand a text one needs to understand its author, not the text. Thus for Schleiermacher, it wasn't the textual qualities of the Scriptures which were of importance, rather it was what Jesus intended to say.

## 5. Beyond Truth

It may happen that what an author seeks to accomplish is to tell the truth, but for some reason or other he fails in fulfilling his aim and the text he utters is misleading.

An outstanding popularizer of logic, Raymond Smullyan (1978) once created an imaginary world inhabited by knights and knaves. Knights are only able to speak the truth, while knaves always lie. However, the situation becomes more complicated when it turns out that both knights and knaves may go insane. An insane knight still believes he is telling the truth, but now he always lies; an insane knave still believes he is lying, but now he always tells the truth. Smullyan next imagines a person who visits the island of knights and knaves, and must solve different puzzles, but in order to do so he must ask the help of the locals. The first step is to make sure he knows who he is dealing with : a normal knight or knave, or an insane one. Now, should an individual in this world claim that he is not Napoleon and should a lie-detector show that he is

lying, although we know full well he isn't Napoleon, we would presume this person to be an insane knave. Doubtless, Smullyan himself would interpret this case in such a way (see Smullyan 1978 : 5). R. D. Laing, who is the source for this example, isn't so resolute however; for there are possibilities other than deliberate deception when interpreting this sort of situation (1990 : 35-36).

Again, what is important for us here is the problem of sincerity, which is of no particular interest to Smullyan in his demonstration. An insane knight believes sincerely that he is telling the truth even though his statements are false; an insane knave believes just as sincerely that he is lying while he is telling the truth. But real-world situations may turn out to be much more complicated than those in Smullyan's world. For instance, an author might sincerely intend to tell the truth, but fail. Yet unlike Smullyan's knight he need not be insane and may be able to understand his statement as false even though he has no intention to mislead.

The fact of the matter is that sincerity belongs to an altogether different category than truth. On one hand its reach is wider, encompassing various utterances that fall outside the purview of truth, such as orders, questions, promises, etc. For example, if a young man asks a young woman if she knows what the time is when his real purpose is to make her acquaintance, then the utterance "What time is it?" is not a lie, but it is also not entirely sincere. On the other hand, sincerity is a narrower concept than truth. An utterance which is a lie, or one that is nonsensical (without a referent in our actual world), can be nevertheless true in some possible world. Thus, a sentence such as "Pegasus is a winged horse" is true in the world of Greek myths. Sincerity is contextual in that it implies a domain of reference, and if a speaker starts to 'play around' with the latter (e.g., switching domains of reference), he or she automatically becomes insincere.

These aren't only textbook logical or philosophical problems. When cultural historians read texts, they try to understand the reality these texts reflect and the purposes their authors had for writing them. Carlo Ginzburg (1991) has for a long time performed in-depth analyses of inquisition protocols where witches confessed their completely fantastic crimes to inquisitors (see also Lotman 1998). Similar problems emerge if we study the Soviet political trials of the 1930s to 1950s : convinced communists could be heard admitting, after months of interrogation, that they were British, Japanese or Nazi German spies and had been working against the Soviet regime from the very beginning. In all such cases, a major concern in accessing the truth pertains to whether or not defendants are sincere in their confessions and if their interrogators actually believe their claims. Answers to these questions can be very nontrivial.

Analogous problems (though sometimes with less dire consequences)

arise in completely different spheres, as for example in the case of mystical texts or poetry, especially Romantic poetry. For the Romantics, the highest truth could not be expressed verbally. All the formulations of language are wrong, and yet only words can *lead* to the truth. In this context, words do not express, do not stand for the truth; they are only a sort of indication which can help the reader move towards the truth. “Can the inexpressible be subjected to expression?”, asked the great Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky at the beginning of the 19th century. Midway through the century, another Russian poet, Fyodor Tyutchev, answered : “An expressed thought is a lie”.

