

Why do we lie to please others?

The role of prosocial deception in the communicative project

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ABSTRACT

Prosocial deception, also known as ‘white lies’, is the most current type of lie in our everyday interactions. This paper discusses its role in maintaining a good communicative project as defined by Tomasello (2008). First, the different types of deception are described, next their underlying functions are discussed. Deception in general helps regulating the emotions in three ways, among which manipulating the emotions of others (Hrubes, Feldman, & Tyler, 2004). I argue here that prosocial deception belongs to this category, with the specificity that it aims to protect the other. To visualize the role of deception in communication, the Affective Language Comprehension model by Van Berkum (2018) is adapted to show the discrepancy between the communicator’s actual social intention and the receiver’s perception of it: in a successful white lie, the receiver stays unaware that the communicator actively intends to ‘save the project’. I therefore argue that prosocial deception fulfils the role of communication softener. The interpretation of the intention behind white lies remains however controversial and I propose that a circular categorization should replace the current continuum classification of deception types. Moreover, the different outcomes of unsuccessful white lies remain a path for further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lies have been argued to constitute approximately 20% of adults’ social interactions on a daily basis, from which most are used with prosocial intentions (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). Deceiving is thus an inherent part of our communicative behaviors. Children also learn how to deceive, and studies have shown an increase in deception behaviors as they grow up (Lee, 2013). Nevertheless, there are different types of lies, with different functions. Some research targets deception from an acquisition point of view to predict different parameters (Talwar & Lee, 2008), while other studies focus on specific cases where deception tends to be positively perceived or even required, such as politeness contexts (Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007).

However, in light of the literature, it seems that prosocial deception has not been extensively researched, especially with regards to its functions in communication (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014; Methasani, Gaspar, & Barry, 2017; Williams, Moore, Crossman, & Talwar, 2016). Yet, understanding prosocial lying abilities can benefit research on individuals with social deficits (Williams et al., 2016), and can be an important variable in fields such as economics, psychology and management (Methasani et al., 2017). The question of interest is therefore the following: What is the role of prosocial deception in maintaining a

good communicative project? The present discussion is based on Van Berkum's (2018) Affective Language Comprehension model, which will be broadened as to map it on Tomasello's (2008) Cooperative Model of Human Communication. This model will thus include expression as well as comprehension while illustrating a successful white lie.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, deception is defined together with its relation to emotion. In section 3, the functions of deception are discussed, first as a general behavior and then focusing specifically on prosocial deception, based on the Emotion Processing Model (Struiksmma, 2017). In section 4, the communicative project is defined according to Tomasello (2008). Subsequently in section 5, I introduce the Affective Language Comprehension model (Van Berkum, 2018) and present an adaptation to the current topic based on the literature to represent how communication partners compute white lies. This literature review ends with a discussion (section 6).

2. DECEPTION AND EMOTION

First of all, *deception* is defined, according to Hrubes, Feldman and Tyler (2004, p. 232), as "any act designed deliberately to create a false belief". The Oxford Dictionary adds to this definition that this act is especially performed for personal gain¹. To describe the mechanisms by which deception occurs, Hrubes et al. (2004) take as a starting point the example of a teenager burying their parent's car in a snow bank. Deception may then occur either by withholding, fabricating or distorting information. The first case would be for instance the teenager hiding the fact that he or she was under the influence of alcohol. In the second case, the teenager could say that this was the only way to avoid a car coming at full speed from the other way, and therefore make up an excuse. In the third case, information can be exaggerated, such as saying that the storm was blinding whereas it was actually gently snowing, or by minimizing the truth, such as admitting having had a beer while having actually had several. Such deception can take place via verbal channels but also non-verbal ones, such as by putting up facial expressions which are not really felt.

