

What's Wrong With Sceptical Invariantism?

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The paper defends epistemic contextualism (EC) against recent objections stemming from sceptical invariantism (SI).

EC is the view that the standards to be satisfied by a subject so as to fall into the extension of “knows φ ” may vary with the situational context; hence, the truth-conditions of “knowledge”-ascriptions are context-sensitive. Contrary to EC, SI holds that the truth-conditions of “knowledge”-ascriptions are invariant while other features of such ascriptions—their so-called assertibility-conditions—may vary with context. SI thus aims to explain away our contextualist, anti-sceptical intuitions by appeal to pragmatic mechanisms: what varies with context is not what the speaker *says* by ascribing “knowledge” but rather what she *means* by performing the very speech act she performs. According to SI, in everyday situations “knowledge”-ascriptions are thus practically assertible yet strictly speaking false.

Against SI it is argued firstly that standard pragmatic theory does not allow for a treatment of “knowledge”-ascriptions as triggering pragmatic mechanisms determining what is meant as opposed to what is said: the most plausible attempt of such a treatment—Jonathan Schaffer’s assimilation of “knowledge”-ascriptions to instances of hyperbole—is shown to be unsuccessful. Secondly, it is argued that methodological constraints on the construction of semantic theories in general necessitate a rejection of SI: if SI were true, speakers would permanently speak falsely when ascribing “knowledge” in everyday life. As a consequence, the literal meaning of “knows φ ” would be beyond the grasp of a Davidsonian radical interpreter and could no longer be thought of as being determined—in one way or another—by its use in our speech community. The paper thus comes to the conclusion that—from a semantic point of view—SI is to be rejected, for it cannot provide a feasible account of the meaning of epistemic terms.

What is Epistemic Contextualism (EC)?¹

According to EC the situational context determines the strength of the epistemic position a person has to be in in order to satisfy the predicate “knows φ ”.² The situational context in which “knowledge” is ascribed accordingly has to be considered when determining whether the evidence a person has suffices for the truth of particular “knowledge”-ascriptions. It may thus well happen that some evidence e that meets the requirements in one context does not do so in another. At first sight this seems to be a quite natural

¹ I am greatly indebted to Stephen Williams and Timothy Williamson for discussion of this material. Many thanks also to Jonathan Schaffer for providing me with the final version of his forthcoming *Skepticism, Contextualism, and Discrimination*.

² See Cohen 1988; DeRose 1995; Lewis 1996 for classical contextualist positions.

view, since the standards for “knows φ ”³ are rather obviously lower in everyday discourse than they are in scientific contexts, for instance. This is exactly the contextualist’s point: the evidence somebody needs in order to fall into the extension of “knows φ ” may alter with certain contextual factors like our pragmatic goals, our intentions, expectations and the purposes of our conversation.⁴

EC is thus effectively a semantic thesis, namely the thesis that the truth-conditions of “knowledge”-ascriptions may vary with situational context:⁵ pragmatic inferences are needed in order to determine the semantic value of epistemic terms in particular contexts. “Knows φ ” in this respect resembles indexical expressions like “I” and “here” in allowing for a distinction between character and content along Kaplan’s lines, the character of “knows φ ” being a function from context to content. Contextualists also often point to an analogy between “knows φ ” and gradable adjectives like “flat” or “empty”: just like what counts as “empty” in one context doesn’t have to do so in another, what counts as “knowledge” in one context doesn’t have to do so in another. In other words: the evidence a subject needs in order to *count as* “knowing φ ” may vary with context.

In order to underpin their thesis contextualists typically tell stories illustrating the context-sensitivity of “knows φ ”. Probably the best known example goes back to Dretske 1970. Let me present a variation of Dretske’s example here:⁶ imagine schoolteacher Smith and her class standing at the zebra pen in the London Zoo. When Benny asks Smith what kind of animals there are in the pen, Smith explains that they are zebras. Benny, however, mixes up zebras with antelopes and thus asks again whether Smith is

³ For the sake of convenience I sometimes use scare quotes so as to indicate metalinguistic speech. Instead of awkward formulations such as “*a* falls into the extension of ‘knows φ ’ in *C*”, “*a* satisfies the predicate ‘knows φ ’ in *C*” and its cognates I will simply use expressions like “*a* ‘knows φ ’ in *C*” or “*a* ‘knows’ φ in *C*”.

