

The 483rd Convocation

Address: "Some Truths about Lies"

By Susan Gal

December 9, 2005

Sincerest congratulations to all of you on the completion of your studies, as you receive your diplomas and degrees. The ceremonial recital of names on this happy occasion, the reading of prayers, speeches by the faculty and President, even my greeting to you are more than mere talk. They are among the actions that officially make each of you a graduate of the University of Chicago. Just like the words recited at christenings and in wedding vows, what we say today is highly consequential. The words do more than describe what is happening. When enunciated by those the institution assigns to this task, they are the ritual acts that create and officially recognize this momentous, hard-won, and irreversible change in your lives.

The transformative power of words is no surprise. Your education has transformed you through a tidal wave of words. For several years, each of you has been immersed in the tasks of reading texts, reading texts about texts, discussing images, writing up experiments, listening to lectures, and holding discussions. Indeed, education is well described as a multilayered tradition that continues centuries-old discussions, thereby inevitably changing them. It is a precious continuity that contributes our own generation's perspectives and discoveries to current debates about earlier debates. Amidst this deluge of commentary and metacommentary, everyone has yearnings for a life raft: Whom should we believe? Which statements are authoritative? Scholarship itself is organized around this quest.

Usually, we respond to the uncertainties in science and philosophy with meditations on the search for truth. Instead I want to talk about lies. I will not belabor the old academic chestnut that truth is relative. Nor am I interested in the white lies we take to be social necessities; nor in merciful lies told to avoid inflicting harm. Instead, my topic today is the lying that we understand to be consequential, hurtful,

reprehensible. The matter is made urgent by the epidemic of lies in our public life. Trust in government is at a perilously low level; investigative reports reveal prevarications that have contributed to disastrous military decisions. It is too easy to respond by impugning the ethics of particular individuals or by dismissing all of politics as a dirty business of mere propaganda. The morality of talk is indeed at issue. We recognize the force of such ethical judgments and their source in our own culturally specific ideas about the nature of language. Yet I am convinced we need a more sophisticated analytical approach than the simple condemnation of lies. For lying is part of the sociocultural process we call human communication. The attempt to avoid lies altogether is futile. Rather, it is by understanding how lies work that we act as responsible citizens, learn to create authority for our own knowledge as experts and leaders, and challenge the authorities we think are wrong.

About a decade ago, when I came to teach at the University of Chicago, a student in my Core course came to discuss material she had read for class. Was it true, she asked, that lies are statements that do not correspond to the way the world is and are told to deceive? I was in a rush; I could have answered with a yes or no. But the student was smart and serious; the answer mattered to me, too. So, I sat down, prepared for a longer talk, and said: "Well, it is actually a lot more complicated than that . . ." She started to laugh, saying: "That is just what the professors here always say when you ask a question . . ." I knew then that I had come to the right place. So had she, and so did you. Now as graduates you are better equipped to recognize the complexity of social life, not least through the exploration of communicative practices.

Consider three examples: *First*, the national scene, where every day brings indictments for perjury among our highest officials, and more evidence of lies told by the government to motivate the current war and to justify the flouting of international agreements about the treatment of prisoners. *Second*, the academy, where plagiarism is a form of lying about authorship. Students participate in this practice when they use the Internet to download or cobble together research

reports from unverified sources. *Third*, ordinary rumor, often of dubious veracity. In any small group, we are dependent for our credibility and good name on the opinions and evaluations of others. These are sometimes expressed in whispered conversations, or more formally in academic grades and in confidential letters of recommendation. In matters of romance, friendship, and judgments of professional competence, circulating reports determine our reputations and thereby our futures.

My student had understood well the commonsense cultural definition of lying: its core is the relationship between a speaker's words and the condition of the world. If there is a correspondence between world and word, then we have truth; if not, and the speaker knows it, then a lie. This definition is venerable; it is as old as Aristotle. Yet it narrows our field of vision. It fools us into considering only two aspects of utterances—the speaker's intent and the statement's representation of the world. I suggest we take a broader, sociocultural view and analyze lying, its results and repercussions, as aspects of communication.

Rumor is a good place to start. Suppose my friend Sharon is seen with a new man, which I report to her boyfriend, John. Obviously, I influence Sharon's reputation and influence John's opinion of Sharon. Less obvious is the fact that I also create and define myself as someone who would tell such a tale, thereby transforming my own relation to John. I can start a friendship with John through the intimacy created by such a revelation; or destroy our friendship and my own reputation in his eyes. Sophocles warned against blaming the messenger who brings bad news, but in sociological terms we do well to remember that the relation of the gossip or news source to the recipient of gossip is as important as the gossip's relation to the target, and often more important than the news itself. There is a three-way linkage between Sharon, John, and me—a circle with a social effect that reverberates as the news circulates.

