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A defense of the ambiguity theory of 'knows'

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A DEFENSE OF THE AMBIGUITY THEORY OF 'KNOWS'

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Purdue University

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Mark R. Satta

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of

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, questions regarding the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions (sentences of the form ‘S knows that P’ where S is a subject and P a proposition) and knowledge denials (sentences of the form ‘S doesn’t know that P’) have been at the fore of a certain sector of analytic epistemology and philosophy of language. These questions include “How do we determine the truth conditions of a particular knowledge ascription or denial?”, “What sorts of factors are relevant in this determination?”, and “Is context among the relevant factors in a non-trivial way, and if so, how?” A variety of proposals have been generated in order to answer these questions—including proposals that offer a primarily semantic response. However, very little attention has been given to the possibility that part of the best answer to these questions about the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials is to posit that ‘knowledge’, ‘knows’, and their cognate terms are ambiguous.

This dissertation offers a defense of a proposal along these lines. More specifically this dissertation is a defense of the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’. The ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ is the view ‘knows’ and its cognates have more than one propositional sense (i.e. a sense that can properly be used in ‘knows that’ constructions) and that which sense of ‘knows’ is being employed in a knowledge ascription or denial plays a role in fixing the truth conditions of a knowledge ascription (in virtue of contributing to the meaning of the claim). In this dissertation, this claim is defended first by making clear how the ambiguity theory differs from others proposals on offer, second, by comparing the ambiguity theory to other leading proposals and arguing that the

ambiguity theory fares as well if not better, and third, by providing other independent arguments in favor of the view. My hope is that the work done here will give the ambiguity theory a more prominent presence in the relevant philosophical debates.

INTRODUCTION

How do we determine the truth conditions of a particular knowledge ascription or denial? What sorts of factors are relevant in this determination? Is context among the relevant factors in a non-trivial way, and if so, how? What about practical stakes? Questions like these regarding the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions (sentences of the form ‘S knows that P’ where S is a subject and P a proposition) and knowledge denials (sentences of the form ‘S doesn’t know that P’) have been at the fore of a certain sector of analytic epistemology and philosophy of language for well over a quarter of a century now. For a long while there appeared to be a single battle line dividing the field into two camps.

On the one side were those who sought a purely epistemological answer to these questions—i.e. those seeking to answer the linguistic question about truth conditions of ascriptions and denials only derivatively via answering questions like “what is the nature of knowledge itself?” and “what does it mean to know something?”. On the other side were those who proposed a linguistic answer—i.e. those seeking to answer the linguistic questions about the truth conditions of ascriptions and denials directly, by positing the context-sensitive nature of the words ‘knows’, ‘knowledge’, etc. The two camps—using the terminology of Peter Unger—have come to be known as invariantism and contextualism respectively.¹

This basic divide between the contextualists and invariantists gave rise to a second, initially co-extensive, but supervening, divide. The new divide was between two types of attempts to explain any “shifty” (to borrow a term from Fantl and McGrath) or seemingly context-sensitive behavior of knowledge ascriptions. One type of explanation

¹ As we go along we’ll see that using this initial divide to describe the distinction between contextualism and invariantism won’t do, but it’s a useful starting point with a certain philosophical heritage.

posited that this appearance of shiftiness was a purely pragmatic phenomenon concerning only what it is appropriate to assert. This is the view of the classical invariantist. The other type of explanation posited that this shiftiness was rooted in semantics and that as a result there can be changes in the literal truth values of such sentences. This is the view of the (at this point classical) contextualist.

In the years since, the picture has been complicated in a number of ways. The initial lines have been redrawn and many new dividing lines have been added. Proponents of subject-sensitive invariantism, for example, posit a pragmatic “shiftiness” in the nature of knowing itself (as opposed to in the nature of ‘knowing’ itself). That is to say, subject-sensitive invariantists don’t think the answer to the “contextualist data” (i.e. the considerations offered by contextualists in favor of their view) lends itself to a semantic answer concerning the nature of ‘knowing’ over the nature of knowing itself. Like contextualists, subject-sensitive invariantists think there is a role that practical concerns play in the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions. But, unlike for contextualists, for subject-sensitive invariantists it is the practical concerns of the *subject* of knowledge ascriptions, as opposed to that of the *ascriber* of knowledge, that matter.

Still others have retained the contextualists’ interest in using a semantics of context-sensitivity for knowledge ascriptions and denials to solve epistemic puzzles, but posit that it is the assessor’s context that matters, not the attributor’s context (as the contextualists argue). Others have made a distinction between the truth conditions of the knowledge ascribing and denying sentences themselves from the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and denying utterances—suggesting different accounts and semantic mechanisms for the truth of each. And still others have made the distinction between the context-sensitivity of the content of knowledge ascriptions and denials and other mechanisms for the context-sensitivity of the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials. These theorists have posited things like epistemic or knowledge parameters, similar to more familiar parameters such as those of world and time, as the means by

which the context-sensitivity of the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials is obtained.²

But within all these complications the following has not been challenged: *If* there is something interestingly non-invariantist going on with the semantics of knowledge ascriptions (whether understood as sentences, utterances, or both) that affects truth conditions, then the reason why this is so rests upon some kind of mechanism allowing for context-sensitivity—i.e. a mechanism for which the upshot is a strict covariation between certain contexts and certain truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials. But taking this for granted seems to me to be a mistake because such an assumption rules out a number of, what I take to be, plausible views, including the views that ‘knows’ is ambiguous, that ‘knows’ is vague, or that the contextualist data is best accounted for by positing an incoherence in our ordinary, non-explicated concept of knowledge. This dissertation, in part, seeks to offer a reason to toss out this assumption by arguing for the plausibility of an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’—i.e. the theory that ‘knows’ is ambiguous and that this ambiguity affects the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials.

Perhaps in part because of the aforementioned assumption, the ambiguity theory has received very little attention in the literature on the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials. But I think it is a view worthy of attention. This dissertation is structured in a manner that, I hope, will be conducive to garnering some attention for the view. More specifically, this dissertation is comprised of the four papers I take the ambiguity theory to be currently in the greatest need of if the view is to start being taken seriously by a broader audience. Those four papers are as follows.

Chapter 1 provides a rather detailed history of contextualism by way of an examination of the assumptions brought to the discussion from philosophy of language, and at the end of this chapter a case for the distinction between contextualism and the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ is made. The point of engaging in this activity is to make clear what the relevant distinctions are between the numerous contextualist views

² From here on out the phrase ‘and its denials’ will typically be omitted, but should be viewed as implied where appropriate.

currently on offer and the ambiguity theory. There are at least two reasons why this is important. First, only once this is all laid out can one see clearly what some of the largely unquestioned assumptions in the discussion on the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials have been heretofore. And it will be useful to see what these assumptions are in order to begin challenging certain ones. Second, I've found that a common initial reaction to the ambiguity theory is the intuition that somehow the ambiguity theory must end up simply being a type of contextualism. I think this view is a mistake, and in order for one to clearly understand what's at stake in the discussion, one needs to see why this is a mistake. Thus, in many ways addressing these matters functions as a necessary precursor to the three chapters that follow—each of which pull from the discussion in the first chapter in their own way.

Chapter 2 and 3 pit the ambiguity theory against, what I take to be, its two greatest rivals—namely, epistemic contextualism and non-skeptical classical invariantism. In Chapter 2, I argue that the ambiguity theory has all the same strengths as contextualism and has a number of advantages that contextualism lacks. In Chapter 3, I look at the counterbalancing strengths and weaknesses of non-skeptical classical invariantism and argue that, on balance, the ambiguity theory currently appears to be the better supported view. In Chapter 4, in response to the only substantive criticism of the ambiguity theory already in the literature that I know of, I argue that the view that 'knows' is ambiguous enjoys a linguistic grounding in virtue of its status as a commonly used English verb. My hope is that the combined effect of these considerations will allow the ambiguity theory to gain traction in the philosophical discussion on the nature of the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions.

CHAPTER 1: THEORIES OF MEANING, THE DEVELOPMENT OF EPISTEMIC CONTEXTUALISM, AND A NEW CONTENDER

As the title would suggest, this dissertation is a defense of the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’. The ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ is the view that ‘knows’ and its cognates have more than one propositional sense—i.e. that ‘knows’ and its cognates have more than one sense that can properly be used in ‘knows that’ (etc.) constructions—and that which sense of ‘knows’ is employed in a knowledge ascription is part of what determines the truth conditions for that knowledge ascription. Large portions of this first chapter say very little about the ambiguity theory directly. This may naturally raise the question: why write this chapter? The answer to that question is multi-fold, but my primary reason for writing this chapter is a practical one. Based on my experiences it would seem that *if* the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ is to be viewed as a serious position in the literature on knowledge ascriptions *then* a clear case for why it is not (merely) another type of epistemic contextualism needs to be made. I believe that providing a discussion of some of the relevant philosophy of language along with a clear presentation of the history and development of epistemic contextualism is the best way to begin making such a case.

My reason for thinking that the ambiguity theory must be clearly distinguished from contextualism in order for the ambiguity theory to be accepted as a serious position in the literature on knowledge ascriptions stems from the reactions I have received from epistemologists (and philosophers in general) when they are first presented with the ambiguity theory. Two types of reactions are by far the most common. The first is a supportive reaction in which the philosopher expresses that the ambiguity theory seems initially plausible and/or appealing. (The reaction is probably slightly more common from philosophers specializing in an area other than epistemology.) The second reaction consists in the putting forward of some question or other along the following lines “Isn’t

that just a type of contextualism?” or “How is your theory any different than contextualism?”. (This reaction is probably slightly more common from epistemologists.) Usually, the conversation that follows if one’s initial response to the ambiguity theory is that it seems like a type of contextualism is a conversation about what counts as epistemic contextualism. And often once down that road it is difficult to get back to a conversation about the merits of the ambiguity theory itself.

My hope is that in presenting a history of epistemic contextualism with an emphasis on how the view has developed over time and how assumptions in the philosophy of language have shaped that development will show two things. First, I hope it will show what lies at the heart of epistemic contextualism (which is more than simply sense variation across contexts). Second, once one sees what lies at the heart of the view, I hope it will be evident why the ambiguity theory is not a type of contextualism. Thus, by including this chapter I hope to guide the mind of the reader who would otherwise stop to argue that the ambiguity theory is “just a type of contextualism” past this affair and onto the consideration of how the ambiguity theory holds up against its competitors (contextualism included).

Incidentally, another reason why I take writing this chapter to be worthwhile is that the examination which follows, indirectly, reveals an advantage that the ambiguity theory has over a number of newer contextualist positions being introduced into the literature on knowledge ascriptions. This advantage is that the ambiguity theory is compatible with a broader range of general semantic theories than those other views. For someone (such as myself) who is inclined to accept a more formal or minimalist semantics, the fact that the ambiguity theory is compatible with such a theory of meaning is an important strength of the view.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 provides a somewhat lengthy, but I think necessary, excursus into semantics. The purpose of this endeavor is to make clear what the landscape is in a relevant portion of the philosophy of language. An understanding of these views in philosophy language will prove useful in understanding why the new types of epistemic contextualism being put forward have the trajectory they do (or so I will argue). But more importantly, it will help to highlight certain consistent

commitments that all versions of contextualism heretofore have in common, commitments which the ambiguity theory does not share.

Section 2 begins with a presentation and examination of epistemic contextualism as it has been articulated by some of its earliest and most prolific defenders. The goals of this first portion of the section are, one, to make clear the traditional picture of epistemic contextualism and, two, to prime the reader to pay attention to certain implicit assumptions about the nature of the view that have been called into question by some more contemporary theorists who have put forward new views under the banner of epistemic contextualism. Section 2 ends with a presentation and examination of these newer views.

In Section 3, the background laid in the first two sections begins to earn its keep. The goal of this section is to highlight some common features at the heart of all the views under the contextualist banner, and to argue that, because the ambiguity theory lacks these features, that it ought to be viewed as a distinct position. The taxonomic point that the ambiguity theory isn't a type of contextualism isn't of great importance itself, but the recognition and acceptance of the differences between contextualism and the ambiguity theory are. This is a necessary precursor to understanding what's at stake between the two views and why the ambiguity theory ought to be seriously considered. To close out Section 3, the content of the earlier sections will be used to show an advantage that the ambiguity theory has over many of the other newer forms of contextualism being put forward. This will be but the first of many advantages that, throughout this dissertation, I will argue the ambiguity theory has over its competitors.