⁴ I do not take this to be an exhaustive list of the contextual factors influencing the truth-value of “knowledge”-ascriptions. There are certainly other, most importantly externalist, factors relevant here, but I will not go into this issue in this paper.

⁵ Sosa 2000, 4 points out that EC cannot “much support the claim that” we know some φ , but only the meta-linguistic statement that “We know φ ” is true in some contexts. This is due to the failure of disquotation in cases of sentences with context-sensitive elements. Now, according to Sosa, this “limits the epistemological interest and relevance of EC [...], however interesting and important it may remain as a thesis in linguistics.” Ibid. However, I do not see any problem for EC here. Analogy: let me grant that you and I are contextualists about “I”. Does the fact that we cannot disquote “I am typing” prevent us from establishing that I am typing? Is the only statement we are licensed to make that the statement “I am typing” is true in some contexts? What is more, if we are—as seems inevitable—contextualists about tense, does this mean that we can always establish only metalinguistic statements?

⁶ Dretske does not argue a contextualist position in his paper, but a relevant alternatives theory. Even though similar in some respects, the crucial difference between these two accounts is that EC does not reject the *Closure Principle* (at least not if the context stays fixed). Moreover, the example presented here differs from Dretske’s mainly by construing two different conversational contexts at one and the same world and time. This is to ensure that the difference in intuitions about the truth-value of the relevant “knowledge”-ascriptions is due to contextual differences rather than to differences in the circumstances of evaluation. For the distinction between context of utterance and circumstances of evaluation see Kaplan 1989. Thanks to Timothy Williamson here.

really sure that the animals are zebras. Smith replies: “Yes, I know that the animals in the pen are zebras” and Benny finally explains to his classmates:

(1) Smith knows that the animals in the pen are zebras.

Has Benny spoken truly when uttering (1)? According to our intuitions, Smith’s epistemic position seems absolutely sufficient for her to satisfy the predicate “knows that the animals in the pen are zebras”, or “knows *Z*” for short. After all, Smith has visual experiences of black and white striped horse-like animals, according to her background knowledge such animals are zebras, she can discriminate reliably between zebras and antelopes, say, and she has read the sign at the pen stating that the animals in question are zebras. To sum up: our intuitions have it that Smith’s overall evidence suffices perfectly to render true Benny’s utterance of (1), provided that the animals in the pen are actually zebras.

Now, notice that our intuitions concerning whether Smith satisfies “knows *Z*” will change when we extend the story as follows: imagine Mary and John walking along the zebra pen while John, a postmodernist experimental artist, gives details of his latest project: he produced a motion picture of himself painting a mule with white stripes so as to look exactly like a zebra and then put the animal into the zebra pen of the New York Zoo. The arty point of this project was that the visitors did not realise that there was anything wrong with the animal. Now, imagine Mary and John overhear Benny uttering (1). They smirk at each other; to their minds it is clear that Smith doesn’t satisfy “knows *Z*” and Mary finally claims:

(2) Smith doesn’t know that the animals in the pen are zebras.

In Mary’s mind so as to count as “knowing *Z*” Smith would have to eliminate the possibility that she is fooled by an evil postmodernist artist like John. Even though the probability of such an evil artist scenario is fairly low, we are now inclined to say with Mary that Smith’s evidence is insufficient for falling into the extension of the predicate “knows *Z*”.

Now, so as to get clearer about what is going on in this case let me use “ C_A ” to denote the context of Benny’s and Smith’s conversation and let “ C_B ” denote the context of Mary’s and John’s conversation. As I have already pointed out, our intuitions tell us that (1) as uttered in C_A is true, while it seems false as uttered in C_B . Now, since Smith’s evidence for her belief *Z* is the same in both contexts, i.e. the circumstances of evaluation remain constant throughout the example, it seems that we must assign different truth-conditions to (1) as uttered in C_A and as uttered in C_B respectively. This is apparently the only way to stay faithful to our intuitions. The remarkable upshot of the zebra-case thus seems to be that one and the same “knowledge”-ascribing sentence can have different truth-values in different conversational contexts.

