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THE LANGUAGE OF LYING IN ELISABETH HOLMES'S TALKS

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РИТОРИКА БРЕХНІ (НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ПРОМОВ ЕЛІЗАБЕТ ХОЛМС)

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The article focuses on Elizabeth Holmes's talks, highlighting the patterns of her speech that indicate manifestations of deceit, and explores the persuasiveness of her language. The study aims to define the key aspects of deceitful language in Holmes's public talks and interviews.

The paper reveals major components in Holmes's narrative that heavily relies on her personal experiences. It further expands on vocal cues that help differentiate lying from telling the truth. The results present the syntactical features of Holmes' reflections and answers and cover the vagueness of the language overall.

Key words: *Elizabeth Holmes, Theranos, lying, deceitful language, persuasion*

У статті розглядаються виступи Елізабет Холмс та виокремлюються особливості її мовлення, що вказують на прояви обману, а також досліджується персуазивність в її мові. Метою дослідження є визначення ключових аспектів брехні в її публічних виступах та інтерв'ю.

Розкриваються основні елементи наративу Холмс, а також фонетичні риси, які допомагають відрізнити брехню від правди. Представлені результати показують особливості мовлення Холмс на синтаксичному та фонетичному рівнях та відсутність конкретики в її мові.

Ключові слова: *Елізабет Холмс, Theranos, брехня, обман, переконання*

Introduction. Elizabeth Holmes, just like many other entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley of the time, presented herself as a visionary, set to change the blood-testing market with a start-up and revolutionize the American health-care system. Holmes created an image of a young and ambitious CEO with her signature deep voice and manner of speaking. She attracted a considerable number of

investors, securing funding for her company, Theranos, by highlighting the affordability and accessibility of the developing technology.

Problem Statement. Although Theranos was not the first instance of a failed and fraudulent start-up, it was not the last either. The recent case with the CEO of FTX Sam Bankman-Fried has showed that the public is still willing to trust someone with their money in case the person in question is charismatic enough. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the ways those people broadcast and advocate for their ideas are effective as a means of communication in the context of marketing. So the paper was triggered by the following research question: What are the language techniques used by Elizabeth Holmes that make her so persuasive?

Purpose. The article aims to explore the means of lying that Elizabeth Holmes uses in her talks and interviews as well as define the differences and similarities in the speech patterns throughout the time period of existence of Theranos as a company.

Analysis of the latest research and publications. Theranos in general and Holmes in particular evoked a major interest among researchers in the areas of economics, gender studies, psychology and linguistics: Martins et al. (2024), Dundes et al. (2019), Mallery (2017). Some literature and media covers not only the economic implications of this endeavour, but also the language and voice alterations: Marchiselli (2024), Ho (2021), Skrobák (2023), Liubertė and Dimov (2021).

Thus Liubertė. and Dimov (2021) analyze Holmes' speeches with the help of the speech act theory (Austin 1975), defining four major aspects: framing (highlighting particular experiences with blood testing), filling (providing detailed descriptions for better visualization), connecting (creating the idea of connection between stakeholders and the technology, personal involvement) and committing (providing a narrative which asserts the existence of tangible results).

Results. Cambridge Dictionary defines "lie" as something that is not true, while it can be both written and spoken (*Lie*, 2024). Additionally, Merriam-Webster expands the notion and adds "deliberation" to it ("Lie," 2024).

In his turn, Ekman (1992, p.28) defines "lie" as follows: "… one person tends to mislead another, doing so deliberately, without prior notification of this purpose, and without having been explicitly asked to do so by the target" He also establishes two ways to lie: to conceal (hide or withhold the information) and to falsify (present false information). In hindsight, we can indicate that Holmes relies on purposeful falsification, where the speaker is aware of the deceptive nature of their message. In the following example Holmes mentions the information about "proprietary Theranos technology", that does not correspond to the truth.

"So we have never used commercially available lab equipment for finger stick base tests. Every finger stick test that we have ever done, uses proprietary Theranos technology, that is not commercially available" (WSJ, 2015).

Owing to the nature of deceptive language, we cannot indicate a lie with explicit utterances (e.g., *I lie that …*) (Meibauer, 2018); however there are some cues in speech that may show it. These cues are the subsequent result of lying, where the speaker exhausts one's cognitive resources by telling a lie. Vrij (2008) claims that it should lead to differences between lying and telling the truth. Those differences might manifest themselves in the form of vocal cues that are present in Holmes' speech:

- First, it is a speech rate. With Holmes, it is inconsistent, depending on the question that is being asked. When relying her personal experience, Holmes tends to keep it steady, conversely to other instances (e.g., presenting the technology (CNN, 2016) where she speaks slower.

- The second is a pause duration. The pauses tend to be short in interviews; however, in the promotional materials (e.g., TEDMED, 2014) they are long and measured.

- The third vocal cue is a pause frequency where pauses are frequent and in some cases are placed arbitrarily. They do not provide a clear indication of the end of the sentence. As with the pause duration and speech rate, they are highly dependent on the context.

- The fourth cue is a voice pitch. Vrij's study (2008) mentions the high-pitched voice in particular. However, here we observe the opposite as Holmes artificially deepened her voice to assert herself and instill confidence (Yong Ping Chua, 2020). This made cues even more pronounced since this alteration increased the cognitive load (Vrij, 2008). As a result, Holmes struggles to maintain the consistent tone of her voice.

