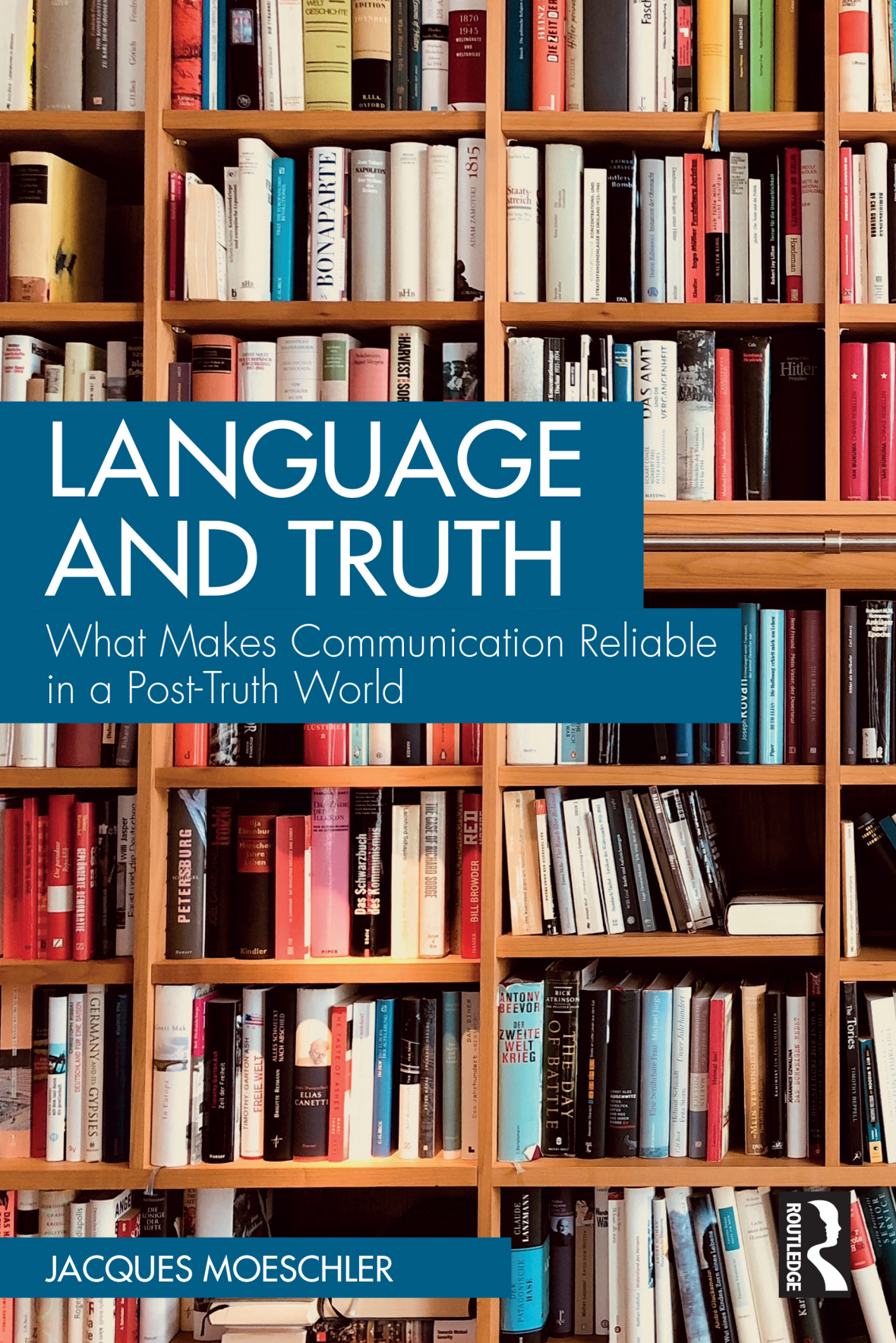
LANGUAGE AND TRUTH
What Makes Communication Reliable in a Post-Truth World
JACQUES MOESCHLER
ROUTLEDGE

LANGUAGE AND TRUTH

The nature of truth is a current preoccupation both in political and social debates. The emergence and consequences of fake news and misinformation are at the core of what some call a post-truth world.

Divided into two parts, *Language and Truth* develops the theoretical framework of language, truth, and communication. The book illustrates the way in which fake news is adhered to or rejected using case studies taken from political discourse such as the recent use of the words "genocide" and "denazification" by Vladimir Putin. It explores sources of information such as gossip and the everyday as well as exceptional uses of language such as humour.