Now, according to contextualists, EC also has the resources to resolve the sceptical puzzle: whenever we consider a sceptical argument—the explanation goes—the standards are artificially tough, so that it is actually true in such a context that we do not satisfy “knows φ ”, for any φ about the external world. However, this does not mean that we don’t satisfy “knows φ ” in contexts with more ordinary standards, i.e. in contexts in which sceptical scenarios are not at issue. Moreover, the contextualist argues, our inclination to claim that we *never* “know φ ”, i.e. our intuition that we don’t “know φ ” in any context whatsoever, can be explained by our failure to recognize the context-sensitivity of “knows φ ”. The puzzle simply arises due to the fact that when in tough contexts speakers are ignorant of the fact that they satisfy “knows φ ” in easy standards contexts. EC accordingly defends an *error-theory* according to which competent speakers are wrong about the contents of their “knowledge”-ascriptions at times.⁷

Sceptical Invariantism (SI): Confounding Truth With Assertibility?

The objection to EC that I want to focus my attention on now stems from the intuition that “knowledge” is an absolute term. The philosophical opponent of the contextualist taking this view is the invariantist. To be precise, invariantism is the view that the standards for falling into the extension of “knows φ ” do not vary but are *invariant* across situational contexts. The predicate “knows φ ” thus only applies to a subject, if she can satisfy a set of absolute, contextually invariant standards. It is undeniable that, considered independently of the zebra-case, invariantism has some *prima facie* plausibility. Many have the vague intuition that if one satisfies “knows φ ” in one context, one *eo ipso* does so in any other context: one cannot lose the property of falling into the extension of “knows φ ” by a mere change of context. “Knowledge” thus does not always seem to be as fleeting and—as Lewis 1996 puts it—as elusive as the contextualist takes it to be. Against the contextualist, the invariantist claims that there is a genuine disagreement between the speakers in the zebra-case.

However, invariantism obviously needs a fresh resolution of the sceptical puzzle. One strategy to this end going back to Unger 1975 is what I shall call *sceptical invariantism* (SI). SI claims that scepticism is true: roughly speaking, in order to know some proposition φ , a subject has to eliminate every ψ being a conceptually possible alternative to φ . Now, since this is arguably impossible, Unger comes to the conclusion that we never satisfy the predicate “knows φ ”. His resolution of the sceptical puzzle, however, rests on the assumption that “knowledge”-ascriptions even though being false are practically assertible in everyday contexts. According to him the truth conditions of “knowledge”-ascriptions are invariant, while other features of “knowledge”-ascriptions, their so-called assertibility conditions, may vary with context.

⁷ See Cohen 1988 for this resolution of sceptical problems and Schiffer 1996 for criticism of EC’s error-theory.

Now, the invariantist obviously owes us an explanation of why “knowledge”-ascribing sentences are assertible even though being almost always strictly speaking false. What exactly is it that constitutes their assertibility? The most plausible answer to this question is that uses of sentences ascribing “knowledge” generate Gricean *conversational implicatures*,⁸ i.e. in particular contexts they trigger pragmatic processes determining what the speaker means as opposed to what she says. Note that the Gricean processes the invariantist has in mind here are essentially postsemantic, i.e. they are not taken to contribute to the proposition the sentence expresses on a given use (what is said), but rather to what the speaker means by her use (speaker-meaning, what is meant).

According to SI, speakers ascribing “knowledge” thus generally speak non-literally, i.e. what they mean does not coincide with what the sentence used means on the occasion of utterance. In the light of the Gricean distinction between what is said and what is meant the invariantist can thus claim that what varies with context is not what the speaker literally says, i.e. the truth-conditional content of the sentence used, but what she means by her use of that sentence: typically, when performing the speech act of ascribing “knowledge”, we mean something fairly different from what we say. To be precise, according to SI, by uttering (3) what the speaker typically *says* is (4) while what she *means* is (5):

- (3) x knows φ .
- (4) x can rule out every conceptually possible alternative to φ .
- (5) x can rule out every relevant alternative to φ .⁹

The sceptical invariantist thus explains the assertibility of (3) by the truth of (5), i.e. by the truth of what the speaker means. Note furthermore that the variation in the truth conditions of (5) is due to the fact that what counts as “relevant” differs from context to context.

The contextualist, on the other hand, draws a different picture. On her view by uttering (3) we *say* and *mean* the same, namely (5). According to her we thus use (3) *literally* in everyday life, while the sceptical invariantist claims that we use (3) *figuratively*, unless we take pleasure in one of those rare affirmative discussions of scepticism. Located in the framework of Grice’s theory, SI thus claims that we *say something false*, if we ascribe “knowledge” in normal contexts, while we *mean something true*.