There are of course many different reasons for deceiving. In this example, deception is used to hide an unintentional mistake. Someone could also want to deceive to hide a voluntary transgression or to get access to information. Besides, one could lie just to please their interlocutor on an aspect that is independent from themselves. Still, drawing a line between the different categories seems inadequate as the reasons might be overlapping or combining different purposes. Williams et al. (2015) therefore propose to order deception types on a continuum going from antisocial deception on one extreme through socially neutral deception and to prosocial deception on the other extreme. The authors define antisocial deception as following: "These lies are told to protect oneself from discovery of a transgression or other self-motivations" (Williams et al., 2015). This infers that those lies benefit the liar in the social interaction. On the other hand, Williams et al. define prosocial lying as being told "for the benefit of another individual". They are thus intrinsically altruistic and are usually told to spare the other's feelings. Examples of

¹ Oxford Dictionary. Definition of deceive. Retrieved June 6, 2018, from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/deceive>

such white lies are saying: 'I was just about to call you!' to someone you should have called a long time ago, or 'It's delicious!' about a dish that does not please you.

A note must be said on the terminology used in this typology. Since lying is a communicative behavior, it is, as a general concept, prosocial in the sense that communication is based on a will to unite. In this paper, however, Williams et al. (2015) distinction is assumed, which is mainly based on the recipient of the lie and on the social intention: defined as 'anti-' or 'neutrally social' are lies uttered with the intention of minimizing the effect of the liar's action on the social environment (e.g. reduce the recipient's anger). They are egoistically rather than altruistically motivated, as opposed to 'prosocial' lies. The function of lies will be further detailed in section 3.

Lying, and expressing one's feelings, is related to the understanding of 'display rules', which refer to social conventions as to how to display one's emotions physically and verbally (Williams et al., 2016). According to Saarni (1979), those display rules are the pivot between 'overt expressive behavior' and 'covert emotional experience'. They describe four ways for dealing with emotion depending on the requirements from the context, namely intensification, minimization, neutralization and dissimulation/substitution. Deception may consequently arise from this emotion-expectation contrast. They will be mentioned later in relation to Tomasello's (2008) communication model.

In the next section, deception will be discussed with reference to the functions it serves intra- and interpersonally in the domain of emotion regulation. The expressive part will be discussed in section 4 in connection to the theoretical grounds for the communicative project.

3. FUNCTIONS OF DECEPTION

3.1 DECEPTION: AN EMOTION REGULATION STRATEGY

As Hrubes, Feldman and Tyler (2004) describe it, deception has three main purposes while fulfilling the function of regulating emotions: 1) conformity, 2) protection and enhancement of self-views, and 3) manipulation of the emotions of others. According to the authors, individuals would resort to conformity (1) in order to avoid rejection, or at least to prevent anxiety-related feelings in response to being perceived as different. This function applies especially when people pretend to agree with norms settled by others. The other members of the group are then being deceived regarding the individual's personal beliefs. The regulation of emotion applies at the level of the potential consequences of deviating from the majority. Secondly, individuals can use deception in order to protect and enhance self-views (2). This defensive mechanism can be used to prevent embarrassment, disapproval or, by contrast, to give a good impression, especially when the individual is presented with information that is threatening to their image. This function regulates the way individuals appear to themselves and to others. The third function of deception, manipulating the emotions of others (3), is mostly used to influence the general emotional perception of a situation in order to regulate one's own emotional experience. The earlier example from Hrubes et al. (2004) of the teenager burying the car in the snow is such a case, as he or she will try to inhibit anger on the parents' side to avoid experiencing the emotional consequences. Nevertheless, this third function can be argued to be related to the previous one (i.e. protecting

and enhancing self-views) since the goal of enhancing self-views is ultimately to experience positive affect instead of negative affect (Hrubes et al., 2004).