1.1 Theories of Semantics

Our guide for this excursion through the semantic landscape is Emma Borg, and our primary guidebook her 2012 monograph *Pursuing Meaning*. There are other guidebooks which also could have served us very well,³ but, in addition to being clear and easy to follow, the way in which Borg carves up the terrain in *Pursuing Meaning* is particularly amenable for the purposes of this chapter. And these seemed to me sufficient

³ Other such useful guidebooks include Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and Recanati (2004).

reasons to select this particular guide and guidebook. My only hope is that the clarity of Borg's work is not too greatly diminished by this presentation of it.

I'm going to go ahead and give away some bits of the ending now in order to help focus our attention on certain important points as we go, and then we'll wrap back around to covering things in more detail. Borg presents five different positions one could adopt concerning the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. Two of these positions—minimalism and indexicalism—she describes as falling under the heading of “general formal approaches to semantics.” My claim is that when epistemic contextualism first came onto the scene, the resulting discussion between the contextualists and the invariantists was an “in house” disagreement between parties all accepting, at least implicitly, a general formal approach to semantics. In this in-house disagreement several tenets, including the tenets of general formal approaches to semantics, functioned as mere background assumptions. Because these assumptions were implicit and shared between the contextualist (who in most cases expressed an “indexicalist”-leaning view) and the invariantist (who in most cases expressed a “minimalist”-leaning view) it would be easy for one with general formal semantic leanings to miss that certain assumptions were present at all.

Enter Borg's next two positions—dual pragmatics and relativism. On these theories of semantics, certain tenets of the general formal approach to semantics are abandoned. The relevant upshot of this for our purposes is that, on a dual pragmatics or relativist theory of semantics, knowledge ascriptions and knowledge denials are capable of being context-sensitive in very different sorts of ways from the ways in which the early epistemic contextualists have traditionally suggested they are. As views like dual pragmatics and relativism have gained in popularity, the new possibilities they allow for concerning knowledge ascription have been recognized by philosophers and new views concerning the relationship between context and the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials have entered the discussion as a result. Because these new views often hinge on a rejection of one or more of the implicit assumptions found in the earlier conversation between invariantists and contextualists, the language used and concepts employed in the conversation shifted in several ways. A clear recognition of these

necessary linguistic and conceptual shifts and the changes in thought that have motivated them are important for fully understanding traditional forms of contextualism, the newer contextualist positions on offer, and ultimately, the ambiguity theory of ‘knows.’

So let’s take our first step towards this fuller understanding and turn to Borg’s take on the semantic terrain. In order to frame her discussion, Borg uses four theses and a “context-shifting argument” (to be explained momentarily) to show the distinctions between the five different semantic positions she examines. The five views are explained, in large part, by which of the following four theses they accept and which they reject and how, as a result, they deal with context-shifting arguments. The four theses are as follows:

- (i) Semantic content for well-formed declarative sentences is truth-evaluable content.
- (ii) Semantic content for a sentence is fully determined by its syntactic structure and lexical content: the meaning of a sentence is exhausted by the meaning of its parts and their mode of composition.
- (iii) There are only a limited number of context-sensitive expressions in natural language.
- (iv) Recovery of semantic content is possible without access to current speaker intentions (crudely, grasp of semantic content involves ‘word reading’ not ‘mindreading’).⁴

The other marker of categorization is the response to context-shifting arguments (CSAs for short). A CSA is a case put forward to elicit the intuition that a sentence must be context-sensitive due to a change in the truth value of the sentence when only a change in the context of utterance has occurred (without a change in anything lexico-syntactic). The sample CSA Borg provides goes as follows:

“[I]magine a fridge which contains only a small puddle of milk on its floor. Two conversations concerning the fridge take place:

⁴ Borg (2012, 4-5).

Scenario 1: Hugo is dejectedly stirring a cup of black coffee. Noting this Odile says ‘There is milk in the fridge.’

Scenario 2: Hugo has been cleaning the fridge. Odile opens the fridge door and says ‘There is milk in the fridge.’

The intuition which drives much of the current debate in this area is that what Odile says can differ in truth value between these two scenarios.”⁵

The general hope of one using a CSA to advocate for a non-formal semantics is that our intuition in such a case will be that Odile has said something false in Scenario 1, but true in Scenario 2. A way to see the distinctions between each of the views Borg considers is to see how each addresses this intuition that the CSA is meant to elicit. (We’ll look at those responses shortly.)

To further aid her presentation of the terrain, Borg also identifies two broad categories on opposite ends of a spectrum (one of which has been mentioned already). On one end of the spectrum is the “general formal approach to semantics extant in the work of theorists like the early Wittgenstein, Frege, Russell, Carnap, Davidson, and Kaplan (and many others).”⁶ At the other end of the spectrum is “full-blooded used-based theories”⁷ in which both individual word and sentence meanings remain indeterminate without a context of use. The general formal approach is characterized as a family of views that accept theses (i) and (ii) above (i.e. a family of views that accept that semantic content for declarative sentences is truth-evaluable and that semantic content of sentences is determined by syntax and lexical content). The used-based approach is characterized as a family of views, inspired largely by the later works of Wittgenstein, in which the formal approach is rejected in favor of the view that “it is only in use that words and concepts come to have particular conditions of application.”⁸

Borg begins the discussion with her preferred view—*minimal semantics* (or simply *minimalism*). According to Borg, minimalism “as the name suggests, wants to

⁵ Borg (2012, 17).

⁶ Borg (2012, 5).

⁷ Borg (2012, 2).

⁸ Borg (2012, 26).

offer a pretty minimal account of the inter-relations between semantics and pragmatics”⁹ and “holds that while context can affect literal semantic content in the case of genuine (i.e. lexically or syntactically marked) context-sensitive expressions (e.g. indexicals, demonstratives, tense markers), this is pretty much the limit of pragmatic input to semantic content.”¹⁰

The minimalist accepts each of the four theses—(i)-(iv)—listed earlier and is the furthest on the formal semantics end of the spectrum. Borg reaffirms minimalism’s commitment to these theses writing that,

“According to minimal semantics, natural language sentences mean things, the things they mean are in some sense complete (that is to say, they are propositional, truth-evaluable contents), and these literal meanings are determined as a function of the lexical elements a sentence contains together with its syntactic form. Thus minimalism claims that well-formed sentences like ‘La neige est blanche’, ‘Everyone likes chocolate’ and ‘Two plus two equals four’ possess literal linguistic meanings (semantic content), meanings which (in some, broad sense) make claims about the way the world is, and furthermore that the semantic content each has is (more or less) that which it appears to wear on its sleeve...”¹¹

The commitment to the complete (truth-evaluable) meaning of sentences constitutes a commitment to (i) and the claim that this occurs in virtue of the lexical content and syntax alone constitutes a commitment to (ii). It is the tendency of the minimalist to think that the semantic content of sentences is “that which it appears to wear on its sleeve” which constitutes her commitment to (iii), with a commitment to (iv) (or at least something close to it) falling out naturally from the previous commitments.

Given the commitments of the minimalist, a natural response for the minimalist to a CSA like the one given above is to claim that the truth value of the sentence has not changed across the scenarios. Rather, what has changed is what is *conveyed* (i.e. what is pragmatically implied), and this change in implication—not literal meaning—is what

⁹ Borg (2012, ix).

¹⁰ Borg (2012, ix).

¹¹ Borg (2012, 3).

grounds the intuition (which, on this response, is ultimately a mistaken intuition) that the truth value of the claim itself has changed.¹² Someone familiar with the literature on knowledge ascriptions likely already sees the parallels between this general tendency and the strategy of many classical invariantists to point to the distinction between truth conditions and what's appropriate to assert in resisting contextualism.

Borg next presents the position of *indexicalism*. The indexicalist, like the minimalist, accepts the tenets of formal semantics—(i) and (ii). But unlike the minimalist, the indexicalist thinks that context-sensitivity in natural language is far more common than it initially appears. Thus, the indexicalist rejects (iii) on the grounds that “if our intuitions suggest that the content of a sentence shifts, in various respects, across shifts in context of utterance, then this is compelling evidence for the existence of a lexico-syntactic context-sensitivity in that sentence.”¹³ Because indexicalism doesn't require any particular means by which this lexico-syntactic context-sensitivity occurs, indexicalism itself represents a family of more specific views on which specific means for the context-sensitivity are posited.¹⁴ However, the umbrella of views which count as part of indexicalism is importantly limited to those views on which the presence of the context-sensitivity is lexico-syntactic. Therefore, in responding to CSAs, the indexicalist is likely to claim that there has been a shift in the content (and thus potentially the truth conditions) of the sentence across contexts, but that whatever means by which this shift is explained must itself be lexico-syntactic (e.g. positing the presence of hidden indexicals or the context-sensitivity of predicate expressions—two examples Borg provides).¹⁵ Just as there are certain parallels between invariantism and minimalism, so also there are parallels between traditional forms of epistemic contextualism and indexicalism concerning the relationship between semantics and pragmatics they put forward.

¹² Borg offers a response along these lines in Borg (2012, 18-19). Her strategy is an instance of what Keith DeRose (1999, 2002, 2009) calls a “warranted assertability maneuver.” Such maneuvers are discussed in detail as they related to knowledge ascriptions and denials in chapter 3.

¹³ Borg (2012, 20).

¹⁴ See Borg (2012, 20-21) for examples of acceptable methods.

¹⁵ That said, one could still be an indexicalist and reject that on this particular CSA the truth conditions have changed between utterances. All that is essential is that an indexicalist will in general feel that the truth conditions do often change in such circumstances and that this occurs for lexico-syntactic reasons.

If the traditional contextualist tends to have in mind an indexicalist-leaning picture about semantics more generally and the invariantist a minimalist-leaning picture of semantics, an important upshot of this is that there is a good deal of semantic common ground that they share. I will later argue that it is this common ground that led to certain assumptions initially resting implicitly as part of the conversation concerning epistemic contextualism until certain newer advocates of epistemic contextualism—who did not share the formal semantic assumptions of the invariantist and traditional contextualist—came onto the scene.

The third view Borg presents she calls contextualism in *Pursuing Meaning*. This usage of the word ‘contextualism’ should not be confused with the primary view being considered in this chapter: epistemic contextualism (i.e. contextualism about ‘knows’).¹⁶ In order to try and mitigate confusion I will refer to this third view as either *semantic contextualism* or, as often as is possible, by the name Borg gives the view in her earlier work—*dual pragmatics*.¹⁷ Borg writes of semantic contextualism/dual pragmatics that it rejects “the idea that the route to semantic content runs exclusively via lexico-syntactic elements”—i.e. it rejects (ii)—and that according to dual pragmatics the following holds:

“Instead, to properly account for the depth and range of context-sensitivity in the propositions we literally express on occasions of utterance, we must allow pragmatic features a much freer reign within the semantic realm...The proposal of contextualism [i.e. dual pragmatics] is thus that pragmatic properties get to act *twice*: once in the usual Gricean, post-semantic way to deliver implicatures, but also once again in a non-standard, inherently semantic way to deliver the proposition literally expressed by the sentence as relativized to a given context”¹⁸

Thus, unlike the minimalist and the indexicalist, the dual pragmatist doesn’t limit the influence of the pragmatic on meaning to the lexico-syntactic. So in assessing what is happening in a CSA, the dual pragmatist can claim that there is a change in semantic

¹⁶ Presumably there could be views sensibly labeled ‘epistemic contextualism’ that are not merely views concerning contextualism about ‘knows.’ However, in this paper, as is common, I am treating ‘epistemic contextualism’ and ‘contextualism about ‘knows’” synonymously.

¹⁷ See Borg (2004).

¹⁸ Borg (2012, 22); bracketed content added.

content even if there is no context-sensitive lexico-syntactic element present. Borg writes that the dual pragmatist can say the following in response to the CSA she provides:

“So, when Odile utters ‘There is milk in the fridge’ in the first kind of scenario above, what she literally asserts may be that *there is milk in the fridge in a form suitable for coffee*—the context acts to enrich the proposition literally expressed even though this is not demanded by any lexico-syntactic element of the sentence.”¹⁹

Borg calls this pragmatic effect on semantic content which is free of any lexico-syntactic element in the sentence ‘*free pragmatic enrichment*’.²⁰

The fourth view Borg puts forward she calls *semantic relativism*. According to Borg, minimalism, indexicalism, and dual pragmatics all share the common feature of treating “contextually determined content as *contributing to the proposition expressed by a sentence as uttered in a given content*”, but relativism parts ways from all of these views by treating “contextual material (in at least some cases) as contributing to the *parameters* against which a proposition is assessed for truth or falsity.”²¹ Thus, on the relativist account, there may be additional context-sensitive parameters posited beyond those which are more standard to accept like the parameters of world and time. For example, with a sentence like ‘Jill is rich’ there may be “a contextually determined parameter of richness against which the unique propositional content expressed” by the sentence needs to be assessed.²² Like indexicalism, relativism describes a family of views which vary depending on the specific nature of the additional context-sensitive parameters posited.