Now, it is important to note that even though adopting a sceptical position, the sceptical invariantist concedes that it is (5) that expresses what is important for speakers with respect to their practical and conversational goals. What is more, since (5) is often true in everyday life, the invariantist can claim that scepticism, even though true, is an insignificant and uninteresting position. There simply is no reason for epistemologists to worry that literally we are speaking falsely when ascribing “knowledge” just as there is

⁸ See Grice 1989.

⁹ Strictly speaking, by uttering (3) in addition to (4) and (5) speakers also convey that x believes φ and that φ is true. I will ignore this detail here.

no reason for Alicia to worry that literally I am speaking falsely when I tell her that she is the cream in my coffee.

However, SI is a sceptical position and as such it has to explain away the *prima facie* counterintuitiveness of scepticism. Why are sceptical arguments so puzzling, if they are, after all, strictly speaking sound?¹⁰ The sceptical invariantist's answer to this question parallels the contextualist's error-theory: scepticism is counterintuitive because we mix up what we mean with what we say when ascribing "knowledge". We simply do not always realise that there is a distinction between what is said by and what is meant by "knowledge"-ascriptions and accordingly tend to confuse the said and the meant. The invariantist thus needs an error-theory as well. She claims that when considering sceptical arguments speakers are systematically mistaken about the contents of the premises and the conclusions of such arguments.

Let me stress another parallel between EC and SI: on both accounts there is a revealing analogy between "knows ϕ " and gradable adjectives like "flat" and "empty".¹¹ For instance, parallel to the above example the sceptical invariantist takes the view that (7) expresses the proposition we say when uttering (6), while (8) expresses the proposition meant:

- (6) That meadow is flat.
- (7) That meadow has no bumps whatsoever.¹²
- (8) That meadow has no relevant bumps.

Contextualism, on the other hand, has it again that (8) expresses both what is said and what is meant by uttering (6).

SI and EC thus have a lot in common: firstly, on both views sentences ascribing "knows ϕ " or gradable adjectives trigger pragmatic processes on particular occasions of use, the only difference being that according to SI these processes are postsemantic while according to EC they are presemantic. Secondly, both accounts need an error-theory in order to resolve the sceptical puzzle, and thirdly both agree that what counts about the relevant ascriptions, i.e. what is meant by the speaker, is variable with context.

Now, even though these views are similar to a high degree, we ideally want to find out which of them is true. How can this be done? The theories obviously do not differ in explanatory force, for both explain our intuitions in the zebra-case equally well: the theories only differ in *where* in linguistic theory they accommodate our intuitions. While

¹⁰ Thanks to Andrew McCarthy here.

¹¹ Cp. Unger 1975; Unger 1984; Schaffer forthcoming.

¹² When discussing invariantism, Unger 1984, 9 paraphrases what is said and what is meant in a different way. In his mind, *what is said* is that that meadow is absolutely flat. He then goes on to paraphrase this as meaning that "that [meadow] is such that nothing could ever be flatter." I wonder how Unger's invariantist explains the literal application of the comparative form of "flat" here. How can there be a meaningful comparative of an absolute, nongradable adjective? There is no possibility for an object x to be more F than y if " F " is an absolute adjective, for the meaningful use of comparatives presupposes that the underlying adjective is gradable rather than absolute.

EC accommodates them in the semantics, SI accommodates them in postsemantic pragmatics. But should we really throw our intuitions into the pragmatic wastebasket or should they rather be accounted for semantically?

Unger 1984 takes the view that there is no fact of the matter deciding this issue, since our linguistic intuitions do not distinguish between the said and the meant in the relevant cases. In his mind there are no reliable criteria to determine whether the pragmatic processes in question are presemantic or postsemantic: our linguistic theories are simply more fine-grained than our linguistic intuitions.¹³ Contrary to this later view of Unger's, however, Schaffer forthcoming argues that in the end SI is to be preferred to EC for reasons of theoretical economy. To his mind EC needlessly complicates our semantics, while SI neither complicates our semantics, nor our pragmatics. What does Schaffer have in mind here?¹⁴ In order to fully appreciate what he is aiming at let us take a closer look at his account.