Common sense—which in this case agrees with Aristotle—would have us pay special attention to the content of the message as it represents the world: was

Sharon really with a new man? What does “with” mean in this story? Alas, we can only know through some further description, and we cannot describe any scene at all without taking a stance towards it, and thereby evaluating the world we describe. Language provides no neutral corners in which to hide. Charged with making distorted drawings, Vincent van Gogh famously remarked: “. . . I want to . . . make these incorrectnesses of reality something that may be untrue but is at the same time more true than literal truth.” He was developing a style through which to picture the world. Even if we are not artists, our news must be delivered in one style or another. Was Sharon chatting with that new man, or gabbing, giggling, debating, shooting the breeze, having a discussion, flirting, haranguing, arguing, lolling about? Or several of these at once? With their often unconscious choice of words, speakers evaluate the events they recount; they thereby shape and construct the world they describe.

Evaluations can be much more subtle than word choice: Suppose I throw back my hair and bat my eyes, providing what can be taken as an imitation of Sharon saying hello to the man. Did I say she was flirting? Within our commonsense view of language, not exactly. To ask whether or not Sharon really threw back her head is to miss the more important point that I can make John suspicious and perhaps jealous without taking direct responsibility. Even more powerfully, one could tell John: “I heard Sharon was with a new man.” Attributing a comment to someone else in this way is a very common conversational device. As the literary theorist Mikhael Bakhtin explained: “Our mouths are filled with the words of others.” When phrased as an anonymous quote, the news about Sharon becomes even more impermeable to questions of truth. It gains the authority of an invisible social world. It seems to be objective, an impersonal voice from everywhere and nowhere.

Given the possibility of such quotations, who exactly is a speaker? The commonsense view assumes a unified personality who is either sincere or has deceitful intentions. Yet notice that in a mere five minutes I have already spoken in the voice of van Gogh and Aristotle, the voice of common sense, of a former student,

of a fictional creature called Sharon, and on behalf of the entire University of Chicago faculty. When I ventriloquated these figures, or myself at an earlier age, I could do so seriously, or with parody and contempt. In each case, the speaker can be distant from the quoted words or take credit for their cleverness.

Such a multiplicity of voices emanating from a single biographical individual is not unusual. We can distinguish within a single speaker the role of animator who merely says or writes the words, but does not compose them; the role of composer who makes up the words, but is not the one who says them; and the principal who is committed to what the words say, but neither says them nor composes the text. These roles can be played by one person or different people; they carry different kinds and levels of social responsibility. We hardly notice these roles in everyday talk, but their conflation has serious consequences and their differences are clear in politics: The ghostwriter of speeches is responsible for the words, but not for the policies expressed in the speech nor for the charisma in delivery that the candidate brings to the campaign. In exceptional cases, the roles are unified: We are impressed that Abraham Lincoln actually wrote the words of the Gettysburg Address, and smile knowingly to discover that Franklin Roosevelt, a great speaker, recopied his speeches in his own hand so as to convince posterity that he had written them himself.

If the ordinary speaker is not unitary, the scientific or scholarly author is even less so. In the academic world, common sense again betrays us. We honor the image of heroic, individual artists and thinkers as owners of their own ideas, produced in magic moments of inspiration. Copyright and patent law support this view. But this image of the author is a relatively new contribution to European thought made by Romantic poets and philosophers. Before the eighteenth century, it was more booksellers than writers who determined authorship; an excerpt from a published book could count as a new creation. It was legal to use the names of famous writers to sell texts they had no part in writing. The relation to creativity was also different: Isaac Newton argued that in writing about optics he was “merely recovering what

God had given to mankind,” and thus he could rightly claim that he was “not its author.” Newton was not known for his personal modesty. Rather, in his time, such apparent self-deprecation was one way to gain the appearance of disinterested authority for discoveries about nature.

Today, the unity of individual authorship is again unraveling. Single articles in biomedicine and high-energy physics often rely on collaborations involving hundreds of people, each bringing different expertise to the project. Unlike Newton, modern scholars claim credit for innovation. But in contrast to the expectations of Romantic literati, the novelty of current research cannot be too new. Creativity is recognized when the innovations are seen as part of a community of discourse that includes intellectual ancestors, allies, and competitors. This community creates creativity by evaluating it; new formulations emerge not from individual speakers but from conversations between them. Scholars must use the terms defined by others, even if only to refute and redefine them. Without such a community, and the rules of discourse upon which it depends, people cannot make what is later recognized as new knowledge. In scholarship as in ordinary talk, our mouths are filled with the words of others.