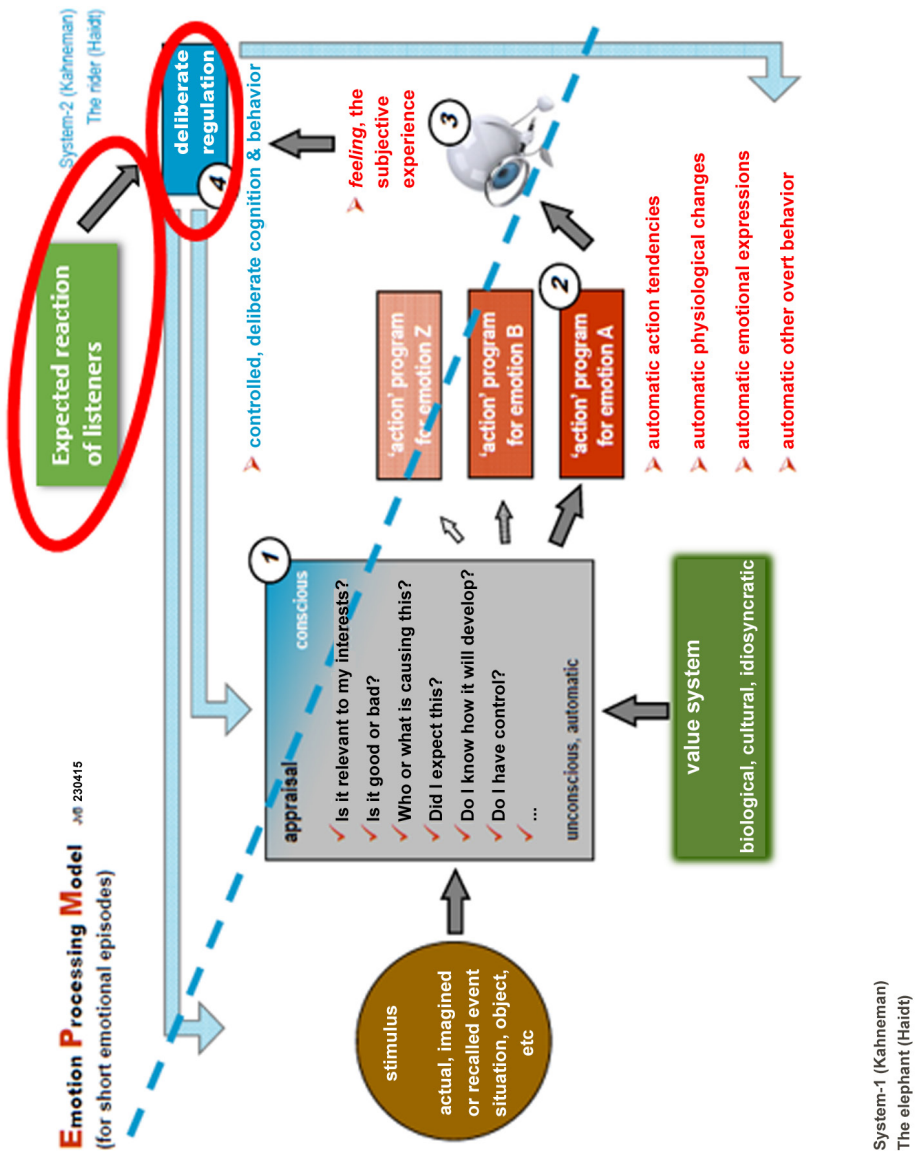


Figure 1: Emotion Processing Model (adapted from Struiksm, 2017). This model shows an account of how emotional responses follow from a stimulus, being activated in different steps spread across conscious (above the dashed line) and unconscious mechanisms (below the dashed line). The feature 'expected reaction of listeners' is added to the original model.