This is vital reading for scholars, researchers, and students of pragmatics, semantics, philosophy of language, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, language and communication, and language and politics within linguistics, psychology, and communication studies.

Jacques Moeschler is Emeritus Professor at the Department of Linguistics, University of Geneva where he specializes in semantics and pragmatics. He is one of the co-authors, with Sandrine Zufferey and Anne Reboul, of *Implicatures* (2019) and the author of *Non-Lexical Pragmatics* (2019) and *Why Language?* (2021).

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What Makes Communication Reliable in a Post-Truth World

Jacques Moeschler

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FOREWORD

The present day is characterized by the fundamental role of verbal communication in every area of human activity: politics, the economy, the working world, the media, education, the family, sport, etc. Moreover, changes brought about by the sudden emergence of the Internet at the end of the last century, and smartphones in the first decades of this one, have altered the usage of speech and writing. The current proliferation of written and oral data is much greater than the flow of speech and of written publications in the 20th century, due to current rapid dissemination of writings and the viral propagation of videos.

No public or private action is performed without a written or spoken justification or explanation: individually and collectively, writing and speech accompany all our activities. A political decision cannot be taken without communication; a manager's request to a subordinate cannot be made without an explanation; a teacher's request to students cannot be made without justification; an order from parents to children cannot be given without negotiation; and a couple's decisions cannot be made without discussion. Speech and writing have never been more present in our lives, and the reading and writing of messages on our smartphones never cease.

In other words, language is so ever-present that it cannot be separated from a single moment of a speaker's life. While this observation is self-evident, its consequences are seldom analysed. It is important to ask what this speech and listening, this writing and reading, are used for. Why do we lend such importance to speeches whose duration is only two or three seconds, writing which disappears as quickly as it is read on our devices, and which in the best of cases exists in libraries but is seldom read?

It is true that speech and writing are often mere background noise. According to certain linguists, about 50% of our oral verbal activities involve exchanges

that provide no information, such as talking about the weather. This can lead to a negative conclusion: if most utterances are not informative, then the function of language is not to inform but to provide social connections among individuals, groups of individuals, and societies. These networks of nonessential but necessary speech are merely the result of the necessity of our connections with each other, a semiotic equivalent of the grooming carried out by large apes such as chimpanzees (Dunbar, 1996).

This conclusion, however interesting it may be for the phylogenesis of our species (see Reboul, 2017 for an alternative pragmatic approach), is not the central point of this book. Instead, it will focus on the thesis according to which *language* is closely linked to *truth*. According to a precise and narrow definition, truth is a property of utterances—their content of representation or proposition—and is a correct description of the world. In other words, a proposition is true if it correctly describes the world and false if it does not, regardless of the beliefs entertained by the speaker.

One in three Americans believes, for instance, that the earth is flat. Technically speaking, for these people, the proposition THE EARTH IS FLAT is true, even though it is factually false. Before 1492, this idea was entertained by a large portion of the European population, including seamen who accompanied Christopher Columbus and feared they would sail off the edge of the earth. However, a proposition is not true because people believe it to be true. Truth is not a consequence of belief: a belief is a propositional attitude or mental disposition that allows a proposition to be entertained, more or less strongly, as true.

We entertain a great number is propositions as true, and some of them are shared: society is founded not only on a shared language with which we communicate, but also on a set of background beliefs that allow us to understand each other; in other words, a *common ground* (Stalnaker, 1977). For instance, the radical changes regarding religion that occurred at the end of the 20th century have not eradicated, at least for the generation which is knowledgeable about Christian practices and culture, comprehension of the Christian world. In other words, some Christian dogmas such as the Trinity and resurrection are perfectly comprehensible to an agnostic or atheist with a Christian background, without being entertained as true.

Such a statement, according to which false beliefs are entertained as true, leads one to wonder about the relationship of utterances—sentences uttered in specific contexts—to truth. In the course of this book, I will show that this relationship is not conventional: it is not semantic but can be explained by pragmatics, that is, by the compatibility between the content of the representation in an utterance (a proposition) and the context in which it is uttered. I will explain not only how beliefs are entertained, but also how false beliefs are entertained as true and how the latter can go viral. My investigation of the relationships between *belief*, *utterance*, and *truth* will lead me to examine the major social and political phenomena known as *fake news*, *post-truth*, and *bullshitting*.

