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Truth

Truth has been studied anthropologically and philosophically from three principal perspectives: the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and the social theory. Several types of non-truth have also been attractive research topics: falsity, non-truth (deception and lying), and truth-irrelevance. Each perspective relies on a view of meaning and pragmatics, and supports its viewpoint either formally or ethnographically.

In the correspondence theory, truth is a matching of words to world. A closely related category, "sincerity," is a matching of words to internal states. Evaluation of the truth of a given utterance depends on understanding of three things: word(s), world, and the relationships between them. These are among the abiding topics of many branches of Western philosophy: ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and semantics. Thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, Alfred Tarski, and Ludwig Wittgenstein have written about truth. Kant proposed a distinction between synthetic truths, which depend on contingent facts, and analytic truths, which depend only on components and their logical relationships. Truth-conditions (analytic truths) are central to formal propositional and predicate calculi in which meaning may be represented by logical operators.

The coherence theory of truth suggests that truth derives from coherent relations within a given social, semantic, and epistemological framework. In this theory, presupposition and rationality are critical for understanding truth. Truth or falsity of religious ideas or metaphysics may be assessed only within a given system. Studies of religion and explanation such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard's work on Azande notions of magic and witchcraft attempt to demonstrate that a positionless model of truth cannot apply to social life. Philosophers of science also often operate within this theory.

The social theory of truth relies on the understanding of relations of power and control over knowledge and claims to possess truth. Plato and Machiavelli proposed the usefulness of social superiors controlling the truth that must be adhered to by inferiors. In this model, truth has been discredited

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from many directions. Postmodernists, feminists, and Foucaultians criticize claims to objectivity, master narratives, and regimes of truth. If knowledge is power, then claims to have knowledge of the truth—transcendent, objective, universal, panchronic, biological, scientific—obscures others' rights to their own truths. Powerful social sectors often claim to possess the truth; how truth claims serve power, often in religion, economy, politics, and science, is a central question for some anthropologists.

Though it might seem that truth occupies only theologians and philosophers and lawyers, all societies must ground their interactions in some sort of validation and provide limits to play. Linguistic anthropological research on evidence and responsibility demonstrates widespread concern for knowing the sources of remarks and their origins/transmissions/consequences. People attempt to measure the truth and lies of others, seeing into their souls or minds or hearts through polygraphs, body language, discourse, psychotherapy, and oracles. Quests for truth(s) abound in human life, sometimes through language.

Non-truth takes many forms. Deception is pervasive throughout all life forms, if we extend this term to include camouflage and protective coloring, expansion to appear bigger, mimicry of an enemy's cry, and so forth. Lies and lying have been explored by philosophers, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, primatologists, and linguistic anthropologists. Moral considerations may involve many matters other than abstract truth. Politeness phenomena may include non-true language uttered for purposes other than those of conveying or seeking information. "What a beautiful dress" may be uttered for pragmatic reasons such as furthering relationships or giving face rather than for literal conveying of true opinion. Sincerity and intentions are in some societies, such as China and Japan, assessed apart from their match between inner state and words. In China moral valuation depends on one's willingness to act appropriately in context; speakers' inner state or desires are irrelevant. Most important are the consequences of utterances, just as of any other act; responsibility is critical, but truth may not be.

Truth-irrelevance in language use is usually traced to Bronisław Malinowski's notion of phatic communion. He argued that in the Trobriands, language (for example, in greetings) was often used to emphasize contact between speakers, but it conveyed no information. J. L. Austin showed that language performs rather than describes actions. Austin's felicity conditions require sincerity on the part of the speaker. The importance of sincerity and intentions is central to an ideology of language that desires access to a self lying deeply within. In societies where selves are constructed differently, access to them is viewed differently and the role of sincerity is not central. Paul Grice's "Maxims" posit that social actors operate with a tacit shared contract to be informative; violations of maxims are interpreted as conveying other kinds of information. His implicitly universal claim motivated anthropologists to demonstrate how different maxims operate in different field sites. Elinor Ochs, for instance, showed that in Madagascar it was undesirable to be informative; the burden fell on women to provide information in some contexts.

Much of linguistic anthropology's relationship to truth is to show how many things language accomplishes *in addition to* or *instead of* expressing the truth and how truth and sincerity occupy variable roles across cultures. Language, produced collaboratively in social interaction, can convey a dazzling variety of truths and nontruths—things displaced in time and space, hypotheticals, counterfactuals—in greatly varying ways. Human beings create characters who have never lived, or animals like unicorns or dragons that live in every generation's imagination. We tell outright lies, either for our own personal benefit or for some greater good or just for fun. We can be mistaken or misunderstood; we can have imperfect transmission or imperfect mastery of a language. We speak of our gods, who are different from other people's gods. We can aspire to the purely referential language of mathematics and logic in which p = p. We play with rhyme or rhythm or repetition; we while away the hours spinning yarns or telling legends or playing the dozens. Language does much more than simply describe the conditions of the world.

Linguistic anthropologists contribute to an understanding of the variety of human behavior by recording and analyzing the many things people do with words—which in some times and places include "telling the truth." By attending to matters beyond truth, we arrive at much of the joy and the passion—and tension—involved in human interaction. Linguistic anthropology's challenge remains to explore the rich diversity of beliefs and practices regarding truth and its manifold variations (performance/stories/deception/lies/gossip)—and to account for similarities, if any. No society can permit complete disregard for responsibility to some physical reality, yet how each society conceives of the consequences and forms of non-truth differs greatly. All these contribute to an understanding of what it is to be human.

(See also *act, inference, intentionality, maxim, plagiarism, prophecy*)

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