If individual authorship is only a legal fiction, why should we care when students copy term papers or use unverified Internet sources? We care because their actions subvert the social organization that creates, assesses, and corrects knowledge. As William James said: “Truth happens to an idea.” This momentous transmutation from idea to truth and hence knowledge happens through a set of organizational practices that are collaborative, cooperative, and also combative. It is the social process of scholarly apprenticeship, debate, review, publication, recognition, citation, and further debate. It happens in seminars, libraries, and laboratories, through books and other publications where scholars—in the course of building careers—are made responsible for the web of ideas they propose and for their methods of providing evidence. By indiscriminately relying on Internet sources, students mistake mere information for knowledge. This threatens to destroy

knowledge by undermining its peculiar, fragile, yet powerful organizational form. The student is duped, and we are all impoverished.

Finally, how does this view of lying help us understand political discourse? When a high official tells us we are in immediate danger from foreign weapons of mass destruction and no such weapons exist, the discrepancy between the world and the word is surely a lie. And it is just as surely a grave moral offense. But if we stop our analysis with this ethical judgment, then common sense once again betrays us, blinding us to the sociocultural work that lying accomplishes. Accusations of lying make for easy political fireworks in American public life. Truth is like apple pie and mother. All political positions decry individuals who lie; all sides purport to find liars among their enemies; every political group promises to eliminate their own “bad apples.” By narrowing our perspective, this “discourse of truth” works as canny stagecraft. It invites us to imagine politics as a personalistic search for individuals who seem to be truthful, because they can present moral images of themselves. It invites us to see politics as a battle to get rid of those who are immoral. As in a magic show, while we are busy lamenting the sins of liars, current political decisions that are made possible or plausible by the lie often escape our attention. Political statements, like cases of gossip, should be evaluated not only for truth value but just as much for the alliances that they set up among disparate social actors, and for the credit and blame they implicitly distribute. Lies, like all utterances, are simultaneously descriptions of the world, while also—and less obviously—consequential acts that realign the players within the world they describe.

A cultural perspective on language makes us more knowledgeable consumers of mass media, more cynical yet more realistic analysts of spin. It shows how ordinary aspects of human communication are used for political purposes, making more acceptable the kinds of political decisions with which we disagree. Beware the choices of words that create a persuasive yet deceptive social reality. Instead of a single, indicted liar, we should look for circles of relations in which reputations are created between those who report the rumor and those who are willing to listen and

pass it on. Messengers are not free of motives: One should always ask why we are hearing one news story now and not another. Why the story is presented in the particular form in which it now appears. Who is implicitly blamed or exonerated by what appear to be self-evident facts. We should ask why news sources and *their* sources want us to believe this particular fact at this particular time—regardless of its veracity.

The multiplicity of speaking roles ensures that the quoting of others can create authority, or deflect responsibility from the speaker. Rather than single culprits who have lied, we can see a process of ventriloquation that strategically points to some as culprits while protecting others. The interactional process—whether in broadcast form or in face-to-face communication—mediates between speakers and listeners, who are never in immediate contact, contrary to what our commonsense ideas about language would suggest. Instead, scholars and politicians are involved in large-scale social processes that are not under singular control. In politics, as in academia, our attention should not be focused narrowly on truth vs. falsehood, but on that delicate political process of image-making and decision-making that can be subverted to underwrite actions we deplore, or can be made to serve the values of justice and fairness in which we believe.

Your education here has prepared you for the assessment of texts and talk; it has given you the chance to study the subtle uses of language that create or undermine authority—whether your genre is philosophical and mathematical argument, aesthetic valuation, social scientific theorizing, or inference from laboratory results. In all of these, argument, persuasion, and belief are constructed through intertextual echoes. The quotation and transposition of others' speech are always in play when people create knowledge. The political process is no less dependent on these everyday devices of language. As you become responsible citizens, knowledgeable experts, and leaders in the world, taking a sophisticated stance towards communication is an indispensable task. It is not a simple nor a commonsensical recipe for moving through life. But then, as graduates of the University of Chicago,



you are not surprised to find that the really important matters turn out to be much *more complicated*. Congratulations to you all.

*Susan Gal is the Mae and Sidney G. Metzl Distinguished Service Professor in the Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics, and the College.*