The function of deception can be visualized better thanks to the Emotion Processing Model (Struiksm, 2017) illustrated in Figure 1. In this model, four main steps in emotion processing are represented: appraisal (i.e. the automatic assessment of the stimulus), ac-

tion programs for automatic responses (which can be compared to spontaneous trigger for situation-appropriate reactions), feeling the subjective experience (where the emotion enters the conscious domain) and deliberate regulation (which sends conscious feedback for an appropriate final response). The dashed line separates unconscious processes (below, up to step 3) from conscious processes (above, steps 3 and 4); the appraisal (step 1) is partly conscious as it receives feedback from the deliberate regulation (step 4). The regulation function of deception occurs at step 4 (circled). However, in deception, as discussed previously, the decision is first and foremost influenced by the expected reaction of the listener. For this reason, this feature (expected reaction of the listener) was added to the model. Another important aspect is the value system: it influences the appraisal directly. Depending on the clash between, on the one hand, the objective situation and the value system of an individual, and on the other, on an undesired but expected reaction from the listener, one can decide to use deception.

3.2 PROSOCIAL DECEPTION

In social interactions, specific functions are fulfilled by prosocial deception. This section focuses on those functions and on features related to the perception of prosocial deception. Furthermore, the effects on among others trust and empathy are discussed with regards to both the communicator and the receiver of the lie.

As mentioned previously, this type of deception is altruistically motivated. The main function of white lies is consequently a protective function (Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). Reasons for protection are developed in Kashy and DePaulo (1996) and include psychological reasons, such as the protection of someone from embarrassment, from conflict, from disapproval, or from having their feelings hurt, and protection of their interests, such as to be accommodating, to avoid physical punishment or to protect their property or safety.

In a series of economics experiments, Levine and Schweitzer (2015) challenged the traditional conviction held by philosophers and psychologists that deception prevents trust. Thanks to several 'trust games' and 'rely-or-verify games' where a counterpart told a participant either an altruistic lie or a selfish truth about a flip of coin that defines the amount of money both parties earn, they showed that white lies actually enhance trust. In another series of experiments by Levine and Schweitzer (2014), a participant learned about a situation in which an altruistic lie or a selfish truth was told about a random number (which defined the characters' payment) and then had to respond to a judgment questionnaire. It came out that altruistic liars were perceived as more ethical compared to people who answered honestly but hurt their interlocutor.

In addition to that, white lies are linked with the ability to feel empathy (Williams et al., 2016). In children, the ability to tell and maintain prosocial lies, as tested with the 'disappointing-gift paradigm' (where children are given a gift and subsequently have to answer two different experimenters' questions about it) proved to reflect a higher control of emotion regulation (Williams et al. 2016). Those findings correlate with a study by Sodian and Frith (1992) which showed that children with developmental and social

impairments (autism, cognitive delay) had difficulty deceiving. Insight in the functions related with prosocial deception might therefore help understand people who struggle with social interaction and how low skills in prosocial lie-telling might affect them (Williams et al., 2016).

Although the prosocial lie is mainly told to regulate the other's emotions, it can also have the secondary function of avoiding conflict and therefore benefit the liar as well. This remark is mentioned in several other studies (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015; Ennis, Vrij, & Chance, 2008). In their experiment, in which participants kept a diary for a week about their social interactions and deceiving behaviors, Kashy and DePaulo (1996) indeed use a scale to rate the degree to which the liars were either trying to protect themselves or their communication partner. Based on Williams' et al. (2015) interpretation of deception as a continuum, white lies could be interpreted as falling into the third of Hrubes' et al. (2004) general functions of deception, i.e. manipulating the emotions of others, described under 3.1. This function would thus be broadened to include, besides egoistically motivated intentions, manipulation performed with the intention to please others. This explains the positive although ambiguous status of prosocial deception.

4. THE COMMUNICATIVE PROJECT

Why prosocial deception can be considered more ethical than selfish honesty can also be understood from the theoretical perspective of Tomasello's (2008) Cooperative Model of Human Communication (Figure 2, see page 19). Prosocial lies indeed appear to be described at an ambiguous position in communication, between the disregarded behavior of deception and the positively evaluated display of commitment to one's interlocutor. Tomasello's model precisely expresses how the communication partner receives and perceives an individual speaker's goals and stresses the role of both participants. The goals are concepts linked to individual values and elicit more specific social intentions, which imply sharing (verbal or non-verbal) information. At the other end of the communication process, the receiver eventually complies with the communicator's goals. The concept of 'display rules' (Saarni, 1979) can be understood here as the manual for the way to share an emotional goal.