The impetus to write this book was mainly provided by the consequences of Joe Biden's election as president of the United States in November 2020. From the time of the earliest results predicting the victory of the Democratic candidate, President Donald Trump refused to concede his opponent's victory and stated that a massive fraud, caused by the automatic system of counting in-person and postal votes, had deprived him of 2 million votes. He continued to affirm that he had won the election, despite the confirmation of Biden's victories in Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. Such persistent denial, exaggerated by his tweets and by his many supporters, not to mention the disinformation that was broadcast on websites and in the media, led me to ask why an American president persisted in denying his defeat. In more technical terms, how could he continue to produce false statements? Was he lying? Did he believe what he was asserting? How can we explain that his tweets were followed, shared, and believed? In other words, how can we explain the manipulation he perpetrated?

These questions are simple, but do not lead to simple answers: Donald Trump is certainly a manipulator, a megalomaniac, a crook, and violent to women, but his persistence in denial is not related to these personal contingencies. I will show that his words and statements are characterized by a bias about language and the world that deviates from what is normally the foundation of human groups: an acceptance of a particular relationship to language and the world; that is, to truth.

Does this relationship have a biological or cultural basis? Anthropologists answer this question in terms of culture: truth is a cultural convention, accepted in one society and denied in another. "Vérité au-deçà des Pyrénées, erreur au-delà" (Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error the other side), as the rationalist philosopher Blaise Pascal put it ([1669] 1962: 118). Is truth relative? Are there not ONE but MANY truths? Is truth a useless concept? If so, what are the alternatives to the concept of truth?

The first part of this book presents solutions suggested by semantics, logic, and pragmatics. Some are acceptable and others are disputable, but all of them are problematic, because they concentrate on the fact that it is easier to disagree than to agree. Are agreement and disagreement connected to truth? Are they concepts that describe the speaker's attitude, rather than a property of discourses?

One may wonder how a linguist such as myself, specialized in meaning and verbal communication (Moeschler & Reboul, 1994; Reboul & Moeschler, 1998; Zufferey, Moeschler & Reboul, 2019; Moeschler, 2019), can address a subject that is traditionally covered by philosophy, experimental psychology, and cognitive science. When necessary, I will refer to these disciplines. But as the title of this book suggests, language is at the centre of the questions I address. I will refer to discoveries made in disciplines such as semantics (the study of linguistic meaning) and pragmatics (the study of utterance meaning in context), and will share the answers, often incomplete, that language sciences provide to the question of truth. I will also show that behind the issue of truth lies a concept that is central to language usage:

the commitment of the speaker. Indeed, if a speaker affirms that something is the case (that it is true), this does not only require that he believes it. It supposes something more. I refer to this additional quality as *commitment*, which implies that a speaker is responsible for what she affirms, can give reasons for what she believes, and, in the best of cases, can give evidence about what she affirms.

This book presents an approach to speaker commitment that is implied by language usage and its consequences—that is, in the trust the addressee places in the speaker.

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INTRODUCTION

1 An example

Let's begin with an ordinary example. A young man bets 100 Swiss francs about the name of the director who made the film *Robert et Robert*, Paris, 1983. He is sure that the director was Claude Chabrol. After checking, he realizes that he was wrong and that the director was Claude Lelouch.

What happened here? Why did the man risk losing 100 Swiss francs over a misremembered fact? The answer, which I will explore in this book, is that he gave more credit to his own beliefs than to those of the person with whom he was betting. However, and contrary to his expectations, his interlocutor was a more reliable source of information than he was.

The relevant point, which is independent from the objective competence of the source, is referred to by psychologists as *myside bias*, that is, the tendency of speakers to give more weight to their own beliefs than to those of others (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). In the previous example, it is clear that the man's myside bias was stronger than his confidence in the reliability of his interlocutor's affirmation.

As this example shows, two initial issues skew the question of truth. First, how much confidence can one have in a source of information? And second, how can one attribute a degree of confidence to someone else that is higher than one's confidence in oneself, since personal bias distorts one's evaluation of the source's trustworthiness?

These are central questions because they tend to relegate to the background both what is known as *truth* and the criteria that allow one to claim that a proposition (the content of an uttered sentence) is true or false. The issue of the source's reliability should be the crucial criterion for truth judgement; that is, the accuracy of the utterance's description of the world.