There are a couple of important points to note about relativism. First, like dual pragmatics, the type of context-sensitivity posited is outside of the lexico-syntactic element, but unlike dual pragmatics, relativism goes even a step farther by positing the context-sensitivity as lying beyond the *content* of the sentence completely (at least in some circumstances). Second, relativism, unlike the other views mentioned heretofore,

¹⁹ Borg (2012, 23).

²⁰ Borg (2012, 22).

²¹ Borg (2012, 23); emphasis added.

²² Borg (2012, 24).

posits relevant context-sensitivity from the context of the *assessor*. Thus, a view like semantic relativism dovetails nicely with a view like John MacFarlane’s epistemic relativism concerning knowledge ascriptions and denials.²³

Relatively little needs to be said about the final view Borg puts forward—*occasionalism*. Borg writes that “[a]ccording to occasionalism there is simply no such thing as determinate content outside a context, for it is only in use that words and concepts come to have particular conditions of application.”²⁴ The reason why relatively little needs to be said about the view is that if occasionalism is true, it trivially follows that some form of epistemic contextualism is true if epistemic contextualism is understood as the view that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive. This is because on occasionalism *all* natural language is context-sensitive. Thus, on occasionalism there is no reason to make a distinct argument for the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions in addition to the general arguments offered in support of the context-sensitivity of language in general.

Before turning to the history and development of epistemic contextualism itself, it will be useful to consider one additional linguistic matter. Consider the three-tier distinction between 1) the content of a *sentence* as uttered in a particular context, 2) the content (*literally*) asserted by an utterance, and 3) the content that is (*merely*) conveyed or implied by an utterance. One may deny that these three levels are distinct in actuality, but it’s reasonable to acknowledge at least the *conceptual* distinctness of the three. (Additionally, one may recognize the distinctness of these three levels yet think that certain entailment relations hold such the content on one level always matches the content on another.)

Traditionally, epistemic contextualism has been expressed as being about *sentences uttered in particular contexts*. Yet it is not uncommon for it to appear as if epistemic contextualism is also about the content *literally asserted* in particular context. I will argue in the next section that the reason for this is that for a long time the distinction between the truth values of sentences uttered in a context and the truth values of the

²³ MacFarlane (2005, 2014).

²⁴ Borg (2012), 26.

utterances themselves was irrelevant in the debate between contextualism and invariantism due to certain commonalities shared by the participants about semantics more generally. As a result, it was not problematic to treat the content of a sentence, as uttered in the particular context, and the literal content of the utterance of that sentence itself as one and the same. Thus, interchangeable talk of sentences and utterances allowed for epistemic contextualism to be a view about the truth conditions of assertions in addition to a view about the truth value of sentences. And perhaps for a time, due to this interchangeability, there was no fact of the matter as to whether the view was about merely sentences versus about sentences and assertions both. However, advocates of some newer forms of contextualism have made use of the distinction between the content of a sentence uttered in a particular context and the content literally asserted by that utterance. Thus, this distinction has become important. Conversely, some of these newer views gloss over the distinction between the content literally asserted by an utterance versus the content merely pragmatically conveyed by an utterance—a distinction important in the work of several prominent classical invariantists. Thus, in parsing out the different views on offer, it will be important to keep track of which level of linguistic content is being discussed.

1.2 The History and Development of Epistemic Contextualism

Credit for the introduction of the term contextualism (and its counterpart term invariantism)—at least as these terms are typically used in epistemology and the literature on knowledge ascriptions—is given to Peter Unger who explains and uses these terms in his 1984 book *Philosophical Relativity*.²⁵ Unger does not provide formal definitions for either term, but he explains the terms in such a way that a reader can clearly gain an understanding of the general meaning of the terms sufficient for Unger's purposes.

As Unger uses the terms, contextualism and invariantism are two disparate, general semantic positions which can be applied to many other terms aside from 'knows'

²⁵ Unger (1984). Unger uses the semantic positions of contextualism and invariantism as a crucial part of his arguments for semantic relativity and philosophical relativity—views which are not relevant to the discussion at hand.

and its cognates.²⁶ We'll start by looking at a few things Unger says about these general positions. Because Unger does not formally define the terms, I (obviously) cannot offer any formal definitions of his here. However, there are a number of things that he does say about contextualism and invariantism which I take to be worth reporting and commenting on. To begin, it is important to note that Unger speaks of contextualism and invariantism as “two *semantic* approaches.”²⁷ Related to this, Unger says of the two views that,

“...there is much that the contextualist and the invariantist may take as common coin: Both can say that there is a lot of pragmatic understanding and a lot of semantic understanding. But, within a certain range, there may be room for different allocations: The contextualist has the semantic understanding amount to *more* than the invariantist would have, and the pragmatic amount to *less*.”²⁸

Here are several things worth noting. First, the key distinction offered between the contextualist and the invariantist, as general positions, is a difference in the amount of work that semantics does versus pragmatics in creating understanding. For the contextualist, semantics plays a greater role than it does for the invariantist. For the invariantist, pragmatics plays a greater role than it does for the contextualist.

Second, as expressed here, the difference between contextualism and invariantism is a matter of *degree*, not a matter of a complete difference in kind. And perhaps for certain middle-of-the-road semantic positions it will not be clear whether or not the position is contextualist or invariantist. (This possibility may help make sense of Unger's claim that “As we shall develop [contextualism and invariantism], each of these views is only vaguely conceived.”²⁹) However, this spectrum view of contextualism and invariantism *generally* is compatible with the view that contextualism and invariantism *about 'knows'* specifically is *not* a matter of difference on a spectrum. When looking at

²⁶ From here on use of the phrase “and its cognates” will typically be omitted. It should be taken to be implied where appropriate.

²⁷ Unger (1984, 6); emphasis added.

²⁸ Unger (1984, 43).

²⁹ Unger (1984), 6. I'll admit I'm unsure what the best reading of this quote is. I've vacillated back and forth between reading this as referring to a fuzzy boundary between the positions or as reading it as a claim which acknowledges that the two views have been merely characterized and not defined.

contextualism and invariantism as general semantic inclinations, one's being a contextualist or an invariantist in regards to 'knows' merely moves one a notch in the direction of general contextualism or general invariantism respectively, but when considering contextualism or invariantism about 'knows', the difference can be characterized appropriately as a difference in kind and as absolute. This is because when it comes to the matter at hand (the appropriate semantic treatment of 'knows') the answers given by the two positions are simply opposing accounts of the semantics of the specific term in question (e.g., "yes, 'knows' is context-sensitive" versus "no, it is not").

Third, Unger's characterization of contextualism and invariantism generally is that, contextualism and invariantism are not treated as opposites *per se* nor are they treated as exhaustive of the logical space. This is evidenced by the fact that Unger considers a third position (a view which he calls sortalism) which he concludes is inferior to both contextualism and invariantism and which he considers to be neither a form of contextualism nor a form of invariantism. Unger focuses on contextualism and invariantism because he thinks there is no other position which is as good as either (except for the other)—not because there aren't any other possible positions.³⁰

Finally, when it comes to Unger's account of contextualism about 'knows', Unger doesn't deal with what specific semantic mechanism makes 'knows' context-sensitive (e.g. he does not claim that knowledge is an indexical or anything like that), but it is clear that he takes 'knows' itself to be context-sensitive in a semantic sense.³¹ While Unger is credited with the introduction of the term 'contextualism' into epistemology, it is Keith DeRose and Stewart Cohen who have been the most influential and prolific proponents of the view. It is to their characterizations of contextualism that we turn next. Let's start with DeRose.

³⁰ For the discussion of sortalism (a view which Unger attributes to Dretske (1981) and which bears certain similarities to Jonathan Shaffer's contrastivism (2004)) and for the potential of other views aside from invariantism and contextualism see section 2.4 of Unger (1984).

³¹ Unger's assumption that on contextualism 'knows' itself is context-sensitive in a distinctively semantic way is expressed clearly when he writes that "Once it is thought that a contextualist account of 'know' does specify some contextually sensitive conditions that are fully determinate for the term, the skeptic has a very long and hard row to hoe" (1984, 51).

In DeRose's twenty-plus years of writing in defense of contextualism, he has put forward a number of similar (and compatible) definitions for contextualism. Here are a couple of those definitions:

“...a ‘contextual’ theory of knowledge attributions...is a theory according to which the truth conditions of sentences of the form ‘S knows that p’ or ‘S does not know that p’ vary in certain ways according to the context in which the sentences are uttered.”³²

“Contextualists hold that the truth conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences (sentences of the form ‘S knows that P’ and ‘S doesn’t know that P’ and related variants of such sentences) fluctuate in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered. What so varies is the epistemic standards that S must meet (or in the case of the denial of knowledge, fail to meet) for such a statement to be true.”³³

(The latter quote occurs later in DeRose's work and definitions very similar to this are retained in other works.³⁴) There are a number of things worth noting here.

First, both definitions address an impact of context on *sentences*. More specifically, both definitions address an impact of context on the *truth conditions* of sentences.³⁵ Second, the type of context referred to in both cases is a *context of utterance*—i.e. the context of the speaker who utters the knowledge ascription or denial. This is why a view like John MacFarlane's relativism which appeals to a *context of assessment* is generally not viewed as a type of contextualism.³⁶ Third, in the case of DeRose's latter definition, it is the *epistemic standard* of the context of utterance which is identified as the feature of context which can impact the truth conditions of a knowledge-ascribing or knowledge-denying sentence.

³² DeRose (1992, 914).

³³ DeRose (2002, 168).

³⁴ See for example DeRose (2004, 2005, 2006, 2009).

³⁵ The fact that contextualism deals with sentences would seem to be enough to make contextualism, properly speaking, a view in philosophy of language. This, of course, is not to say—as DeRose has been diligent to point out (e.g., DeRose (2009, 18-19))—that it is not also a question properly speaking in epistemology, or that if it is not properly speaking a question in epistemology, that it is not a question which is important to epistemology.

³⁶ Seen, for example, in MacFarlane (2005, 2014)

Thus, at least as DeRose construes contextualism we have a relationship in which the epistemic standard present in a context of utterances constitutes the first relatum, and the truth conditions of the sentence uttered in that sentence constitute the second relatum. But what exactly is the nature of this relationship? DeRose writes in the first quote that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials “*vary* in certain ways” with changes in the context of utterance and in the second quote that they “*fluctuate* in certain ways” with such changes. So, the relationship is such that certain changes in the one—the context of utterance—lead to, or bring about, changes in the other—the truth conditions of the relevant knowledge ascription or denial.

Two points are worth making explicit. First, it is the context that is responsible, in some sense, for the change in the truth conditions, not the other way around. Second, the relevant variation in the truth conditions seems to be guaranteed with the right changes in the context—i.e. it is not the case that a particular change in context, which is sufficient to bring about a change in the relevant knowledge ascription, could, all other things being equal, fail to bring about such a change. When I say that certain variations in context guarantee certain variations in the truth conditions of the sentence uttered what I am getting at is the fact that the rules of variation seem to be determinate and mechanistic. When the right sort of change occurs in the context of utterance, the corresponding change in the truth conditions will occur.

To see how this sort of thing gets played in the cases offered by contextualists, let’s turn to DeRose’s oft-cited bank cases.

Bank Case A: My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says, ‘Maybe the bank won’t be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturday.’ I reply, ‘No, I

know it'll be open tomorrow. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It's open until noon.'

Bank Case B: My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account before Monday morning, the important check we wrote will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, 'Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?' Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, "Well, no, I don't know. I'd better go in and make sure."³⁷

DeRose follows up his description of these cases writing the following: "Assume in each case that the bank will in fact be open on the Saturday in question, and that there is nothing unusual about either case that has not been included in my description of it."³⁸ DeRose thinks that his first-person knowledge ascription in Case A is true, and that his first-person knowledge denial in Case B is also true. The reason why the knowledge ascription can be true in Case A and the knowledge denial true in Case B is because the fixed degree of justification DeRose had in both cases, which was sufficient for a true knowledge ascription in Case A, was made insufficient by a change in context. The context was the only different input between the two situations, and this was sufficient for the change in output.

But for the point at hand what's most important to note is that DeRose would also claim that had he restated his knowledge ascription from Case A in Case B, his knowledge ascription would have been false in Case B and it doesn't seem it could have been otherwise given that context. The presentation of outcomes like this by

³⁷ DeRose (2009, 1-2).

³⁸ DeRose (2009, 2).

contextualists functions as evidence that there is a mechanistic shift between certain changes in context and the truth conditions of the relevant knowledge ascriptions and denials. That this is so will prove an important point in differentiating contextualism from the ambiguity theory.