However, in order for communication to be successful, Tomasello (2008) mentions the importance of the Gricean maxims, which are the basis for the communicative project. Prosocial lies arise from the combination of two of them. The tension between social and moral rules of communication (Williams et al., 2016), or between justice and care (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014) comes de facto from the demands of *Grice's maxim of quality* and the *Meta-maxim of general cooperation* (Lakoff, 1973). The former requires speakers to be truthful: listeners expect their communication partners not to misinform them. Lying is thus a violation of this principle. By contrast, the latter, equally important maxim, requires the communication partners to help, and not harm, each other, and is especially applicable in politeness contexts. This is expressed in most cultures by a less negative attitude towards prosocial lies than towards antisocial lies, and 'little white lies' are accepted when appropriate (Williams et al., 2016).

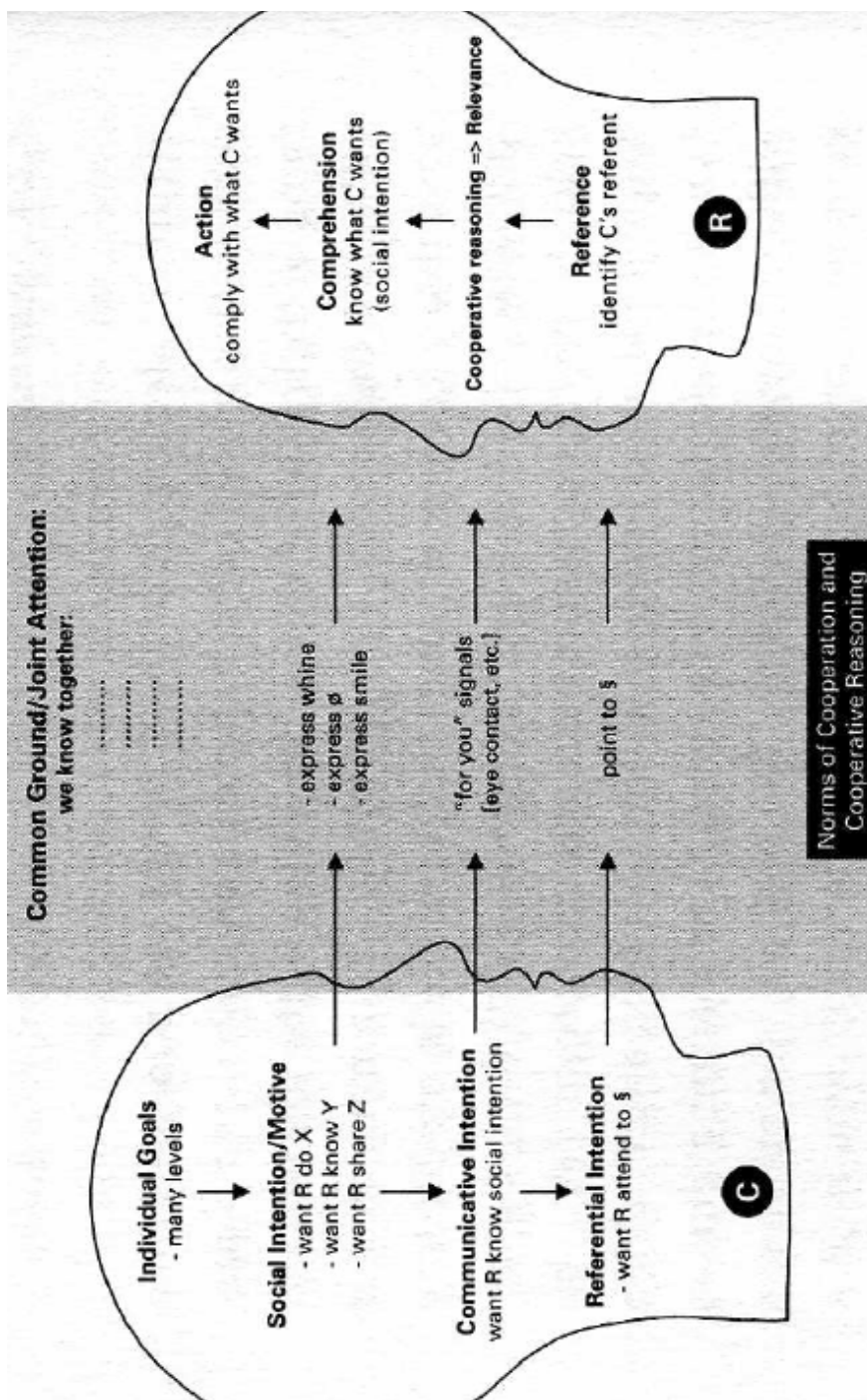


Figure 2: Cooperative Model of Human Communication (Tomasello, 2008, p. 98). The model shows how interlocutors (receivers, R) perceive the goals shared by communicators (C), relying on a Common Ground by means of verbal or non-verbal signals.

5. AFFECTIVE LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION MODEL

The Affective Language Comprehension model (ALC) is developed by Van Berkum (2018) to combine two systems that run, possibly in parallel, during the processing of language: the incremental code-cracking by Jackendoff (2007) and Tomasello's Cooperative Model of Human Cooperation (2008). This model contributes to the understanding of prosocial deception by representing the way people infer from linguistic and non-linguistic input at different levels of interaction. However, as Van Berkum remarks, in the original model the mental processes and the associated retrieved representations are only shown for the receiver (partner Y). For this reason, the model is adapted here as to include the communicator's (partner X) actual representations and intentions. The resulting two-sided model (Figure 3, see page 21) can be compared to a detailed view of Tomasello's communicator's and receiver's representations.