Here it would be too easy to ask, ironically, and in the spirit of the liar’s paradox, whether the sentence “An expressed thought is a lie” is itself true or false. I think a true Romantic would likely reply that the whole thing is untrue. However, there is no reason for us to feel superior. Zhukovsky and Tyutchev were completely sincere and they were sincerely trying to express the truth, although the outcome was... false. Whereas Postmodernists believe that “each reading is a misreading” – a maxim that can be generalized as “each interpretation is a misinterpretation” – the Romantics had a slightly different understanding : according to them “every expression is a misexpression”. But if truth can only be reached through interpretation, it is not disturbed by the fact that the message itself is a false message. For a true communication takes place between hearts, and is not dependent on words. Surely it is no coincidence that hermeneutics emerged during the Romantic era.

## 6. Sincerity

A common, one might even say normal understanding, is that sincerity is good, whereas insincerity isn’t. Studies on the language of totalitarian societies, some of which were conducted by journalists, have often focused on how such regimes suppress the truth and favor lies. This is the spirit in which Nobel prize winner Joseph Brodsky has written about the effects of totalitarianism on the Russian language. Czesław Miłosz, another Nobel laureate, examined the state of the Polish language during the Socialist period, as did, though in a manner that was more theoretical, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (1999), whose experience was not confined to the communist regime, but also included the Nazi occupation and, what is especially important, Western democracy. According to Kołakowski, totalitarian language not only characterizes totalitarian regimes, it may also be the cause of them. The upshot of this claim is that it would be misleading to believe that the problem of totalitarian language is present only in totalitarian societies. Western democracies may not be totalitarian yet, but elements of totalitarian language could thus lead them to become so.

Kołakowski is not the only thinker to conceive the matter in this manner. British writer George Orwell also believed in a reciprocal rela-

tion between language and totalitarianism : not only does totalitarianism favor a certain use of language over others, but the latter in turn creates conditions favorable for the rise of totalitarian regimes. In 1946 Orwell published *Politics and the English Language*, an essay in which he uncovers several “warning signs” of totalitarianism, not only in the domain of political discourse, but also in fiction and art criticism. What connects all of them is that, in each case, language doesn’t lead to the truth, rather it attempts to hide the truth behind clichés, worn metaphors and phraseology :

Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, “I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so”. Probably, therefore, he will say something like this : “While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement”. (Orwell 1968 : 136; see also Zolyan 2015)

It is important to stress once more that, in discussing the British situation, Orwell (who hadn’t yet published his novel *1984*) isn’t describing an actual totalitarian society. This is one of the tasks he set for himself in his famous novel. Indeed, *1984* develops the same idea, though this time in the context of a (fictional) totalitarian society. Here, he examines both sides of the equation by describing the mechanisms that connect totalitarianism and language use. The characters in Orwell’s world double-speak and double-think. They aren’t like Smulyan’s insane knaves, who know one thing but speak another. Unlike the knaves, Orwell’s characters are sincere and yet, at the same time, they both believe *and* disbelieve what they say. Reality, including its recording as history, changes constantly according to the party’s decisions; some individuals simply vanish from the historical records, while others appear, etc. The novel’s main character, Winston Smith, who works for the Ministry of Truth, participates in the fabrication of the past, all the while believing *and* not believing in the results of his work.

Orwell’s novel is a dystopia : it depicts a frightening, horrible world of dehumanization. Yet, the mechanisms of sincerity/insincerity described by him aren’t specific to totalitarian societies, and are not all to be condemned unequivocally.

## 7. Beyond Sincerity

“Politicians always lie”, such is the common understanding. It has even become a truism. In fact, politicians frequently use deceit mechanisms that are very close to those described by Orwell. Reality is rich in its variety, but political speeches tend to fasten to clichés, and the

scantiness of the message is often compensated by an overabundance of words. It is hard to catch a politician – if he or she is good – with a straight lie, but listeners often, and rightly so, question their sincerity. Let me illustrate this with two dramatic examples.