So far we've seen that epistemic contextualism is a view about the relationship between a context of utterance and the truth conditions of the sentence uttered in that context—namely, a relationship in which certain changes in context are sufficient to bring about certain changes in the truth conditions of the relevant knowledge ascriptions and denials. It is my claim that this constitutes the heart of epistemic contextualism and that the best test of whether or not a view ought to count as a type of epistemic contextualism is whether or not it satisfies this description. In the examination of newer forms of contextualism that follows I hope to be able to reinforce this claim.

At this point it will be useful to turn to how another prolific defender of epistemic contextualism, Stewart Cohen, has described the view. Cohen opens his frequently-cited 1999 defense of contextualism with the following:

“Suppose one speaker says about a subject *S* and a proposition *P*, ‘*S* knows *P*.’ At the very same time, another speaker says of the very same subject and proposition, ‘*S* does not know *P*.’ Must one of the two be speaking falsely? According to the view I will call ‘contextualism’, both speakers can be speaking the truth. Contextualism is the view that ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive—the truth values of sentences containing the words ‘know’, and its cognates depend on contextually determined standards. Because of this, sentences of the form ‘*S* knows *P*’ can, at one time, have different truth values in different contexts. Now when I say ‘contexts’, I mean ‘contexts of ascription’. So the truth values of a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can vary depending on things like purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc. of the speakers who utter these sentences.”³⁹

In this passage Cohen touches upon a number of important issues. To begin, note that Cohen preserves the same core of what constitutes epistemic contextualism as DeRose.

³⁹Cohen (1999, 58).

For Cohen, epistemic contextualism is a view about the relationship between the truth values of knowledge ascriptions and context (via contextually determined [epistemic] standards). Cohen describes the relationship as a *dependency* such that the truth conditions of the sentences are dependent upon context. This preserves both the fact that it is context which influences truth conditions, not the other way around, and the mechanistic relationship between the appropriate change in context and the appropriate correlative change in the truth conditions of the relevant knowledge ascription.

Cohen also notes that contextualism allows for the following thesis to be true: **Surface Conflict Without Inconsistency (SCWI)**: It is possible for a speaker to say about a subject S and a proposition P “S knows that P” and at the very same time for another speaker to say about the same subject and proposition that “S doesn’t know that P” and for both speakers to be speaking truly.

This is an important result for contextualism, practically speaking, because it is this result that in many cases allows the contextualist to solve the skeptical and other epistemological paradoxes it is invoked to solve. Cohen is clearly right that this is an upshot of epistemic contextualism—a point which has been acknowledged by a number of others, including DeRose, who have written on contextualism as well.

However, in noting the positive result that contextualism allows for the truth of SCWI, some philosophers have mischaracterized the relationship between contextualism and SCWI as something stronger than it is. Consider, for example, the following passage by DeRose.

“Thus, the contextualist will allow that one speaker can truthfully say ‘S knows that P,’ while another speaker, in a different context where higher standards are in place, can truthfully say ‘S doesn’t know P’ at the same time. The “invariantist” – Peter Unger’s good name for one who denies contextualism – will have none of this. According to her, there’s a single, invariant set of standards which, at least as far as truth conditions go, govern the use of knowledge attributions regardless of the context in which they’re

uttered; thus, our two speakers can't both be speaking a truth."⁴⁰

A similar understanding is conveyed by John Turri who writes that,

“Invariantism denies that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive. They remain constant, invariantists say, across contexts.”⁴¹

These descriptions imply that, in addition to being the denial of contextualism, invariantism is also the denial of SCWI. If it were true both that invariantism is the denial of contextualism (i.e. any view which is not contextualist is invariantist) and that invariantism is the denial of SCWI (i.e. any view which does not affirm SCWI is invariantist) then only on contextualism would SCWI be true and never on invariantism could SCWI be true. I will argue later on in this chapter that there are non-contextualist views (e.g. the ambiguity theory) on which SCWI is true and that as a result this is a bad characterization of both contextualism and invariantism. However, for the time being, I am merely pointing out that this stronger connection between contextualism and SCWI has been rather hastily assumed.

Another important feature of Cohen's description of contextualism is that it provides some insight into a very basic and important question for the topic at hand, namely, what counts as the context of utterance? We gained some insight earlier into this question from our examination of Unger and DeRose and their interest in the epistemic standards of a particular context. But this quote from Cohen provides us with something more concrete when he writes that on contextualism “the truth values of a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can vary depending on things like purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc. of the speakers who utter these sentences.” Presumably, Cohen thinks variation in connections with these things can occur on contextualism because Cohen considers these things to be aspects of the context of utterance.

⁴⁰ DeRose (1999, 188).

⁴¹ Turri (2010, 78). See also Kompa (2002, 16).

DeRose provides some details as to what he counts as context which are in keeping with Cohen's description when DeRose writes that the following aspects of an attributor's conversational context "are the kinds of features which affect whether attributions of knowledge are true":

"How important is it that the parties to the discussion in which the subject may be engaged be right on the matter in question (how high are the stakes for them)? What has transpired in the conversation in which the subject may be engaged? In what 'community' is the subject operating, and what epistemic standards are appropriate to that community's intents and purposes?"⁴²

Patrick Rysiew uses this passage and the one cited earlier from Cohen to conclude that for DeRose and Cohen 'context' as they use it in describing epistemic contextualism "means none other than such things as the interests, expectations, and so forth of knowledge attributors."⁴³

This conclusion strikes me as problematic for three reasons. First, neither Cohen nor DeRose make the claim that the types of considerations they list are exhaustive of the kinds of things that count as context—nor does their language strike me as implying this. Thus, Rysiew's usage of the phrase "none other" seems unwarranted. Second, the main point of both of these passages seems to be that it is matters related to the speaker/attributor (as opposed to the, potentially distinct, assessor of the utterance) which are relevant to the variation in truth conditions. Which aspects of the speaker's context are the ones to be focusing on is a secondary point.

Third, and most significantly for our purposes, I think Rysiew's focus on only "interests, expectations, and so forth" puts forth too much of an "internalist"-bent to the description of the factors that count as context for DeRose and Cohen. On a natural reading of Rysiew's claim, context is something that exists entirely "in the head" of the

⁴² DeRose (1999, 191).

⁴³ Rysiew (2005, 51). That Rysiew so interprets Cohen's and DeRose's understanding of context as such is further verified by Rysiew's claim that "both Cohen and DeRose conceive of context in terms of the purposes, intentions, interests, beliefs, and so forth of the *speaker*" in Rysiew (2001, 485)—although Rysiew's emphasis on the word 'speaker' indicates a desire that this is the aspect of the claim most significant to him at that point.

speaker as it were.⁴⁴ But this doesn't seem to match up with the picture of context utilized in much of the discussion of and argumentation for contextualism. For starters, this description does not take into account the more "external" sort of elements DeRose discusses like what has transpired in an attributor's conversation and the "community" in which the attributor is operating. Second, if we look at the popular cases used to motivate contextualism (things like DeRose's bank cases and Cohen's airport case, which will be discussed in detail later on) the nature of the external circumstances seem to be playing a role in what the context of utterance is along with the more internal factors. Thus, the context of utterance seems to contain both aspects internal and external to the utterer.⁴⁵

While less than constitutive of the view, entailing the truth of SCWI and employing a rather broad view of what counts as part of the context of utterance are traits found both in the more traditional versions of contextualism advocated by DeRose and Cohen as well as in the newer versions of contextualism which we'll turn to momentarily. However, before turning to those newer views, two more points about the nature of DeRose and Cohen's versions of contextualism are worth noting. First, for both Cohen and DeRose, the means by which knowledge ascribing and denying sentences gain their special sense of context-sensitivity is via the lexically marked context-sensitivity of 'knows'. In their traditional presentations of the view, they have not consistently limited themselves to seeing 'knows' as an indexical in a narrow sense of that term, but they seem to have consistently considered their contextualism to be rooted in some kind of context-sensitivity for the content picked out by 'knows' itself. Second, neither DeRose nor Cohen have taken any pains to separate out the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing or denying sentences uttered in particular contexts from the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing or denying utterances themselves.

⁴⁴Rysiew may not have meant to give this overly internalist description of contextualism. Depending on what Rysiew means to include in "and so forth" perhaps he and I are in agreement. Evidence that Rysiew is amenable to "and so forth" containing the additional elements I pointed out is found when Rysiew writes in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on epistemic contextualism that on the dominant form of contextualism "features of the knowledge *attributor(s)*' psychology and/or conversational-practical situation" are the relevant aspects of context (Rysiew, (2011)).

⁴⁵ This is not to say that there aren't places where Cohen and DeRose put a great deal of emphasis on the internal factors. See for example DeRose (2004, 2005).

In thinking back to the view of the semantic landscape provided to us via Borg in Section 1, we can see that nothing put forward by DeRose or Cohen challenges a “general formal approach to semantics”. DeRose and Cohen treat well-formed declarative sentences as truth-evaluable and the means by which they posit the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions is via a lexico-syntactical route in virtue of some kind of lexically marked context-sensitivity for ‘knows’ and its cognates. The solution DeRose and Cohen offer to the contextualist data is one which doesn’t challenge formal semantics, and perhaps even implicitly supports it via the limited nature of the context-sensitive considerations they put forward. Similarly, invariantists, in virtue of their assumption that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials can be determined without any special context-sensitivity considerations, also seem to be implicitly supporting views on the formal semantics end of the spectrum. For a long while these implicit assumptions were able to play a quiet, guiding role in the conversations between the invariantists and the contextualists. However, in more recent years, new versions of contextualism have been put forward: views incompatible with formal semantics. And these new views have required a restructuring in how the debate between contextualism and invariantism is framed. It is to these newer views that we now turn.

These newer contextualist views come in two types. Both types have an analog with (and require the acceptance of) one of the types of more use-based approaches to semantics discussed in Section 1. The first type of new view is called “pragmatic contextualism”, the primary defender of which is Geoff Pynn.⁴⁶ This type of view requires acceptance of a certain form of dual pragmatics and employs free pragmatic enrichment. The second type of newer view has gone by various names including “truth-contextualism” as defended by Berit Brogaard and “nonindexical contextualism” as defended by John MacFarlane.⁴⁷ In what follows I’ll refer to this view as nonindexical contextualism, noting that by a nonindexical expression I mean an expression that fails to be indexical in Brogaard’s broad sense of indexical expressions which consist of any

⁴⁶ Pynn (2015a and 2015b)

⁴⁷ Brogaard (2008), MacFarlane (2007, 2009). These defenders don’t necessarily endorse the view, but they, at the very least, argue the superiority of this form of “contextualism” over more traditional forms like the contextualism of DeRose and Cohen.

“expression whose content varies with context.”⁴⁸ Nonindexical contextualism requires the employment of at least a limited form of semantic relativism. As a result, both pragmatic contextualism and nonindexical contextualism challenge certain earlier assumptions in the literature on knowledge ascriptions and have required new distinctions to be acknowledged in the discussion. As these new distinctions have been made, the contextualist umbrella has generally expanded to take these new views under its purview. However, as I hope to show, this is because these views have not conflicted with the real essence of epistemic contextualism. To see why this is so, let’s look at pragmatic contextualism and nonindexical contextualism in a little more detail.

Let’s begin with pragmatic contextualism. Geoff Pynn notes that “[c]ontextualism in epistemology has traditionally been understood as the view that ‘know’ functions semantically like an indexical term, encoding different contents in contexts with different epistemic standards.”⁴⁹ Pynn describes pragmatic contextualism as “an alternative version of contextualism on which ‘know’ is a semantically stable term, and the truth conditional variability in knowledge claims is a matter of pragmatic enrichment.”⁵⁰ Pynn also points out that pragmatic contextualism “distinguishes sharply between the contents encoded by knowledge sentences and the propositions asserted by speakers who make knowledge claims.”⁵¹ For Pynn, context impacts only the truth conditions of the latter—i.e. the truth conditions of assertions or utterances—but not of the former—i.e. the uttered sentences themselves. Thus, Pynn needs to make a distinction between our earlier labeled 1), the content of a *sentence* as uttered in a particular context, and 2), the content (*literally*) *asserted* by an utterance; a distinction which by and large was lacking in relevance in earlier discussions of contextualism. But Pynn not only needs to make this distinction. He also needs to accept that the truth conditions of the one can pull apart from the truth conditions of the other. That is to say, his account requires that the truth conditions of

⁴⁸ Brogaard (2008, 440, footnote 2).

⁴⁹ Pynn (2015a, 26). Pynn seems to be using the term indexical in a fairly broad sense here so as to include most (if not all) ways in which a single word’s context-sensitivity might be marked. See Pynn (2015b, 17-18).

⁵⁰ Pynn (2015a, 26).