Although lie and deception are key points of this analysis, we additionally address the issue of persuasion, which is. defined as an act of "making someone believe something" (Cambridge, 2024). It consists of a number of components including the powerless speech (frequent use of intensifiers, hedges, hesitation forms and questioning intonations) and powerful speech (less frequent use of these features). Although these two do not constitute persuasiveness, they define the speaker's status and their perception. Erickson (1977, p. 278) presents this idea as following:

"Perhaps the powerful style, with its straightforward communication of information, leads to acceptance of the information on such bases as its internal consistency, whereas the powerless style, with its more complex and perhaps more personalized structure, may prompt listeners to consider source characteristics relatively more in deciding whether to accept the information." In line with this, we can claim that there is a predominance of features of powerful speech in Holmes's talks as she tends to avoid hesitation forms and questioning intonations while using intensifiers and hedges.

The most prominent example would be the Wall Street Journal interview (2015) where Holmes presents her points in a manner that has characteristics of the aforementioned powerful speech:

"... It is proprietary technology↘ [short pause]. Theranos develops [short pause] many proprietary technologies and devices↘ [short pause], and that is what we use↘."

"My dad was a reporter with the [short pause] San Francisco Chronicle↘. I told you this before we were going onstage ↘"

In what follows, we will also look at three periods: the TEDMED speech in 2014 and other promotional material at the beginning, the conferences and interviews before the allegations and Holmes's responses to the backlash. We do not take into consideration the interviews after 2016. The timeframe of 2014-2016 is motivated mostly by the onset of Theranos traction and the following backlash.

That being said, there is a reason why the TEDMED speech is considered as a separate point of interest. Firstly, in this instance Holmes speaks to the audience directly. Secondly, due to this she is able to lead the narrative without the outsiders' interference. This makes her utterances deliberate and hyperbolised, not only in terms of the content but also of phonetics: the pauses are longer and not syntactically motivated as they separate not the utterances, but rather individual words or phrases. Moreover, the voice pitch is substantially lower, presumably due to the fact that the speaker is in control of the narrative; she is able to present a ready-made speech without the following questions and interruptions.

Conversely, there are two other points of the timeline to consider where the participants of the discussion (interviewers) are present in the video recordings. In the talks and interviews, Holmes confronts the interviewer, which represents not only the media outlet but also the audience and their queries. Such confrontation does not happen explicitly and is intended for the following purposes: damage control and product presentation. In both of those scenarios she performs differently – in all probability due to the mental load (Vrij, 2008).

In the analyzed video and video transcripts, we can also highlight certain emerging syntactical patterns in Holmes' speech. She often relies on complex sentences that are used to extend the idea. The following example was taken from the Wall Street Journal interview (2015) and is presented *ipsis litteris* :

"...**And** that was why that was such a big deal **and** not only did they do a FDA approval they did a CLIA waiver. Which is really hard, **and** something that we're incredibly proud of. Cause no one's taken a technology that processes the chemistries in the way we do, with more sophisticated assays, through the CLIA waiver process. **And** FDA was wonderful in working with us on that, **and** we're very grateful for the way that they approached it, **and** that's demonstrated, right, that this technology is really robust… "(WSJ, 2015).

Holmes tends to answer the questions in an extensive manner, elongating the sentences with the help of excessive usage of conjunctions and linkers (e.g., so, which is really hard, cause, and that,

etc.). The utterances are separated with short pauses, which do not indicate the end of the sentence, thus making her speech continuous. This helps to build the pace of the conversation.

In the following example we can observe the repetition of certain patterns, such as "and…" with Present Perfect, "and then … " followed with Present Indefinite and "that…" clauses for creating a narrative:

"**...And** we've seen two articles **that** were published **that** were false. **And then** immediately everybody **picks it up** and reprints it as if it's true. **And then** all these people **come out** of the woodwork. **And we've** looked at it, **and** I think the most important thing is there's all these questions **that** have come out from people, and the people **that** we serve and the people in these communities **that** matter, and that's why I wanted to be here…"

Another pattern is echoing and repetition that Holmes' uses in her interviews.

"And it was really interesting, because **we had our first** FDA clearance this summer, we also **got our first** FDA CLIA waiver." (Forbes, 2015)

"… **we're the first lab to** publish our audit scores, **we're the first lab to** publish our turnaround wait time in our wellness centers, **we're the first lab to** publish our customer SAT scores…" (Forbes, 2015)

"... **you can go** into engineering, **you can go** into science, **you can be** successful, **you can build** a family and we should be doing this…" (Fortune Magazine, 2015)

Such repetitions are used to create a pattern and make the speech rhythmical. Similarly, with the linkers and conjunctions, this repetition extends the utterances. Holmes rarely deviates from this pattern, thus making her speeches relatively consistent within the time period.

Conclusions and further research perspectives.

Findings indicate that in Holmes' speeches and interviews, persuasiveness is achieved with the help of repetitive structures, linking, and vocal cues that both disrupt the speck and contribute to its flow. This creates a rhythm and sets the pace for the conversation.

As it was mentioned before Holmes tries to hold on to her style and way of speaking. Therefore, in our further research, we would like to expand on the differences between those interviews within the period of 2014-2015 and explore other means Holmes uses to bring forward her narrative, including vagueness.It also seems perspective to verify, in line with the tenets of empirical studies of literature (Zyngier et al. 2008; Чеснокова 2011; van Peer and Chesnokova 2019), whether the audience is indeed sensitive to manipulative techniques used by Holmes.

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