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One might object that this issue is not really a question of philosophy of language or of semantics (the discipline that studies linguistic meaning); it is more an issue for the social sciences or psychology to address. But these disciplines can only measure the impact of the source in terms of reliability and trust.

A third question arises: how can false utterances be characterized, especially when the speaker knows they are false? The young man mentioned earlier strongly believed that the proposition Claude Chabrol is the director of 'Robert et Robert' was true. But can we also say that Trump strongly believed that he had won the presidential election when in fact he lost it in terms of his percentage of electoral votes?[1] This question will not be answered—who could claim to answer in Trump's place? But one may wonder whether he was lying, manipulating his audience, or spouting bullshit.

2 Why should we discuss language and truth?

Talking about language and truth amounts to wondering about the nature of our utterances. Above all, how are addressees able to distinguish between true and false assertions, bullshit, and nonsense? Are we equipped to make such distinctions? If so, where does this sensitivity to falsehood and deception come from? And if we were not so equipped, how can we trust a speaker's assertions? Similarly, how can we explain that speakers are able to knowingly deceive their addressees and lie to them, or in some circumstances, like in bluffing, to peremptorily affirm something that is untrue? What distinguishes the feeling of empathy and sharing that interlocutors experience in successful verbal communication from the disagreeable feeling that arises when one suspects that manipulation is taking place?

Everyone has experienced situations of verbal communication in which he felt great confidence and even admiration for a speaker, and others in which he experienced the opposite and felt immediate mistrust and even repulsion for a speaker without understanding why either state occurred.

The faculties that enable us to detect feelings of closeness and of being manipulated are used not only in our daily interactions, to assess institutional, professional, and political discourses, but also to evaluate the reliability of information we read and hear. They are also used to evaluate fictitious characters in detective novels, for example, the ability of these characters to inspire confidence in their words and their reliability is an important property of narratives.

The issue here is not simply to identify different types of utterances, which is the province of traditional linguists. The challenge is more general and more important: what are the faculties that allow us to live with others? It is therefore crucial to understand what causes the repugnance we feel towards certain discourses. The approach I suggest is not based on social psychology, but simply on what cognitive pragmatics can teach us.

3 The cognitive pragmatics approach

I will therefore use the tools of cognitive pragmatics to address the question of the relationship between language and truth (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Blakemore, 1987; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2004, 2012; Clark, 2013; Scott, Clark & Carston, 2019). One might wonder why I do not refer to older disciplines such as semantics and rhetoric.

First, because semantics is mainly devoted to what is known as literal or descriptive meaning. Pragmatics seeks to understand why verbal communication is generally implicit; that is, why the addressee must go beyond what is said to understand what is meant.

Second, because traditional rhetoric addresses the issue of implicit meaning through the theory of two languages. The first of these languages describes the normal state of communication, while the second one (the rhetorical layer) results in secondary meanings whose purpose is mainly poetic. More generally speaking, the rhetorical approach suggests that there is something behind words. Let's examine this traditional metaphor in greater detail.

In other words, the idea is that something is hidden behind words which must not or cannot be shown. This gives rise to two questions. First, what do we not want to show that must be hidden? Second, why would we need to hide something with words?

1 What is hidden behind words?

This old idea comes down to us from ancient rhetoric and corresponds to the theory of two languages: behind the literal meaning is a non-literal meaning, a hidden meaning. Here is how Roland Barthes described the theory of two languages in the part of ancient rhetoric devoted to wording, or *elocutio*:[2]

> 1) il y a une base nue, un niveau propre, un état normal de la communication, à partir duquel on peut élaborer une expression plus compliquée, ornée, douée d'une distance plus ou moins grande par rapport au sol originel. . . .; 2) la couche seconde (rhétorique) a une fonction d'animation: l'état "propre " du langage est inerte, l'état second est "vivant ": couleurs, lumières, fleurs *(colores, lumina, flores)*; les ornements sont du côté de la passion, du corps; ils rendent la parole desirable. (Barthes, 1970: 218)
>
> 1) there is naked basis, a proper level, a normal state of communication, from which one can elaborate a more complicated, embellished expression, capable of a greater or lesser distance relative to the original ground. . . . 2) the second (rhetorical) layer has an enlivening function: the "proper" state of language is inert, the second state is "lively": colours, lights, flowers *(colores, lumina, flores)*; embellishments are on the side of passion and of the body; they make speech desirable. (my translation)