⁵¹ Pynn (2015b, 19).

sentences uttered in contexts will at times have different truth conditions than the assertions themselves.

The method by which Pynn claims this occurs is a form of pragmatic “narrowing” in which contexts with stringent knowledge standards narrow down the acceptable range of epistemic standards that will result in knowledge.⁵² So for example, in a low stakes situation, the knowledge claim made in Bank Case A is true in virtue of a wide enough range of epistemic standards resulting in knowledge and in Bank Case B such a knowledge claim is false because the range of epistemic standards resulting in knowledge has been restricted. Put in these rather neutral terms, this may sound no different than the proposal DeRose, who also appeals to epistemic standards, gives. However, there are two important differences.

First, for DeRose, this change in truth conditions occurs because ‘knows’ itself is context-sensitive. However, Pynn states that on pragmatic contextualism ‘knows’ is “a semantically stable term”—i.e. not context-sensitive. Rather, for Pynn, what changes across Case A and Case B is not the semantics of simply ‘knows’ itself, but rather the actual content of the utterance as a whole. Just as, according to the pragmatic enrichment theorist, the utterance “You’re not going to die” said by a mother to a child with a scratch literally means “You’re not going to die because of this scrape”,⁵³ so also, according to the pragmatic contextualist, the utterance “I know the bank is open on Saturdays” literally means something fuller than what the syntax and lexical content alone give us. (What is this fuller meaning? A variety of answers are compatible with pragmatic contextualism as a method, and a specific answer is not important for our purposes.)⁵⁴ This is in contrast with a traditional form of contextualism which sees the extra content included via the lexically marked context-sensitivity of ‘know’. It follows that an accurate accounting of the difference between contextualism and invariantism should not focus just what the two

⁵² Pynn (2015a, 26).

⁵³ This example comes from Bach (1994) and is repeated in Pynn (2015b).

⁵⁴ Pynn writes that “[t]here are several different ways one could elaborate PC” (2015a, 33). In the way that Pynn focuses on what it is that an assertion of a knowledge ascription says is that the subject is in the particular epistemic position relevant to the situation at hand (2015a, 35). Thus, the move is very similar to that being made by more traditional contextualists, as Pynn cashes the idea out, save that this enrichment occurs only with the assertion and not to the sentence itself.

views say about the nature of ‘knows’, for pragmatic contextualism agrees with invariantist that ‘knows’ is semantically stable. Rather, the difference between invariantism and contextualism must be explained in terms of whole utterances.

This leads to the second key difference between pragmatic contextualism and more traditional forms of contextualism. This second difference is that pragmatic contextualism is, at its heart, a theory about the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and denying *utterances only*, whereas (as I understand the view) traditional forms of contextualism say something about the truth conditions of both knowledge ascribing and denying *utterances and sentences*.

These two differences between Pynn’s view and the view of traditional contextualists require the challenging of two assumptions that had been at play, at least implicitly, in the conversation about the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions. The first assumption challenged is that the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and denying sentences and the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and denying utterances do not differ. The second assumption challenged is that the context-sensitivity of knowledge ascribing and denying utterances enters in via a lexico-syntactic means. Thus, Pynn’s view requires an acceptance of dual pragmatics, as least as it pertains to the content of utterances.

However, it’s important to note a feature that has remained the same between traditional forms of contextualism and pragmatic contextualism—a feature exemplified by their responses to the bank cases. That feature is the mechanistic covariation between context and truth conditions (at least in the case of utterances). It is the change in context that is *responsible* for the change in truth conditions, and on neither view is the relevance of context relegated to merely helping make clear (without helping determine meaning) what the truth conditions or content of the utterances are.

With that in mind, let’s turn to the second kind of new contextualist proposal: nonindexical contextualism. With nonindexical contextualism, Berit Brogaard and John MacFarlane (among others) bring another important distinction to the literature on knowledge ascriptions—namely, the distinction between *shifts in semantic content* across contexts from *shifts in truth conditions* across contexts. Traditionally, contextualism has

been defined in terms of a change in truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions resulting from a change in context. However, it has typically been assumed that the means by which this change occurs is via a change in the content of the knowledge ascription across contexts. Thus, MacFarlane is certainly correct when he writes that “Philosophers on all sides of the contextualism debate have had an overly narrow conception of what semantic sensitivity could be. They have conflated context sensitivity (dependence of *truth* or *extension* on features of context) with indexicality (dependence of *content* on features of context).”⁵⁵

The central move of the nonindexical contextualist is to put forward a theory on which the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions, but not the content of the knowledge ascriptions, shift with changes in context. Brogaard succinctly puts forth the idea as follows.

“Here is my working hypothesis: ‘know’ has the same semantic value in any context of use. The content of ‘know’ is (or determines) a function from circumstances to extensions. But the circumstances are non-standard: they contain a judge parameter in addition to the time and world parameters.”⁵⁶

It is important for our purposes to see the ways in which this view is both similar to and different from more traditional forms of epistemic contextualism. One key difference is that on nonindexical contextualism, ‘knows’ is, like on pragmatic contextualism, semantically stable, unlike traditional contextualism on which ‘knows’ is context sensitive. Another key difference, as mentioned before, is that on nonindexical contextualism, unlike on pragmatic contextualism or traditional contextualism, it is only the truth conditions, and not the content, that varies across contexts. However, nonindexical contextualism shares in common with traditional contextualism no need to posit free pragmatic enrichment like pragmatic contextualism does. For this reason, nonindexical contextualism represents a less stark departure from the general formal semantics presupposed in traditional forms of contextualism. However, it is not without its controversial element.

⁵⁵ MacFarlane (2009, 231).

⁵⁶ Brogaard (2008, 450).

As Brogaard notes, “[t]he controversial part is that the circumstance of evaluation contains a judge parameter in addition to a time and a world parameter.”⁵⁷ If we think back to the theories of semantics covered in Section 1, we can frame this controversy in terms of a movement towards the used-based end of the semantic spectrum via a move toward relativism which was defined as a view on which “contextual material (in at least some cases) [contributes] to the *parameters* against which a proposition is assessed for truth or falsity.”⁵⁸ While positing this one extra judge parameter on its own may not take us too far in the direction of relativism, either the nonindexical contextualist opens herself up to positing other such parameters, or she ends up with an idiosyncratic view on which a parameter is employed to explain a particular set of problematic data even though such parameters are not generally posited as existing. Thus, nonindexical contextualism is either saddled with a significant movement in the direction of relativism or is an odd duck-out-of-water sort of view.⁵⁹ Of course, this first horn in this “dilemma” is only a problem if one wishes to retain a formal semantics. Retaining formal semantics doesn’t seem to be a high priority for those advocating nonindexical contextualism, so for them it is a cost perhaps only to the extent that it will be harder for them to convince those with formal semantic tendencies to accept their view.

So we’ve gotten clear what some of nonindexical contextualism’s differences from traditional contextualism are as well as what a potential cost of accepting the view might be. However, it is important to note a feature that nonindexical contextualism shares with both pragmatic contextualism and traditional forms of contextualism: namely, that context has the power to change what the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials are. More specifically, on all these views, context has the power to make certain knowledge ascriptions and denials true in some contexts where that same claim

⁵⁷ Brogaard (450). MacFarlane doesn’t employ a time parameter (2007, 242).

⁵⁸ Borg (2012, 23); emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Interesting, MacFarlane (2007) has argued elsewhere that nonindexical contextualism (or at least a view similar to it) is compatible with Cappelen and Lepore’s version of semantic minimalism—although he highlights “...how close it is to Radical Contextualism” and that it may feel too close to Radical Contextualism for Cappelen and Lepore (248). He also notes that Stefano Predelli (2005) has sought to show the compatibility of what we are here calling nonindexical contextualism with what MacFarlane calls Radical Contextualism. And MacFarlane closes with the following “Hegelian thought”: “*Thesis*: Semantic Minimalism. *Antithesis*: Radical Contextualism. *Synthesis*: Nonindexical Contextualism” (250).

would have been false if uttered in other contexts and vice versa. It is this feature that has emerged as the heart of epistemic contextualism. And while the ambiguity theory allows for something similar, it is importantly different. It is this difference that sets the ambiguity theory apart. And it is this difference that I think makes the ambiguity theory so promising. We'll now turn to an examination of the ambiguity theory of 'knows' and what that difference is.

1.3 Contextualism and the Ambiguity Theory of 'Knows'

The ambiguity theory of 'knows' is the view that 'knows' and its cognates have more than one propositional sense or meaning—that is to say, there is more than one sense of 'knows' and its cognates properly available for use in 'knows that' (etc.) constructions—and that as a result, which sense of 'knows' is employed in a knowledge ascription or denial determines, in part, the meaning (and as a result the truth conditions) of that knowledge ascription or denial.

Epistemic contextualism (i.e. contextualism about 'knows' and its cognates), as covered in the previous section, is the view that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials vary in certain ways according to the context in which the sentences are uttered. Unlike the ambiguity theory which posits a specific semantic mechanism (i.e. ambiguity) and a specific means (i.e. via content determination) by which the alterations in the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials occur, contextualism is less specific on these fronts, with its defining focus being on the ability of context to change the truth conditions of knowledge and denials across contexts. And as we've seen in the previous section the mechanisms and means by which a contextualist may suggest that this occur are quite varied—from 'knows' functioning as an indexical, to pragmatic enrichment, to assessment against a judge parameter. In thinking about matters this way it might seem natural to suggest that the ambiguity theory provides just another means by which these changes occur. While this initial line of thought is perhaps reasonable, it is mistaken.

I will suggest that there are at least two important reasons why it is mistaken. First, ambiguity and context-sensitivity, as linguistic features, are different in kind.

Second, and more importantly, all types of context-sensitivity function to limit the ways in which a knowledge ascription or denial can be true within a given context, while ambiguity keeps open in all contexts all the ways that a knowledge ascription or denial can be true within any given context. That is to say, unlike on contextualism, on the ambiguity theory there need not be any *change* in the possible truth conditions of a knowledge ascription or denial from one context to another. This is because, at its core, epistemic contextualism is about the *context-driven covariation* between certain contexts and truth conditions, but, at its core, the ambiguity theory is about the *ambiguity-driven expansion* of possible semantic content for a sentence in all contexts. Thus, while the two views entail a number of common or similar outcomes, they should not be conflated.

Let's begin with the nature of the linguistic difference between the two views. One interested in making the case that the ambiguity theory ought to be viewed as distinct from contextualism has a certain presumption from linguistics going in his favor—namely, the fact that ambiguity and context-sensitivity are generally recognized as distinct semantic phenomena. Adam Sennet makes the point nicely writing that,

“Context sensitivity is (potential) variability in content due purely to changes in the context of utterance without a change in the convention of word usage. Thus, ‘I am hungry’ varies in content speaker to speaker because ‘I’ is context sensitive and shifts reference depending on who utters it. ‘I’, however, is not massively ambiguous. ‘Bank’ is ambiguous, not (at least, not obviously) context sensitive. Of course, knowledge of context may well help disambiguate an ambiguous utterance. Nonetheless, ambiguity is not characterized by interaction with (extra-linguistic) context but is a property of the meanings of the terms.”⁶⁰

Sennet's examples clearly show that a word can be ambiguous without being context-sensitive and that a word can be context-sensitive without being ambiguous. While both ambiguity and context-sensitivity allow for a change in content across context (as is evident in our uses of both ‘I’ and ‘bank’), with context-sensitive words the change in semantic content is *due purely* (to use Sennet's phrase) to the change in context, while

⁶⁰ Sennet (2011).

with ambiguous words context plays a role relegated to the pragmatic where context merely makes it likely or sensible that a change in semantic content may occur via a change in the speaker's intention with certain changes in context.⁶¹ Even if one were to make the case that 'bank' is context-sensitive, the context-sensitivity of 'bank' wouldn't be *because* it was ambiguous and conversely with 'I'. This is, in part, because ambiguity is the non-context-bound property of a word having more than one meaning, any of which can be the meaning used in *any* context where the appropriate syntax is present,⁶² while context-sensitivity is the property of content variation *resulting from* a change in context. This distinction is in keeping with the general assumption in linguistics that context-sensitivity and ambiguity are distinct linguistic phenomena.

A practical way to see the difference is to apply the following sort of test. Imagine that you are scheduled to meet me on a street with a river on one side and numerous establishments on the other side, one of which is a bank. We'd agreed upon only an approximate location to meet and you are in that general vicinity looking for me. You decide it would be easier to call and ask where I am rather than continue to somewhat aimlessly wander. I pick up the phone and you ask, "where are you?"