This model shows the communication partners' representations for the utterance 'You look lovely in that!'. As explained by Van Berkum, the computational processes of the participants draw upon and add to the (emotional) information stored in the Long Term Memory traces (LTM) to extend it with each communicative act. The process occurs as in Tomasello's (2008) model, downwards on the side of the communicator and upwards on the side of the receiver. At each stage, an Emotionally Competent Stimulus (ECS, smiley face) can be activated by the active representations the participant computes, and trigger emotional responses (representations are conscious or unconscious). This model makes visible that, in the case of a prosocial lie, there is a discrepancy between communicator and receiver's perceived social intentions.

Let us assume that X and Y are good friends, or at least on good terms with each other. As main communicative project, which is the goal of the interaction between X and Y, there is the will that this situation remains so. It occurs that participant Y bought a new dress; this is the situation X is referring to and that Y adequately infers thanks to their common ground. The social intention is therefore, for X, to show their friend that they have noticed this new purchase. However, the tension occurs at this level: participant X finds the dress very ugly. Following the Meta-maxim of general cooperation (because the communicative project is to maintain the relationship), participant X will decide to save the project and therefore not to hurt their friend's feelings. Among the three major social motivations discussed by Tomasello (2008), which are requesting, informing and sharing, X will chose for sharing and, for that reason, want to elicit feelings in Y so they can share them afterwards, as described in van Berkum (p.15). X's stance will also be friendly towards Y. The signs that X will send to Y are the sentence made of nice words in addition to positive prosody and facial expression. By means of cooperative reasoning, the receiver will compute the positive signs and the friendly stance, and link them to the referential intention and infer that X's social intention is to pay Y a compliment. If the white lie was successfully performed, Y will comply with X's communicative project and act consequently, i.e. maintain the good relationship.