Note firstly that if there really are implicatures present when we ascribe “knowledge” or gradable adjectives, these implicatures must be triggered by systematic violations of at least one of the Gricean maxims. But which maxim is violated in such cases? Schaffer proposes that the ascriptions in question violate Grice's *Maxim of Quality*; he thus takes these ascriptions to be cases of hyperbole.¹⁵ Thus, if Benny claims “Smith knows *Z*” he makes a claim similar to “I've been waiting for ages”: she conveys some proposition by exaggerating and overstating what is actually the case. Schaffer's crucial point here is that in order to explain away our intuitions in the zebra-case he only needs “the pragmatic machinery needed to handle hyperbole[, which] is already in place.” The contextualist, on the other hand, has to add the notion of relevance in a given context to our lexicon entry of “knows φ ”, which is superfluous for the sceptical invariantist. As Schaffer stresses, the notion of relevance is governed by a fairly complex set of semantic rules as, for instance, those explicated in Lewis 1996. SI thus has a considerably simpler lexicon than EC, but the same pragmatics. The invariantist—Schaffer claims—has a more parsimonious overall theory.¹⁶

¹³ Note that Unger changed his mind: in Unger 1975 he defends SI, while in Unger 1984 he argues for what he calls *philosophical relativity*—the view that there is no fact of the matter deciding the issue between EC and SI.

¹⁴ As Schaffer himself suggests, he might be understood as arguing along the lines of *Grice's Razor*: does the contextualist multiply conventional meanings beyond necessity? As Schaffer concedes in a footnote she does not: “To adopt the terminology of David Kaplan [...], contextualism multiplies *contents*, not *characters*.” As has already been pointed out in section I, in this respect “knows φ ”, “flat” and “hot” function just like “I” and “here”: as opposed to ambiguous words “I” and “here” have only one entry in our lexicon. Contextualism thus takes “knows φ ” to be differing essentially from “bank”, for when we encounter sentences ascribing “knows φ ” so as to interpret those sentences we do not disambiguate them, i.e. we do not select one of different entries in our lexicon under “knows φ ”, we rather enrich the meaning provided by our lexicon by means of pragmatic reasoning. As Schaffer points out correctly, *Grice's Razor* accordingly cannot provide support for SI.

¹⁵ See Grice 1989; Schaffer forthcoming.

¹⁶ Notice that if the notion of simplicity is interpreted purely cognitively, i.e. if our query for the most simple linguistic theory is understood as the query for the theory that minimises the amount of

But is Schaffer's SI really to be preferred to EC for reasons of theoretical economy? And is Schaffer's main assumption that "knowledge"-ascriptions are hyperbolic tenable? In the following section I will argue in favour of EC that it is not. The section is structured as follows: it is firstly argued that ascriptions of "knows φ " and gradable adjectives are almost certainly *not* cases of hyperbole, so that the Gricean pragmatic machinery cannot really do the explanatory work Schaffer wants it to do. In the second part of this section it is then argued that methodological constraints on the construction of semantic theories in general necessitate a rejection of SI.

What's Wrong With Sceptical Invariantism?

To begin with let me note that there is a crucial difference between instances of hyperbole on the hand and ascriptions of gradable adjectives and "knows φ " on the other: it is a palpable feature of the former that speakers can easily become aware of the difference between what they say and what they mean by uttering them, while this is not the case with regard to the latter. The invariantist's error-theory simply does not seem to hold of hyperbolic utterances, for competent speakers do not at all tend to mix up what they mean with what they say when using standard hyperbolic expressions. Consider an example:

- (9) And Joseph gathered corn as the sand of the sea, very much, until he left numbering; for it was without number.¹⁷

As my empirical surveys suggest, competent speakers of English are typically perfectly aware that (9) is strictly speaking false, no matter how much corn Joseph actually gathered.¹⁸ In fact, competent speakers immediately recognise that (9) is merely meant to convey that Joseph gathered an extraordinary amount of corn, i.e. they immediately identify (9) as a trope—as an exaggeration or overstatement, to be precise. However, the mere fact that the difference between what is said and what is meant by an utterance of (9) is fairly obvious to competent speakers does not constitute unchallengeable evidence against Schaffer's attempt to assimilate "knowledge"-ascriptions to hyperbole. As Schaffer points out in a footnote, "the fact that 'I know that I have hands' is not obviously hyperbolic is no objection", since "[h]ighly formulaic tropes are particularly non-obvious [...]." Let us take a closer look at examples of "highly formulaic" cases of hyperbole in order to find out whether Schaffer is right here. Consider the following candidates:

cognitive operations to be performed by the subject, EC and SI are alike in simplicity. Whether the rules of relevance at question are pragmatic or semantic does obviously not make a cognitive difference to speakers. Obviously, this is not the notion of simplicity Schaffer has in mind. He rather argues that SI minimises theoretical machinery. However, it is not trivial that this notion of theoretical simplicity is to be regarded as theoretically virtuous. Thanks to Stephen Williams here.