If I reply "I'm by the bank" you may wonder, appropriately, whether I am talking about being by the riverside or the financial institution and may ask for clarification. I can thus disambiguate my unclear referent by specifying that "I'm next to the First Bank and Trust on the corner of First and Main." While this clears up the ambiguity, this doesn't negate that fact that I just as easily could have been referring to the riverside with my original utterance. The same does not hold with the word 'I'. It wouldn't make sense if you were to question who I was referring to with the term 'I' (assuming that you realized

⁶¹ I favor a view according to which it is the speaker's intention which plays the primary role in disambiguation, at least on the level of answering the question as to what proposition an utterance picks out in the case of lexically ambiguous utterances. But the specifics of this are not crucial for my case. For someone with a different view of what disambiguates a word, that thing can serve the role that I've given to a speaker's intention.

⁶² I include the qualifier of "where the appropriate syntax is present" to cover instances where due to an ambiguous term's meanings including different parts of speech certain meanings are blocked due to syntactic structure. Take for example the word 'duck' which has both noun-form and verb-form meanings. The syntax of the sentence "She saw him duck" blocks the possibility that the referent of 'duck' could be the animal instead of the action. This example is given by Emma Borg (2004, 143). Sennet (2011) uses a similar example to make a similar point.

you were speaking with me). The context fixed the referent in that situation. Of course, ‘I’ can be used to pick out lots of speakers *across* contexts, but the context we were in made only one referent available. It’s our adept usage of both ambiguous and context-sensitive terms that allows Sennet to give the examples of ‘I’ and ‘bank’ as paradigmatic cases of each and trust that we can recognize discrete categories of linguistic types.⁶³

The significance of this difference can be heightened if we turn to John Perry’s useful distinction between the presemantic and semantic which he describes in the following way,

“Sometimes we use context to figure out with which meaning a word is being used, or which of several words that look or sound alike is being used, or even which language is being spoken. These are *presemantic* uses of context: context helps us to figure out meaning. In the case of indexicals, however, context is used *semantically*. It remains relevant after the language, words and meanings are all known; the meaning directs us to certain aspects of context.”⁶⁴

I (along with Perry and Borg⁶⁵) take the difference between ‘I’ and ‘bank’ to be a case of such a difference. The way in which context determines the meaning of ‘I’ is semantic. That is, context remains relevant after the language, words, and meanings are all known. The task of determining which sense of ‘bank’ is being employed is presemantic. We use context to figure out what meaning a speaker has employed, but once we’ve successfully done that, there is nothing especially context-sensitive about ‘bank’ that remains. It seems clear to me that contextualists have traditionally seen context playing a robust, semantic role that cannot be relegated to the presemantic. But part of what the ambiguity theory claims in stating that the variability in meaning is a result of an ambiguity in the term ‘knows’ is that the role context is playing is solely presemantic and as a result purely pragmatic. This seems to clearly constitute a difference in kind. This difference is important, and perhaps sufficient on its own for the ambiguity theory to be viewed as a

⁶³ Thanks to Matthias Steup for suggesting this general type of test for identifying ambiguity versus context-sensitivity.

⁶⁴ Perry (2001, 39-40).

⁶⁵ Perry (2001, 40-41) and Borg (2004, 146).

position distinct from contextualism. However, there is an even more important difference lurking nearby.

We noted earlier that contextualism entails the truth of the following claim:

Surface Conflict Without Inconsistency (SCWI): It is possible for a speaker to say about a subject S and a proposition P “S knows that P” and at the very same time for another speaker to say about the same subject and proposition that “S doesn’t know that P” and for both speakers to be speaking truly.

This principle follows because contextualism allows for the differing contexts of the different speakers to contain distinct truth conditions for the expression of the same proposition.

The ambiguity theory entails the truth of SCWI too. But for a different reason. The reason why this is so is because the speakers can select different senses of ‘knows’ in their utterances which in turn will alter the content of their ascriptions and derivatively the truth conditions of those ascriptions as well. But note that, unlike the case of contextualism which required that the two speakers be in different contexts, two speakers in the same context can diverge in their responses and both be saying something true in some circumstances, so long as they each are using a different sense of ‘knows’.

This reveals the central divide between epistemic contextualism and the ambiguity theory. At bottom, epistemic contextualism seeks to solve epistemological problems by allowing the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials *to change across contexts*. This is a feature that has remained consistent and central across the over quarter century of development of epistemic contextualism. However, at bottom, the ambiguity theory seeks to solve epistemological problems by *allowing for there to be a wider range of truth conditions* for knowledge ascribing and denying sentences and utterances in virtue of providing more options for what the content of those ascriptions and denials might be.

In the next chapter, much of the case for the ambiguity theory over epistemic contextualism will hinge on this distinction between the two views. And because this

differing feature between the ambiguity theory and contextualism is one that all versions of contextualism have in common, my criticisms of contextualism in chapter 2 will, for the most part, apply to all forms of contextualism.

But in closing, I think it's worth pointing out that there's a weakness that the newer forms of contextualism have which both the traditional forms of contextualism and the ambiguity theory are not saddled with—namely, as noted earlier, the newer forms of epistemic contextualism, like pragmatic contextualism and nonindexical contextualism, are compatible with only a limited set of theories of semantics. Neither one is compatible with a strict minimalism or indexicalism as Borg has defined the terms. Yet both the ambiguity theory and traditional forms of contextualism rely only on non-controversial semantic mechanisms (no one is denying that ambiguity and context-sensitivity exist) and as a result don't employ any linguistic assumptions that limit the types of views of semantics they are compatible with. This feature is one that traditional contextualism and the ambiguity theory share in common. But we turn now to an examination of their differences in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTUALISM AND THE AMBIGUITY THEORY OF 'KNOWS'

The generally agreed upon virtues of contextualism are that it solves certain persistent epistemological problems relating to skeptical arguments and that it preserves the truth of most of our everyday, ordinary usages of 'knows' and its cognates.⁶⁶ For these reasons, many epistemologists find contextualism very appealing. However, many others resist contextualism because the view seems, to them, to come with certain unacceptable costs. Those who reject contextualism are often labeled invariantists. Typically, according to invariantism there is only one sense of the word 'know'. But rejecting contextualism does not require that one accept that there is only one sense of the word know (or so I will aim to show).

In this paper I argue for the *ambiguity theory of 'knows'*—the view that 'knows' and its cognates⁶⁷ have more than one sense and that which sense of 'knows' is used in a knowledge ascription or denial determines, in part, the meaning (and as a result the truth conditions) of that knowledge ascription or denial.⁶⁸ It is, in a way, remarkable how little attention the ambiguity theory of 'knows' has received (although a few modern advocates of the view will be discussed later) and, in particular, it is remarkable how little contextualists have said against it, given that the ambiguity theory has so many of the

⁶⁶ Cf. Cohen (1988), (2006, 289), DeRose (1992) (1995), (2005, 172 & 178), Lewis (1979), Newhard (2012, 564), Pynn (2015b, 3 & 5), Rysiew (2001, 480, 482; 2007, 628) and Stanley (2004, 119-120), among many others.

⁶⁷ From here on out the phrase "and its cognates" will typically be omitted, but should be understood as implied when appropriate.

⁶⁸ Most would agree that there is more than one sense of 'knows' *simpliciter*. My claim is specifically that there is more than one sense of 'knows' understood propositionally—i.e. more than one kind of 'knows that' sorts of knowing.

benefits of contextualism and avoids so many of the costs. This paper is in part an attempt to direct some attention towards the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’.⁶⁹

Section 1 lays out the theoretical landscape by defining contextualism, invariantism and the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ and clarifying the differences and relationships between the positions. In Section 2 I argue that the ambiguity theory has the same virtues as contextualism. In Section 3, I provide an ambiguity-theory-friendly account of why contextualism may be initially appealing. In Section 4, I argue that the ambiguity theory has several advantages over contextualism—making the ambiguity theory a view worthy of consideration and the superior theory unless counterbalancing considerations can be offered.

2.1 Contextualism, Invariantism, and the Ambiguity Theory of ‘Knows’

In keeping with standard usage, I use the phrase epistemic contextualism, or more simply contextualism, to refer to the view that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials (e.g. sentences of the form “S knows that P” and “S doesn’t know that P”), in virtue of making a knowledge claim, shift in accordance with certain changes in the context of utterance. Or, to put it another way, contextualism is the view that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials depend, in part, upon the attributor’s conversational context because of the way in which ‘knows’ contributes to the claim.⁷⁰ Among the relevant aspects of context are both factors internal to the utterer

⁶⁹ In what follows, generally, the terms ‘know’, ‘knows’, ‘knowing’ and even at points ‘knowledge’ will be used in an interchangeable fashion in the context of discussing the ambiguity theory of ‘knows.’ One might object that this glosses over the fact (if it is a fact) that it is signifiers, vocables, or some other linguistic entity, and not words themselves, that are ambiguous. While I see the sense in such an objection, I am not too concerned about it for several reasons. First, in discussions of indexical forms of contextualism, shifts between talk of ‘know’, ‘knows’, etc. is typical and seems to have been part of the accepted convention. Second, I see nothing wrong with treating a lexeme as ambiguous, and with the exception of ‘knowledge’, all the forms used are part of the same lexeme. Finally, if a reader is not swayed by these considerations, I would ask such a reader to consider me to be arguing for a family of related views (an ambiguity theory of ‘know’, an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’, etc.) in which I take evidence for the ambiguity of any one of the words signifiers under discussion as equal evidence for the ambiguity of the others.

⁷⁰ Cf. Brown (2006, 407), Cohen (1999, 58), (2006, 289), Conee (2010, 47), DeRose (1992, 914), (1999, 187), (2002, 168), Greco (2008, 416), Newhard (2012, 564), Rysiew (2011), Pynn (2015, 1), Stanley (2004, 119), and Steup (2005), among many others. Keith DeRose (1999) and Geoff Pynn (2015) discuss other uses of the term contextualism in epistemology, like that found in the work of Davis Annis (1978), but these are non-dominant usages of the term in epistemology and are not of concern for the purposes of this paper.

(e.g. the utterer’s purposes, interests, stakes, etc.) and factors external to the utterer (the conversation the utterer is contributing to, the community the utterer is a part of, etc.).⁷¹

I also take the following clarification from Patrick Rysiew to express something essential about the view:

“The thesis is that it is only relative to a contextually-determined standard that a knowledge sentence expresses a complete proposition: change the standard, and you change what the sentence expresses; acontextually, however, no such proposition is expressed. In this respect, knowledge utterances are supposed to resemble utterances involving uncontroversially context-sensitive terms...truth values shift only because, according to EC, *different propositions are expressed in different contexts.*”⁷²

As Geoff Pynn has recently noted “[c]ontextualism is a broad tent,”⁷³ and the linguistic mechanisms by which context allows for the completion of a proposition differ among alternative types of contextualism. However, what remains essential in all cases is that context is required to recover the complete meaning and/or truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials,⁷⁴ and that a shift in context can control a shift in truth conditions

⁷¹See, for example, Cohen (1999, 58 and 61) and DeRose (1999, 191 and 195). The claim that context contains both these internal and external elements has perhaps been denied by others at points. For example, Patrick Rysiew writes that “and ‘context’ here [in a discussion of epistemic contextualism] means none other than such things as the interests, expectations, and so forth of knowledge attributors.” Depending on what he means to include in “and so forth” this may count as an implicit denial of what I’ve called the external factors of context, but if that is what Rysiew meant, he has provided no argument for this claim. And in other places Rysiew seems to adopt the internal/external blend that I’ve put forward when he writes that on the dominant form of contextualism “features of the knowledge *attributor(s)*’ psychology and/or conversational-practical situation” are the relevant aspects of context (Rysiew, (2011)). Similarly, DeRose, in his emphasis on the internal factors at points, may implicitly be denying at least the centrality of the external factors. The place where DeRose seems to do this most strongly is in DeRose (2005) in particular sections III and VII, and perhaps in DeRose (2004), but this also seems to be offset by considerations like the quote of his above. At the end of the day, given the set of elucidations of context available in the literature and the reliance on external elements of context to generate intuitions and outcomes in contextualist data like DeRose’s bank cases and Cohen’s airport case, I think the best understanding of ‘context’ (both in general and as used by the epistemic contextualist) is that it contains both these internal and external elements.

⁷² Rysiew (2011); emphasis in original.

⁷³ Pynn (2015b, 14).