By successfully performing their white lie, the communicator could fulfill their individual goal, but also regulate the receiver's emotions as well as the tone of the conversation. Consequently the communicator's own emotions are regulated as well by avoiding being the

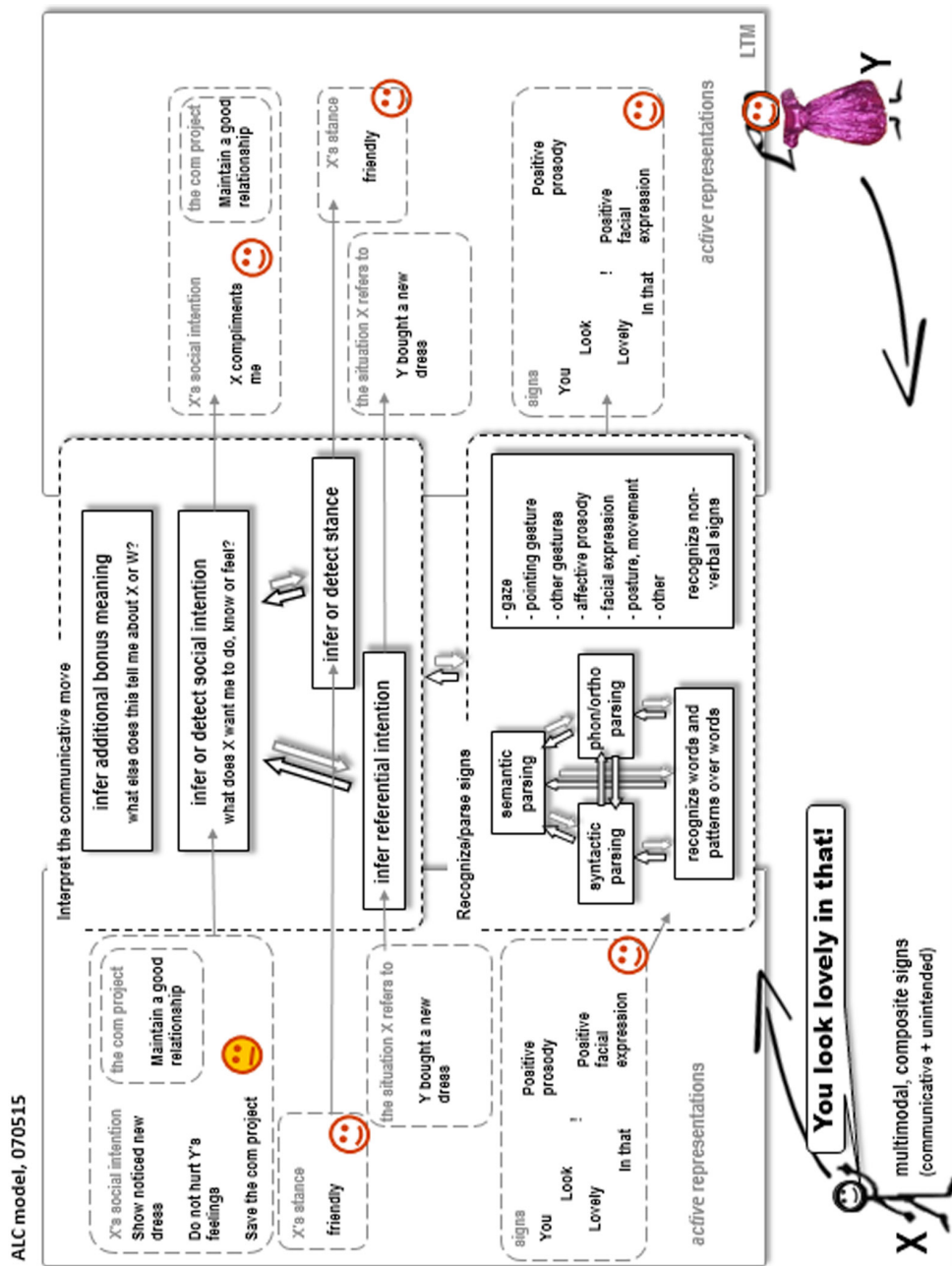


Figure 3: Affective Language Comprehension model (Van Berkum, 2018) extended to represent speaker X's communicative intentions. Com project = communicative project; LTM = Long Term Memory trace; Smiley face = Emotionally Competent Stimulus.

target of negative affect and thus appearing nice. Nonetheless, regulating the communicator's emotions was not the primary function of the deception because the intention was to show commitment to the receiver.