¹⁷ Genesis 41, 49 (KJV).

¹⁸ Thanks to the Queen's MCR here for functioning as guinea pigs in dangerous linguistic experiments.

(10) *dying of thirst, waiting for ages, a flood of tears, tons of money, as old as the hills, a thousand apologies.*¹⁹

Note firstly that these phrases are cases of what Bach 1987 calls *standardised nonliterality*,²⁰ i.e. they are phrases that are standardly—or even always—used nonliterally. But does this mean that they are particularly non-obvious in Schaffer’s sense? Schaffer is perhaps right that they are less obviously hyperbolic than (9), but note that even though being idiomatic to a very high degree competent speakers can still fairly easily identify them as figurative. To illustrate this it is important to see that when speakers using the expressions in (10) are asked whether they are speaking literally they usually answer in the negative right away:²¹

(11) A: You’re so unpunctual, I have been waiting for ages!
B: Oh, I’m sorry. But wait—you haven’t *literally* been waiting for ages, have you?
A: Hey, of course not! I’m just exaggerating.

The way A reacts to B’s question in this dialogue is exactly the way we expect competent speakers to react. Ordinary speakers thus seem to be in a position to become easily aware that their use of the phrase “waiting for ages” is nonliteral. As a consequence, (11) suggests the falsity of one of the main principles on which Schaffer’s view rests. Schaffer:

(S1) “Our linguistic intuitions provide evidence for acceptability, and do not discriminate between semantic and pragmatic sources.”²²

Contrary to (S1), our linguistic intuitions discriminate on the whole fairly reliably between what is said and what is meant. Indeed, in the most paradigmatic cases of conversational implicature—in cases of irony, metaphor and hyperbole—our intuitions are perfectly clear about the distinction between what is said and what is meant.²³ What is more, since dialogues corresponding to (11) can be construed without difficulty for the remaining phrases in (10), it seems that the alleged connection between standardised nonliterality and non-obviousness in Schaffer’s sense does not exist. Even in cases of highly formulaic hyperbole speakers discriminate without difficulty between what they strictly speaking say and what they mean. This, however, is not the case concerning as-

¹⁹ All of these phrases except the first and the last are listed as examples for hyperbole in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992. The first example is Schaffer’s, the last is mine.

²⁰ Bach 1987, 79ff.

²¹ Again, my surveys in the Queen’s College MCR clearly confirm this. When asked whether sentences in which the above expressions were embedded were used literally, an overwhelming 100% majority of the 29 tested non-philosophers and non-linguists answered in the negative straight away.

²² Schaffer forthcoming. Schaffer ascribes this principle to Noam Chomsky.

²³ Schaffer might argue that the distinction is not clear in cases of *conventional* implicature. But to my mind the notion of conventional implicature is to be rejected due to this very fact. See Bach 1999.

criptions of “knows φ ” and gradable adjectives: the alleged nonliterally of ascriptions of these expressions is entirely hidden from the view of competent speakers. To illustrate this let me contrast the above dialogue with the following two dialogues:

- (12) A: Look over there, that field is ok for football. It’s flat!
B: Oh, great! But wait—that field isn’t *literally* flat, is it?
A: Hey, of course not! I’m just exaggerating.

And with epistemic notions:

- (13) A: Don’t worry about Benny, I know that he wants a teddy for Christmas.
B: Oh, great! But wait—you don’t *literally* know that he wants a teddy, do you?
A: Hey, of course not! I’m just exaggerating.

According to the competent speakers that I have interviewed there is something seriously wrong with these dialogues. Both B’s questions and A’s responses in (12) and (13) respectively seem conversationally highly defective. B’s questions as to whether A is speaking literally simply don’t make any sense concerning ascriptions of “knows φ ” and gradable adjectives. But if Schaffer were right, B’s questions and A’s responses should be conversationally unobjectionable, as in (11). (12) and (13) thus provide strong evidence against the view that “knowledge”-ascriptions are hyperbolic or even figurative in any other way. As a result, the sceptical invariantist’s claim that the Gricean notion of conversational implicature can be employed so as to explain away our zebra-case intuitions is to be rejected. SI cannot provide an adequate explanation of the phenomena in question.