In 1999, when NATO planes bombed Belgrade, it was almost forbidden in the West to call this a “military action”. According to the “official” phraseology, it was a humanitarian intervention. Whence the sad irony that, as paraphrased, this was nothing short of a “humanitarian bombing”. This may well be the ultimate hypocrisy : the killing of people for “humanitarian purposes”. The problem is that the term “war”, which was a common, accepted, and widely used political term less than a century ago, has now become nothing short of a taboo in political discourse. Military activity is now so well regulated with various normative acts, that using the term has become almost impossible. For example, Estonia, like many other European countries, cannot, *literally speaking*, declare a “war” with another country. Of course, this is a noble principle in itself, but it has two unfortunate linguistic (and real-world) consequences. First of all, classical military activity, where the belligerent parties involve two (or more) nation states, now has to be called by some different name, if not a “humanitarian intervention” than a “counter-terrorist operation”, etc. Secondly, as a result of this “emancipation” from its direct denoted meaning (*i.e.*, a state of armed conflict between two or more groups), the word “war” is free to be used for other meanings. So it was, for example, that in 2001 George W. Bush could declare a “War on Terror” (after his father, George H. Bush, had declared a “war on drugs” in 1989), which led to ironic remarks from several observers : you cannot be at war with a phenomenon rather than a country! Yet for someone like myself, with a Soviet background, there is nothing unusual in this. For decades the Soviets had been at ‘war with alcoholism’ (it seems they lost!), and every autumn meant a “battle for the harvest”, etc.

Another instance of this phenomenon can be seen in the current situation in the Ukraine, where an invasion of troops from a neighboring country is taking place, troops who are actively engaging in battle. A number of political commentators have recommended the use of the term “war” to describe the situation in Crimea, since the events there have all the features of a war, all of them but one : it is not called a war by those involved! Of course, the Russian government is against naming this a war. The official position is that there are no Russian troops deployed in Ukraine. According to the Kremlin a number of Russian soldiers on leave have, in their spare time, travelled to Ukraine for some R&R. As a result, the government claims it is not involved in the Crimean situation and has no information to offer about what Russian soldiers do there on their spare time. We could call this “knaves talk”. First, one cannot take an optional leave from the Russian army, especially conscripted soldiers. Second, when Russian soldiers are given a leave, they need to inform

their superiors as to their whereabouts during their down-time. Third, while on holiday, Russian soldiers aren't allowed to take their weapons along with them, not to mention leaving for vacation driving a tank, an armored vehicle, or else borrowing an autocannon or a surface-to-air missile system BUK!

So, is it a war? Indeed it is *not!* The Ukrainian side equally avoids the term "war" in every possible way. Even a proposal to declare a limited martial law in the areas affected by military actions did not find support in their Parliament, and the Ukrainian president is categorically opposed to calling the situation a war. The fear is that by referring to the hostilities as a military conflict, an automatic escalation of the conflict will follow, including, for example, the interruption of diplomatic relations and the closing down of embassies, all of which would inevitably bring about several other dramatic and unpredictable developments.

## 8. Taboo

Among other things, this odd linguistic practice suggests that there are certain things one should not call by their name, as if it were taboo to do so. Naming in these cases could bring about negative consequences. We know that primitive societies sometimes believed in the magical power of words, but as we can see, such taboos also find their way in our modern societies as well. Such practices are universal and permeate our everyday lives, and not just in the political arena.

According to J. L. Austin and John Searle, declarations of war are declarative speech acts. In such instances, as previously mentioned, language not only reflects a certain situation in the real world, it also creates or produces it. Because of how they can impact the world, declarative speech acts are often framed by rules and institutions. For instance, only a limited number of individuals can name a child (depending on the culture, these could be the parents, a priest, the leader of a clan, etc.). Even more limited is the number of people who can pass legal verdict, make policy, declare wars, etc. In the case of such acts, speakers not only fulfill linguistic rules, they also fulfill the power and authority invested in them (often by another declarative speech act). But in addition to direct speech acts, there are also indirect ones, even in cases of declarative speech acts. Here too, the speaker's position is very important. In the case of the Ukrainian conflict, journalists in the Ukraine and elsewhere openly describe the fighting as a war, as do Ukrainian politicians who oppose the president's and the government's use of language. But as mentioned earlier, the Poroshenko government's insistence on characterizing its own military operations as "counter-terrorism" and circumventing the use of the term "war" is understandable : through their insincere use of language, Ukrainian authorities seek to avoid escalating the conflict into an all-out war, the prospect of which would be dire for the country.