⁷⁴ From here on out the language of “and knowledge denials” will typically be dropped, but should be viewed as implied where appropriate.

by changing the proposition expressed. This point will be useful later in clarifying the distinction between contextualism and the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’.⁷⁵

Invariantism, in the epistemological sphere, is often simply taken to be the view that contextualism is false.⁷⁶ However, invariantism is frequently described in a way that makes it more than simply the denial of contextualism. For example DeRose writes that,

“Thus, the contextualist will allow that one speaker can truthfully say ‘S knows that P,’ while another speaker, in a different context where higher standards are in place, can truthfully say ‘S doesn’t know P’ at the same time. The “invariantist” – Peter Unger’s good name for one who denies contextualism – will have none of this. According to her, there’s a single, invariant set of standards which, at least as far as truth conditions go, govern the use of knowledge attributions regardless of the context in which they’re uttered; thus, our two speakers can’t both be speaking a truth.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Presenting contextualism in these terms captures essential components uniting the traditional forms of contextualism advocated by those like Lewis, DeRose, and Cohen, but it somewhat suppresses a few important nuances that certain newer forms of contextualism have to offer. Geoff Pynn, for example, offers a view dubbed pragmatic contextualism which requires considering the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying *assertions* apart from the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying *sentences*—and posits, as a starting point in philosophy of language, that the truth conditions of sentences and their accompanying utterances can indeed come apart (see Pynn (2015a) and (2015b)). Pynn’s view properly speaking is about assertions/utterances only and not sentences, but I don’t believe that appealing to that distinction here will be relevant for my arguments so I’ve chosen to gloss over it in this paper. On another front, views like those found in the work of Nikola Kompa (2002), Berit Brogaard (2008), and John MacFarlane (2007, 2009) are best understood as claiming not that context is required in order for a proposition to be expressed, but rather that a context is required in order to determine the truth conditions of the proposition in virtue of the existence of an epistemic parameter of evaluation, much like more commonly affirmed parameters of evaluation like time, place, or possible world. While such views may allow for the expression of a proposition without a context, they still share two important traits in common with more standard forms of contextualism: 1) they require a context for the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials and, 2) they posit that context *determines* in part what those truth conditions are. Thus, for my purpose, I take what I say in this paper to apply to these views just as forcefully as other forms of contextualism. For a reader wary of this claim, I would suggest considering my argument against contextualism to not include this particular sub-family of views.

⁷⁶ For example, Rysiew (2011) writes that “one is an invariantist (with respect to a given class of statements) just in case one rejects contextualism (with respect to statements of that class)”.

⁷⁷ DeRose (1999, 188). John Turri conveys a similar understanding writing that “Invariantism denies that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive. They remain constant, invariantists say, across contexts.” (Turri (2010), 78). John Hawthorne may be saying something similar when he writes that “[a]ccording to the *invariantist*, the semantic value of ‘know’, and accordingly the extension of ‘know’, does not vary across contexts of use” (Hawthorne 2004, 113). See also Kompa (2002) and Brendel & Jäger (2004, 146-7).

This description implies that, in addition to being the denial of contextualism, invariantism is also the denial of the following view:

Surface Conflict Without Inconsistency (SCWI): it is possible for a speaker to say about a subject S and a proposition P “S knows that P” and at the very same time for another speaker to say about the same subject and proposition that “S doesn’t know that P” and for both speakers to be speaking truly.

The denial of contextualism does not entail the denial of SCWI unless it is assumed that the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’ provides the only way for SCWI to be true. One aim of this paper is to show that this assumption is false. I will argue that on the ambiguity theory SCWI is true and that the ambiguity theory is not a type of contextualism. If I am right, there has been an inconsistency in how the term invariantism has been used. In order to keep things clear in the discussion ahead, in this paper by ‘invariantism’ I mean the view that (1) contextualism is false and that (2) SCWI is false. Thus defined, the ambiguity theory is not a type of invariantism.⁷⁸

The ambiguity theory of ‘knows’, like invariantism, combines two theses. The first is that ‘knows’ has more than one sense—specifically more than one propositional sense, i.e. a sense that can properly be used in ‘knows that’ constructions.⁷⁹ The second is that which sense of ‘knows’ is being employed plays a role in fixing the truth conditions of a knowledge ascription (in virtue of contributing to the meaning of the ascription). Thus, so long as the ambiguity theorist doesn’t hold a view that requires that context be determined in order to fix meaning in general, the ambiguity theory allows that the meaning and truth conditions of a knowledge ascription can be determined even when the

⁷⁸ Although the ambiguity theory would be a type of invariantism using the definition from Rysiew in footnote 66.

⁷⁹ I take it that for each distinct sense of ‘knows’ there is also a distinct referent. (The ambiguity theory as stated doesn’t technically rule out the option that there are multiple senses but only a single referent. However, this seems to me to be a very strange view and one which I do not seriously consider). Thus one could advocate a “companion view” to the ambiguity theory about the referents of ‘knowledge’ instead of senses. Matthias Steup’s Multiple Concepts Theory of knowledge (Steup, 2005) might be able to serve as such a view. The ambiguity theory remains neutral on the nature of these referents. It would be a matter of one’s additional epistemological views what those referents would be—e.g. relations, mental states, etc.

context is not. That is to say, the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions can be known on the ambiguity theory even if the attributor's context is unknown or if the ascription is presented acontextually (if such a thing is possible).

While until recently the ambiguity theory has not been much defended (or even discussed), it is a view that has been previously suggested and endorsed. Two such early ambiguity theorists are Norman Malcolm⁸⁰ and Fred Feldman.⁸¹ Malcolm's and Feldman's positions are very similar. Both posit two senses of 'knowledge' (what DeRose calls a "high" and a "low" sense"⁸²) one of which is 'knowledge' in a rigorous, high-standards, "philosophical" sense and the other 'knowledge' in a practical, every-day sense.

While both Malcolm and Feldman adopt a "two senses" view of 'knowledge', it is important to note that the ambiguity theory itself doesn't say anything about the number of senses 'knows' has or the conditions under which these different senses are satisfied.⁸³ This point has been noticed by Matthias Steup who has more recently advocated an ambiguity theory-like position which he dubs the "Multiple Concepts Theory" (MCT).⁸⁴ Steup writes that "[a]ccording to MCT, there are as many *concepts* of knowledge as there are different *standards* of knowledge."⁸⁵ While Steup chooses to frame his discussion in terms of the multiple concepts of knowledge instead of the multiple senses of 'knowledge', I take MCT to be completely compatible with the ambiguity theory.⁸⁶

Another recent advocate of a form of the ambiguity theory is Baron Reed. The metaphysical picture Reed advocates is that "knowledge in general is a determinable; the different knowledge relations that are grounded in particular degrees of justification are

⁸⁰ Malcolm (1952)

⁸¹ Feldman (1986, 33-37).

⁸² DeRose (1999, 195).

⁸³ Viewed in this way the ambiguity theory is a genus for which there could be a number of species of more specific views. Of course, the ambiguity theorist working on the "species-level" will need to provide details about how many senses of 'knows' there are and under what conditions each sense is satisfied. But my aim in this paper is only to defend the "genus."

⁸⁴ Steup (2005).

⁸⁵ Steup (2005, 6).

⁸⁶ In fact, the relationship between MCT and the ambiguity theory seems to be a much stronger relationship than merely a relationship of compatibility. Steup identifies a view which he calls "New Contextualism" (NC) which he refers to as a "semanticized mirror image of MCT." I take this description of being a semanticized mirror image of MCT to also apply to the ambiguity theory.

its determinates.”⁸⁷ He compares this to the nature of colors writing that, “[t]he same sort of metaphysical structure can be found in color: blue, for example, is a determinable with the various particular shades of blue as its determinates.”⁸⁸ Reed combines this metaphysical account of blue with the following semantic account of ‘blue’: the “various usages of ‘blue’ are possible because it is ambiguous.”⁸⁹ And Reed takes the same semantic account to apply in the case of ‘knows’.

The fact that the ambiguity theory itself doesn’t say anything about the number of senses ‘knows’ has is a particularly important point because it shows that what distinguishes the ambiguity theory from contextualism is *not* the number of senses the theory posits. This point has sometimes gone unnoticed. For example DeRose writes that,

“Theories according to which there are two senses of ‘know’ – a ‘low,’ ‘weak,’ or ‘ordinary sense’ on the one hand, and a ‘high,’ ‘strong,’ or ‘philosophical’ sense, which is much more demanding, on the other – can be viewed as limiting cases of contextualist views...current contextualist theories don’t hold that there are just two different sets of epistemic standards governing the truth conditions of knowledge attributions, but rather posit a wide variety of different standards.”⁹⁰

By taking Malcolm’s two senses view of ‘knowledge’ to be a “limiting case” of contextualism, DeRose implies that the *only* relevant difference between Malcolm’s view and the view of the contemporary defender of contextualism is the *number* of epistemic standards governing the truth conditions of knowledge attributions. This seems to be a mistake. After all, if there is nothing other than the number of senses posited that separates the ambiguity theory from contextualism, we lack an explanation as to what differentiates Reed’s theory from contextualism. Ambiguity theories of ‘know’ that are multivocal like Reed’s and Steup’s prompt one to note that there is a second, important difference between a view like Malcolm’s and a view like DeRose’s.

⁸⁷ Reed (2013, 54).

⁸⁸ Reed (2013, 54).

⁸⁹ Reed (2013, 54).

⁹⁰ DeRose (1999, 191-192). Similarly, Jason Stanley (2005, 81) considers the ambiguity theory to be a type of epistemic contextualism.

This second difference deals with what is required in order for a given utterance or sentence expression of a knowledge ascription or denial to pick out a proposition. On contextualism, what is required (in addition to the things we standardly think are required) is a context. On the ambiguity theory a context is not required, but a sense of ‘knows’ is. This in turn results in a difference between contextualism and the ambiguity theory as to what determines the truth conditions of a knowledge ascription or denial. For the proponent of contextualism, context is one such determinant, but for the proponent of the ambiguity theory context is not (at least not in any way beyond the way in which context may always be required). This difference between contextualism and the ambiguity theory is no mere difference in degree as is the difference between a view that advocates two epistemic standards versus a view that advocates more than two epistemic standards. This difference between contextualism and the ambiguity theory is a difference in kind.

In order to see clearly that this is a difference in kind and not just degree, one needs to clearly see the distinction, linguistically, between ambiguity and context-sensitivity. Adam Sennet makes the point nicely writing that

“Context sensitivity is (potential) variability in content due purely to changes in the context of utterance without a change in the convention of word usage. Thus, ‘I am hungry’ varies in content speaker to speaker because ‘I’ is context sensitive and shifts reference depending on who utters it. ‘I’, however, is not massively ambiguous. ‘Bank’ is ambiguous, not (at least, not obviously) context sensitive. Of course, knowledge of context may well help disambiguate an ambiguous utterance. Nonetheless, ambiguity is not characterized by interaction with (extra-linguistic) context but is a property of the meanings of the terms.”⁹¹

Sennet’s examples clearly show that a word can be ambiguous without being context-sensitive and that a word can be context-sensitive without being ambiguous. While both ambiguity and context-sensitivity allow for a change in content across context (as is

⁹¹ Sennet (2011).

evident in our uses of both ‘I’ and ‘bank’), with context-sensitive words the change in semantic content is *due purely* (to use Sennet’s phrase) to the change in context, while with ambiguous words context plays a role relegated to the pragmatic where context merely makes it likely or sensible that a change in semantic content may occur via a change in the speaker’s intention with certain changes in context.⁹² Even if one were to make the case that ‘bank’ is context-sensitive, the context-sensitivity of ‘bank’ wouldn’t be *because* it was ambiguous and conversely with ‘I’. This is, in part, because ambiguity is the non-context-bound property of a word having more than one meaning, any of which can be the meaning used in *any* context where the appropriate syntax is present,⁹³ while context-sensitivity is the property of content variation *resulting from* a change in context. This distinction is in keeping with the general assumption in linguistics that context-sensitivity and ambiguity are distinct linguistic phenomena.

Still, one may acknowledge this difference in kind between context-sensitivity and ambiguity, but still want to resist that there is a difference in kind between contextualism and the ambiguity theory by suggesting that it is a specific element of context which fixes the sense of ‘knows’ with that specific element of context being speaker’s intention. There is a certain initial plausibility to this suggestion. After all Cohen includes speaker’s intentions among the elements that make up context,⁹⁴ and in places DeRose gives a great amount of influence to speaker’s intentions to determine context.⁹⁵ It is true that a speaker’s intention is *part* of the context of the utterance, and on the account of speaker meaning which I currently favor, it is the speaker’s intention which fixes the sense in cases of ambiguity.

⁹² I favor a view according to which it is the speaker’s intention which plays the primary role in disambiguation, at least on the level of answering the question as to what proposition an utterance picks out in the case of lexically ambiguous utterances. But the specifics of this are not crucial for my case. For someone with a different view of what disambiguates a word, that thing can serve the role that I’ve given to a speaker’s intention.