In order to gain further support for the argument thus far let me address another question pertaining to the relation between standardised nonliterality and nonobviousness in Schaffer’s sense: how is it possible, after all, that the phrases in (10) have the literal meaning they have even though being standardly used to convey something different? This is not a trivial question, for if we adopt the plausible view that standard use determines literal meaning, then there seems to be no room for a difference between literal meaning and standard speaker meaning. However, note that it is not really surprising that there is such a difference: the phrases in (10) simply have a literal meaning distinct from what they are standardly used to convey in virtue of being *composed* out of simpler expressions: their literal meaning is a function of their syntax and the meanings of their constituents. This idea also allows us to give an explanation of why ordinary speakers recognise the literal meaning of the phrases in (10) straight away: they grasp it by means of decomposition.

At this point it is essential to emphasise that there is no such possibility of a difference between literal meaning and standard speaker meaning in the case of gradable adjectives and “knows φ ”: these expressions are obviously not decomposable in a way that leaves room for such a difference. Accordingly, their standard use *must* coincide with their

literal meaning, since there is no independent use of these words that might be taken to fix their literal meaning. In summary: gradable adjectives and “knows φ ” are not semantically complex in a way that would allow for a distinction between literal meaning and standard speaker meaning. One of the most crucial assumptions of SI has been undermined.

In order to make this point more vivid consider a scenario of radical interpretation. How would a Davidsonian field linguist observing the *Principle of Charity* interpret Mary’s and Benny’s seemingly contradictory uses of “knows Z ” in the zebra-case? So as to get her interpretative business going she would obviously have to assume that both Mary’s and Benny’s utterances are true and then attempt to construe a semantics for “knows φ ” that can account for this phenomenon: a contextualist semantics. What is more, notice that once she has ascribed such a semantics there will be no more reason to revise this interpretation along the lines of SI: there is no possible evidence for SI, since EC can account for *any* use of “flat” and “knows φ ” that the radical interpreter might come across—even for uses in contexts with extraordinary high standards.

Imagine our radical interpreter meeting a group of sceptical invariantists in a philosophy seminar. For the sake of accuracy, the invariantists have agreed to use “knows φ ” and “flat” only in those ways that they take to be literal uses of these expressions. Now, in such a situation the radical interpreter would obviously not consider her experiences in the philosophy class as falsifying her already established contextualist theory about “knows φ ” and “flat”, which she acquired while interpreting Mary and Benny. She would rather come to the conclusion that the philosophy class is a context with extraordinary standards and thus attempt to integrate the phenomena into her theory so as to interpret *as true* as many “knowledge”-ascriptions as possible. She will accordingly interpret our “flatness” and “knowledge”-ascriptions as straightforward cases of literal speech.

However, when phrases that are standardly used nonliterally—like those in (10)—are at issue, the field linguist will sooner or later be forced to accept that our utterances containing these expressions are figurative: in order to make maximum sense of our *overall* linguistic behaviour she will have to fix the meanings of the constituents of standardly nonliterally used phrases independently of their uses within these phrases and thus yield an interpretation of such phrases that characterises them as essentially figurative. The phrases’ literally said contents, which are functions of their syntax and the meanings of their constituents, are propositions that are false in almost every context of utterance.²⁴ But this interpretative option is not open to the radical interpreter as regards the interpretation of “knows φ ” and “flat”. There is no evidence for the view that “knows φ ” and “flat” are standardly used nonliterally along the sceptical invariantist’s lines, for there simply are no independent uses of these expressions or of constituents of these expressions in everyday conversation that can be singled out as fixing their literal meaning. The sceptical invariantist accordingly cannot explain why “knows φ ” and

²⁴ I’m ignoring the distinction between character and content here, assuming the expressions in question are context-insensitive for heuristic reasons.

“flat” have the literal meaning she takes these expressions to have. EC is thus our only option so as to ensure that the linguistic meaning of “knows φ ” and gradable adjectives is publicly accessible.

Let me sum up. Schaffer’s argument for SI essentially rests on the false assumption that ascriptions of “knows φ ” and gradable adjectives are hyperbolic. The notion of conversational implicature accordingly cannot do the explanatory work he wants it to do. What is more, I have argued that the contextualist complication of our semantics is indispensable in order to maintain the public accessibility of literal meaning. EC is thus to be preferred to SI since the latter cannot provide a feasible account of the meaning of epistemic notions and gradable adjectives.

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