In this case, it can be argued that there is no specific bonus meaning; the cell was therefore taken out of the model. The bonus meaning is an inference made by the receiver that is not intentionally conveyed by the communicator, such as specific information about speaker X's person or the situation. There is a situation, however, where a bonus meaning could be assumed. When the communicator does not successfully communicate their intention to save the project and that the white lie fails, the receiver can infer from the utterance a part of the communicator's intention that was not intended to be perceived: not to hurt Y's feelings. The intended and the perceived intentions become thus identical. Nevertheless, the receiver can infer a bonus meaning about X depending on the situation: that X is a caring person for instance or, by contrast, that X is not reliable or that X does not take the relationship seriously enough to be honest. As a consequence, the function of emotion regulation would take an unexpected turn, strongly contingent on factors such as mood, context, relationship and culture.

6. DISCUSSION

In this paper, the concept of *deception* is defined and connected to emotion through the functions it fulfills in communication. Deception indeed occurs to serve a function of emotion regulation, which can be divided into three main functions: 1) conformity, 2) protection and enhancement of self-views and 3) manipulation of the emotions of others (Hrubec et al., 2004). Prosocial deception is mainly associated with protection of and commitment to the communication partner. Along those lines, it can be argued to fall into the category of manipulating the emotions of others, yet with the important distinction that the social intention will benefit the receiver rather than the communicator. By merging Tomasello's Cooperative Model of Human Communication (2008) and Van Berkum's Affective Language Comprehension model (2018), it becomes visible that the tension occurs at the level of the social intention: the communicator does not provide the receiver with the necessary signs to infer the whole social intention but rather misleads them into inferring an intention that is in line with the communicative project.

Going back to the initial research question: 'What is the role of prosocial deception in maintaining a good communicative project?', it seems that prosocial deception precisely maintains the communicative project in situations where it could fail. It is the consequence of the Meta-maxim of cooperation, requiring interlocutors to help and not harm each other. Prosocial deception's role is to regulate emotions, mainly those of the receiver but the emotional tone of the situation as well, in a way to avoid conflicts. It could be compared to the softener of social interactions by avoiding negative emotions.

A possible direction for further research could be to analyze the effect of failing white lies across cultures. As Williams et al. (2016) mentioned, societies often evaluate lies based on the intention behind them, which is why white lies are often more positively evaluated. As a white lie fails, however, the social intention of the communicator is unmasked for the receiver. Nevertheless, depending on how deception and prosocial deception are perceived, the receiver can feel offended or still recognize the positive intention, and accept the white lie for social purposes or not. As a result, different emotions would be triggered along with different ways to deal with them in a social context.

It must be noted, however, that the social intention behind white lies can also be subject to evaluation on a continuum. Although white lies are uttered principally to please or protect the receiver, the communicator can have different degrees of altruism, which can also modify the social intention. Taking back our example of person Y buying a new dress, the communicator could want to show Y that they noticed the dress, still in order to make Y feel positive emotions but, ultimately, (pathologically) intending to be well perceived. This raises the question whether deception could not be represented on a circular continuum rather than on a linear one: both extremities of the continuum would meet and close the circle, allowing prosocial types to merge directly with antisocial types rather than only with socially neutral ones. All types of ambiguous situations would thus be possible. Further research can therefore focus on the intention behind such subtle situations to help detect manipulations or help people who struggle with disordered social skills. ■

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