Insincerity, however, is not characteristic solely of the speech and behavior of politicians and statesmen, rather it manifests itself throughout our entire lives and is even, one might argue, a rudimentary aspect of civilized behavior. The clearest everyday examples of insincerity are the rules of politeness and civility. These can be quite different from one culture to another, but the basic principle remains the same. Indeed, why is it that, whenever we meet our unpleasant neighbor, we ask “How do you do?” rather than inform him of our wish that he drop dead as quickly as possible, even though this may be our most sincere desire? There is a well-known Jewish joke about this : two persons meet, one asks : “how are you doing?”; the other responds : “don’t even hope”.

### 9. *Licentia Poetica*

One of the paradoxes of artistic mimesis is that no matter how particularly and explicitly a thing or event is shown or described, it is inevitably subjected to various constraints : in other words it is “phony”. Take eating. Although it is often shown or described in films and novels, its organic consequence – defecation – is rarely depicted. The great Spanish surrealist filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, playfully turned the situation around in *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), creating a world where sitting on a toilet is a social entertainment, while eating is an individual, almost shameful activity. In more “normative” works such constraints are matters of cultural conventions. The power of these conventions is such that one society’s illicit pornography can be another’s accepted erotica.

Let us now return to the issues raised by Orwell’s *1984*. At the end of the novel, the central characters, Winston Smith and his lover Julia, are broken. They have betrayed each other and now sincerely believe in the official ideology of Big Brother. It is not double-thinking anymore : there is just one reality left, and it is the official, state-sanctioned, one. Orwell, as mentioned earlier, wrote a dystopian novel. Its world shared many features with the Soviet Union, though it is an artistic construct and not, strictly speaking, a depiction of the Soviet Union. In a similar vein, Arthur Koestler’s novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940), which was written before the publication of *1984* and inspired Orwell, mentions neither the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany directly although both are vividly brought to mind, especially through the depiction of political trials during the late 1930s. The main character of the novel, Nikolay Rubashov, is an old revolutionary hero and a leading Bolshevik, who is accused of being a public enemy. The accusation is complete nonsense as far as he is concerned, but during the interrogations Rubashov admits to it. The interrogator uses the apparatus of modal logic, with which Rubashov has to agree. The trick here is that deontic modality is used in the function of alethic modality; normativity is interpreted ontologically.

This was a common practice in the Soviet Union : what cannot exist could not be spoken of and vice versa (think, for example, of the famous

statement made on live television in 1986 “There is no sex in the Soviet Union”!). Rubashov’s interrogator has a slightly different strategy, however. According to him, what Rubashov might have wished for, he did wish for, and what he wished for, he did *ipso facto* perform. All that is required, therefore, for the charges to stand, is that Rubashov be forced to admit that, theoretically, he might have wished for something.

Why does Rubashov go along with this twisted logic? The problem is that his own views are actually very similar to this form of reasoning : “Only a naïve bourgeois could believe that a person’s guilt or innocence can play a certain role when the fate of the whole world is at stake”. Moreover, the whole point here is to see how the project of building the “global state of happiness” is based on blurring the boundaries between truth and lie :

“Why is it so, that when we tell the truth, it always sounds like a lie? Why is the declared freedom muted by the curses of prisoners? Why are we covering the ground with corpses, while declaring a new life?”

“We brought you truth, and in our mouth it sounded a lie. We brought you freedom, and it looks in our hands like a whip. We brought you the living life, and where our voice is heard the trees wither and there is a rustling of dry leaves. We brought you the promise of the future, but our tongue stammered and barked...” (Koestler 1968 : 59).

According to Lenin (*The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, 1913) truth has the character of the Bolshevik party, thus a coherent Marxist ideology contains the whole truth in itself : “The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true” (Lenin 1973 : 43).

Of course, it is so, at least on the one hand. On the other hand, however, there is no such thing as “general truth”, truth is always concrete and that is what the Bolshevik party is teaching. This isn’t a hermeneutic circle, it’s a short circuit. Teaching is omnipotent, since it is true; truth is what corresponds to teaching. This is the general formula of all fundamentalisms, which *mutatis mutandis* applies equally for Islamic fundamentalism. It is not that “the snow is white”, if and only if the snow is white, but that the snow is white when the teaching says so. The teaching creates a parallel reality of its own, which is to be shared by all its adepts.

