

What to call the denials?

The denials of polygamy led people to believe one thing (Joseph and other leaders were *not* marrying more than one wife) while the exact opposite of that thing was occurring (Joseph and other leaders *were* marrying more than one wife). But leaders made these denials, at times, using word definitions and codes that were only familiar to the Saints even though the leaders knew that others would interpret the *meaning* of those words very differently.

What are the appropriate words to use when speaking of the deceptiveness of these denials?

Definitions

I compiled a list of definitions from Merriam Webster (MW), Wikipedia’s entry on lying (WK), and the Gospel Principles (GP) manual’s discussion of lying here.

Given these definitions, Joseph Smith and other leaders were, *at a minimum* guilty of **deception** and **lying**—the denials easily fit within the usage of those terms as defined and used *by all three sources*.

In addition, the following words seem to be perfect descriptors of the denials:

- equivocation (MW)
- prevarication (MW)
- bullsh*t (WK)
- contextual lie (WK)
- disinformation (WK)
- half-truth (WK)
- misleading (WK)
- dissembling (WK)
- weasel word (WK)

Evasions, mental gymnastics, circumlocations?

Words and phrases that Hales references like “evasions”, “mental gymnastics”, “circumlocations”, and “language with coded double meanings” capture the semantic process used, but not the intended effect on the audience of those denials. Leaders, including Joseph Smith, did not *just* evade, did not *just* talk around issues, did not *just* use coded language—they used this language so as to leave the audience with the distinct impression that the *opposite* of the truth was the truth. Because the intent was to mislead and the effect was highly misleading¹ these denials are better referred to by the words “lie”, “deception”, or any number of the other words that happen to fit a particular denial (“equivocation”, “prevarication”, etc.).

¹in fact, many individuals *were misled* so completely on this issue that people *still* believe Joseph Smith didn’t practice polygamy over 150 years later *based almost exclusively on these denials*)

Are “Lies and deception” too harsh?

Though they are semantically exact, the terms “lie” and “deception” might be considered by some to be too harsh. If there are less harsh words that capture the intent and effect then I welcome the suggestions.

One way to determine if we’ve been too harsh is to consider the manner in which Church leaders characterized the statements of those who attempted to shed light on the practice of polygamy by early Church leaders.

In August of 1842, the Millennial Star wrote of Martha Brotherton:

a young female who emigrated from Manchester in September last, after conducting herself in a manner unworthy the character of one professing godliness, at length conceived the plan of gaining friendship and extraordinary notoriety with the world, or rather with the enemies of truth, by striking a blow at the character of some of its worthiest champions. She well knew that this would be received as a sweet morsel by her old friends, the Methodists, and other enemies of the Saints. She accordingly selected president J. [Joseph] Smith, and elder B. [Brigham] Young for her victims, and **wrote to England that these men had been trying to seduce her, by making her believe that God had given a revelation that men might have two wives**; by these disreputable means she thought to overthrow the Saints here, or at least to bring a storm of persecution on them, and prevent others from joining them; but in this thing **she was completely deceived by Satan**.

To discredit Martha, The Millennial Star then published a letter from her sister claiming that “my sister has told some of the **greatest lies** that ever were circulated” (emphasis added). In fact, Martha was almost certainly right—others had been approached in similar fashion and. Even Brian Hales treats Martha’s story as [generally reliable](#).

If she had been mistaken (she was not), then the Saints felt it appropriate to publish that this young female was guilty of telling “some of the greatest lies that ever were circulated” and that “she was completely deceived by Satan.”

Finally <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smith-statements-denying-polygamy> [link original source]

12th **Lie**—Joseph Smith taught a system of polygamy. (emphasis added)

12th Refutation—The Revelations given through Joseph Smith, state the following . . . “We believe that one man should have one wife.” Doctrine and Covenants, page 331.

These sources suggest that LDS leaders of that era would be comfortable with labeling their denials of polygamy “lies” and “deception”.