There is a recurring theme of dream and dreaming in Koestler’s novel. The unmentioned Soviet Union is the realization of the dream. Its reality is the reality of the dream.

## 10. Split Consciousness

By no means would I like to say that such dreaming is typical only of a communist society. My last example isn’t related to a society, but

to an individual, and this individual was very right-wing. I am talking about Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), a unique thinker who has sometimes been called the “Russian Nietzsche”. What characterizes Rozanov is an extreme lack of principles accompanied by sincerity and boldness. For instance, he dared address – before Freud – questions of sexuality that were completely impossible to discuss in philosophical discourse. A living contradiction, Rozanov was at once an extreme judeophile *and* an extreme anti-Semite. During the Beilis trial in 1911, when the latter was accused of “blood libel” (the ritual murder of a youth by the name of Andrei Yushchinsky for the purpose of using his blood during the Pesach), Rozanov published a series of papers, where he claimed that Jews definitely did such things, since they *could* do it, even *had* to do it (note the skewed shift in modalities and entailment!). It seems he held these false beliefs sincerely, and these writings were so important to him that in 1914 he collected them into a book, *Olfactory and Tactile Attitude of Jews to Blood*.

Five years later, however, on his death bed, Rozanov wrote a series of letters where he asked forgiveness from all his correspondents for his intentional and unintentional deeds. In these letters, he also apologized to Jews, admitting that he scorned them too much and unjustly (though he never admitted to lying or insincerity). He left half of his copyrights to Jews (Jews in general, not to an individual or organization, since he believed that Jews are part of a single collective!) and left his family under their care. Another letter might be considered an application or a request to be accepted among the Jews. In it Rozanov wrote that, for his last Passover, he wished to eat not the traditional Christian Passover food, but the “Jewish honest pike”. This was likely a significant compromise on his part since Rozanov was a *gourmand* and a big enthusiast of Russian Orthodox food, but again his wish appears to be sincere. That Rozanov would be content eating gefilte fish is one thing, but in light of his anti-Semitic views one wonders how he would have reconciled his appetite with his (false though sincere) belief that the Jewish meal would also include Christian blood!

My point, however, is that it would be misleading to think that in one case (which one?) Rozanov is sincere, while in the other, he is not. Carefully distinguished by Rozanov – just like Koestler’s Rubashov carefully separated the communist ideals from real life –, there appears to be different “realities” to which different discourses refer. Yet distinct as they are, these realities may be just as real in their effects – or better yet : *in the effects that sincerely believing in them induce* – as those of “real life”. For it is precisely those effects that make them “real” – whence the self-sustaining endurance of sincerely held clichés or otherwise false or racist beliefs.

There is a famous story about Daoist Master Chuang Chou (or Zhuang Zhou) :

Once upon a time, Chuang Chou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly fitting about, happily enjoying himself. He did not know that he was Chou. Suddenly he awoke, and was palpably Chou. He did not know whether he was Chou, who had dreamed of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Chou. Now, there must be a difference between Chou and the butterfly. This is called the transformation of things. (Mair 1994 : XXXIX-XL)

The idea is valid not only for night dreams, but also for daydreams. I believe that something similar happened to the fictional Rubashov and the real Rozanov. Master Chou called it the transformation of things; I would prefer to speak of the transformation or the splitting of consciousness.

### 11. Dream : A Non-Interpretation

I would like to conclude, just like I started, with a personal recollection, but this time not with a strange event that actually took place, but rather a strange dream I had while working on the first draft of this paper (in fact, it is a reason why the paper was written down in the first place). We have no conscious control over our dreams, of course. But this doesn't mean we can't learn anything from them.

The year might have been 1945. It is wintertime. I am visiting Hitler. The action takes place in a huge building in the monumental architectural style of the Third Reich and there are many empty halls and long corridors. There are three of us : myself, Hitler and his new wife. It is definitely not Eva Braun; it seems to me that she had an Italian name (but not Clara Petacci). Hitler and his wife are very lonely and sad people, though surprisingly they turn out to be rather pleasant company. In the dream Hitler shows no hatred, but his wife clearly hates her ex-husband. The biggest inconvenience for me is that I urgently need to go to the restroom, but I am not permitted. The guards are not Gestapo-type brutes, but rather Soviet style old ladies, who do not restrain me, but inform me that I am not authorized to go to the lavatory. What is important for the purpose at hand is that I remember asking myself in my sleep whether Hitler was *sincerely* pleasant to me? And I answered to myself in the dream : yes.

Let us now interrupt the dream and make some explanatory notes. I had never dreamt of Hitler prior to that night and I don't belong to those who often think about him, for better (sic) or for worse. Thus, I am not obsessed with him or what he represents. For me he impersonates the very thing that Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil". I am therefore not an admirer of Hitler in any possible way, but neither do I believe he was, in the literal sense of the term, an infernal monster. Infernal monsters don't exist in flesh and blood, though evil men do! But now note this : I do *not* think, by any means, that Hitler was a pleasant person. Yet in my dream I asked myself if I sincerely liked Hitler, and my sincere answer to myself was "yes". Where is (the) truth here? Where

does sincerity lie? I do not think that it would be right here to use a psychoanalytical approach — for example, Hitler standing-in for my repressed father figure, or else look for some sexual subtext (in part because I was dreaming at my present age and Hitler was of the same age as me; moreover, he had just married, and, I said, if one should look for a subtext, it would be rather more urological than sexual!). Rather, I prefer to examine the issue differently. The dream has another reality, other than wakefulness. And, the Hitler of my dream was definitely *not* the historical Hitler. But the “I” in the dream was also not identical to myself, as it were, that is to say the person whom I am while I’m awake. As a result, there’s nothing strange in having these two distinct “I” express different attitudes, or else to question what each of them sincerely express. Moreover, when I woke up after the dream, I did not have Chou’s problem : I did not confuse my sleeping and waking selves. Nonetheless, one thing still bothered me : who was the third ‘me’, the one who, in the dream, asked from my dream self, “am I sincere?”

## Notes

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## Abstract

Simply stated, sincerity is an intention to express the truth, while insincerity is an intention to mislead. A sincere person can be wrong and give false information, while an insincere person can make a mistake and speak the truth. Sincerity – and not the truth – is what is detected with a polygraph (a mentally ill person responding

to the question “Are you Napoleon?” with a negation may well register as lying on a polygraph test).

In this paper I bring different examples (from texts which belong to various spheres of discourse) that illustrate a splitting of consciousness in an otherwise mentally sane person : fantastic accusations (both self-accusations and accusations of others) are presented in a state of both belief *and* disbelief. Usual triggers for this phenomenon are fear and anger (which often occur together), but reasons may also be found in erotic desire or else in aesthetic licence, etc.

**Keywords** : Fact; Insincerity; Truth; Consciousness; Speech Acts; Understanding.

## Résumé

Dit simplement, la sincérité suppose l'intention d'exprimer la vérité, alors que l'insincérité suppose l'intention d'induire en erreur. Une personne sincère peut néanmoins être dans l'erreur et transmettre malgré elle une information fausse; de même, une personne non sincère peut transmettre une vérité malgré son intention d'induire en erreur. En outre, c'est la sincérité et non la vérité que vise à déceler un polygraphe. À preuve, une personne atteinte d'une déficience intellectuelle et qui croit être Napoléon échouera le test du polygraphe si elle répond par la négative à la question “êtes-vous Napoléon?”.

Dans cet article, j'examine différents exemples textuels (tirés de divers genres : fiction littéraire, publicité, discours politique, plaidoirie, propagande) où l'on peut observer un tel clivage chez un énonciateur sain d'esprit : des auto- ou alio-accusations fantastiques sont présentées qui mettent en jeu des états mentaux de croyance *et* de non-croyance. Les principaux déclencheurs de ces clivages sont la peur et la colère – deux émotions qui se chevauchent souvent –, mais il existe également d'autres causes comme par exemple le désir érotique ou la licence esthétique.

**Mots-clés** : Fait; insincérité; vérité; conscience; actes de langage; compréhension

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