⁹³ I include the qualifier of “where the appropriate syntax is present” to cover instances where due to an ambiguous term’s meanings including different parts of speech certain meanings are blocked due to syntactic structure. Take for example the word ‘duck’ which has both noun-form and verb-form meanings. The syntax of the sentence “She saw him duck” blocks the possibility that the referent of ‘duck’ could be the animal instead of the action. This example is given by Emma Borg (2004, 143). Sennet (2011) uses a similar example to make a similar point.

⁹⁴ Cohen (1999, 61).

⁹⁵ DeRose (2004 and 2005) in particular.

However, there are three important points to be made in response to this suggestion. First, in looking at the popular thought experiments used to ground contextualism—like DeRose’s bank cases and Cohen’s airport case—it seems clear that speaker’s intention is only one of several constituents making up the speaker’s context—including constituents that are external to the speaker. The upshot of this is that, despite the fact that the exact boundaries of what counts as context for the proponent of context are rarely made explicit, it is clear that much more than speaker’s intention is typically taken to be part of context. Thus, even if we consider anything determined by speaker intention to be context-sensitive, the proponent of the ambiguity theory differs in kind from the traditional proponent of contextualism because the proponent of the ambiguity theory rejects the additional elements of context beyond speaker intention as having a role in determining the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials. (Or at least this will be the case for an ambiguity theorist who takes the sense of an ambiguous term to be determined by speaker’s intention.)

Second, as Reed has noted, having determination of sense by speaker’s intention count as a type of context-sensitivity makes ‘knows’ context-sensitive in only a very trivial sense which would certainly also make all ambiguous words context-sensitive along with just about every other word as well.⁹⁶ This seems to be a good reason to reject mere sensitivity to a speaker’s intention as grounds for context-sensitivity.⁹⁷

Third, this explanation seems to undermine the distinct ways in which we use context in relation to meaning. John Perry makes a useful distinction between the *semantic* and the *presemantic* which he describes in the following way,

“Sometimes we use context to figure out with which meaning a word is being used, or which of several words that look or sound alike is being used, or even which language is being spoken. These are *presemantic* uses of

⁹⁶ Reed (2013, 57). A similar point is raised by Patrick Rysiew who writes that “insofar as ‘context’ is taken to refer to the interests, expectations, and so forth of attributors, it is a tautology—something that everyone has got to accept—that in *some* sense ‘ascriptions of knowledge are context-sensitive’” (Rysiew 2001, 478). See also Cohen (1999, 57).

⁹⁷ Unless one wants to take a more use-based approach to language in which such a result is desired, in which case epistemic contextualism loses any of its distinctively epistemic flavor and becomes just a general theory of language.

context: context helps us to figure out meaning. In the case of indexicals, however, context is used *semantically*. It remains relevant after the language, words and meanings are all known; the meaning directs us to certain aspects of context.”⁹⁸

I (along with Perry⁹⁹) take this difference between ‘I’ and ‘bank’ to be a case of such a difference—the way in which context determines the meaning of ‘I’ is clearly semantic. That is, context remains relevant after the language, words, and meanings are all known. The task of determining which sense of ‘bank’ is being employed is clearly a presemantic task. We use context to figure out what meaning a speaker has employed, but once we’ve successfully done that, there is nothing especially context-sensitive about ‘bank’ that remains. It seems clear to me that contextualists have traditionally seen context playing a robust, semantic role that cannot be relegated entirely to the presemantic. But part of what the ambiguity theory claims in stating that the variability in meaning is a result of an ambiguity in the term ‘knows’ is that the role context is playing is solely presemantic and as a result purely pragmatic. This seems to clearly constitute a difference in kind.

That being said, my primary goal in this section has been to make clear the differences between the ambiguity theory, contextualism, and invariantism as they are typically presented. I have done so by denying that the ambiguity theory is a type of contextualism or invariantism, but at the end of the day my primary concern is not with taxonomy. If one wished to change or expand their characterization of contextualism such that the ambiguity theory counted as a type of contextualism, they are of course welcome to do so, but it is important that it be understood that there are key differences in kind that separate the ambiguity theory from traditional forms of contextualism and not merely a difference in the number of epistemic standards involved.

In what follows it will be useful to have a more specific form of the ambiguity theory in mind to compare to contextualism. Thus, for dialectical purposes only, I will endorse a “two senses” view of ‘knows’ similar to the positions adopted by Malcolm and

⁹⁸ Perry (2001, 39-40).

⁹⁹ Perry (2001, 40-42). Emma Borg advocates seeing ambiguity as presemantic as well (2004).

Feldman.¹⁰⁰ For the purposes of this paper the specifics of these senses are not important so long as the low sense is such that it allows for most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions and denials to come out true and the high sense is such that only maximally justified (or close to maximally justified) beliefs count as knowledge.¹⁰¹

2.2 The Strengths of Contextualism and the Ambiguity Theory

As previously stated, the generally agreed upon strengths of epistemic contextualism are (1) that it can be used to solve persistent, skepticism-driven epistemological puzzles in a manner which explains why many people have competing intuitions that both skeptical and non-skeptical responses to such puzzles are plausible and (2) that it preserves the truth of our everyday knowledge ascriptions. In this section I argue that the ambiguity theory also has these strengths.

One type of puzzle which contextualism solves is exemplified in the following scenario from Stewart Cohen.¹⁰²

“Mary and John are at the L. A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and responds, ‘Yes, I know—it does stop in Chicago.’ It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, ‘How reliable is that itinerary? It could

¹⁰⁰ Steup (2005) makes a similar dialectical move.

¹⁰¹ One might wonder what other senses of ‘knowledge’ one could reasonably posit. Discipline-specific senses of knowledge strike me as good candidates for additional senses of ‘knowledge.’ On such a view to say that one has, for example, “scientific knowledge” or “historical knowledge” is to say something more than simply that *the subject matter* of such claims is scientific or historical. It is also to say that the *specific criteria which constitute the epistemic standard* for “scientific knowledge” or “historical knowledge” are satisfied. On such a view the words ‘scientific’ or ‘historical’ provide information not only about the content of the proposition known, but also the type of epistemic standard satisfied. Another option for an addition sense of knows would be a “middle” sense between the “high” and “low” senses identified above. Or if Reed’s suggestion that ‘knows’ works like color words (Reed, 2013) is right, there may be perhaps hundreds of fine-grained senses of ‘knows.’ For some useful and plausible additional suggestions as to what some of those specific sense (or kinds of senses) might be see Reed (2013, Section VII).

¹⁰² Another popular scenario is DeRose’s “bank case” (DeRose, 1992). Both contextualism and the ambiguity theory solve the bank case in a similar fashion to the respective ways in which they solve Cohen’s airport case.

contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.’ Mary and John agree that Smith doesn’t really know that the plane will stop in Chicago.”¹⁰³

It would appear that Smith has a standard for knowledge which differs from Mary’s and John’s.

The puzzle comes about by asking which (if any) party’s knowledge ascription is true. Cohen thinks that to conclude that just Smith’s, just Mary’s and John’s, or neither Smith’s nor Mary’s and John’s ascription is true are all dissatisfactory options. After all, to conclude that Smith’s ascription is true is to conclude that Mary and John could sensibly say “Smith knows the plane will stop in Chicago but we still need to verify that this is true.” But to conclude that either just Mary’s and John’s ascription is true or that neither Smith’s nor Mary’s and John’s ascription is true is to conclude that many other everyday ascriptions of knowledge are incorrect and to move very strongly in the direction of skepticism.

Cohen concludes instead, by appeal to contextualism, that “[n]either standard is simply correct or simply incorrect.”¹⁰⁴ Cohen writes that,

“Rather context determines which standard is correct. Since the standards for knowledge ascriptions can vary across contexts, each claim, Smith’s as well as Mary and John’s, can be correct in the context in which it was made. When Smith says, ‘I know...’, what he says is true given the weaker standard operating in that context. When Mary and John say ‘Smith does not know...’, what they say is true given the stricter standard operating in their context. *And there is no context independent correct standard.*”¹⁰⁵

Many, like Cohen, consider each of the options he rejects dissatisfying. Thus, many consider it a virtue of a theory if it is able to supply an alternative. Contextualism does this. But so does the ambiguity theory.

¹⁰³ Cohen (1999, 58).

¹⁰⁴ Cohen (1999, 59).

¹⁰⁵ Cohen (1999, 59); emphasis is the original author’s.

On the ambiguity theory both Smith's knowledge attribution and Mary's and John's knowledge denial can be right in *both* their contexts, so long as Smith is using 'know' in the low sense and Mary and John are using 'know' in the high sense. Of course, Mary and John would be incorrect if they claimed Smith was *wrong* in claiming to have known that the flight would stop in Chicago. So long as Smith was using the word 'know' in the low sense (and it seems reasonable to think that he was), he is correct even in Mary and John's context.

To see why this is so, let P stand for the claim that the flight has a layover in Chicago. Let know_L stand for 'know' in the low sense. And let know_H stand for 'know' in the high sense. Smith's and Mary's and John's claims can now be expressed as follows:

Smith: I know_L that P

Mary & John: Smith doesn't know_H that P

Given that Smith saw on the printed itinerary that the flight had a layover in Chicago, Smith has sufficient evidence to make his claim that "I know_L that P" true. The differences between his low-standard context and Mary's and John's more demanding higher-standard context do not and could not make Smith's statement false. Were Smith to have overheard Mary and John say he didn't know, and were he to have said "No, I truly do know_L that P," he would still be saying something true.

But while Smith's claim would remain true, it just wouldn't be very relevant, practically speaking, to Mary and John given their context. And given the relevance of the high sense of 'know' for Mary and John, it would be easy to see how Mary and John might carelessly conclude that Smith was wrong because they hadn't taken his intended sense into account.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the ambiguity theory seems to be able to provide as satisfying a response as contextualism to Cohen's scenario and other scenarios of a similar type—namely, it shows how both Smith on the one hand and Mary and John on

¹⁰⁶This solution does not, of course, prohibit genuine disagreement about whether or not Smith knows_H or knows_L that P. For example, if Smith were to say to John and Mary "I know_H that P because my evidence entails P" then Smith would be contending their claim that he doesn't know_H that P. However, in such a case Smith would simply be wrong.

the other can be correct by showing that Smith is correct when using know_L and Mary and John are correct when using know_H .¹⁰⁷

The other popular type of epistemological puzzle which the proponent of contextualism claims to be able to solve comes in the form of inconsistent triads of a particular structure. One such triad is the following:

- (i) If I know I have hands, then I know I'm not a brain-in-a-vat (BIV)
- (ii) I know I have hands
- (iii) I don't know I'm not a brain-in-a-vat (BIV)¹⁰⁸

Cohen considers the best type of response to such a triad to be one in which not only is a solution provided as to which premises are true but in which an explanation of the independent plausibility of each of the premises is also provided.¹⁰⁹

The response which the proponent of contextualism is able to put forward is that this “skeptical paradox arises from inattention to shifts in context.”¹¹⁰ Thus, the skeptic is correct in accepting (i) and (iii) and rejecting (ii) relative to the *high standards context* in which all three propositions are entertained. But this does not mean that we are not typically correct in accepting (ii) in most of the *everyday contexts* in which we believe that we have hands. The merits of responses of this type will be discussed in greater detail in Section 4. What is important to note now is that the ambiguity theory is once again able to give an equally (if not more) satisfying response.

Just as the proponent of contextualism claims that the paradox arises from inattention to shifts in context, so the proponent of the ambiguity theory claims that the paradox arises from inattention to shifts in the sense of ‘know’ employed. If the low

¹⁰⁷ This general strategy will work with other hypothetical cases put forward like the bank cases given by DeRose (1992) and Stanley (2005) and the train cases by Fantl and McGrath (2002).

¹⁰⁸ The general form for such triads comes from G.E. Moore (1959), who rejected statements of type (iii) on grounds of statements of type (i) and (ii). Another triad of the same form is Dretske's zebra/cleverly-disguised mule case. Dretske chooses to reject statements of type (i) while accepting statements of types (ii) and (iii) (Dretske, (1970)).

¹⁰⁹ Cohen writes that “So what we want is a resolution of the paradox that preserves our strong intuitions that we know things. But any such resolution must explain the undeniable appeal of skeptical arguments. For this is what gives rise to the paradox. Though, initially we claim to know many things, under skeptical pressure we begin to worry. Often when we consider skeptical arguments, we find ourselves vacillating between thinking we know and worrying we don't...any successful response to the paradox must explain how we end up in this situation” (Cohen, 1999, 63).

¹¹⁰ Cohen (1999, 67).

sense of ‘know’ is used consistently throughout, then (iii) is false while (i) and (ii) are true. If the high sense of ‘know’ is used consistently, then (ii) is false while (i) and (iii) are true. The reason both (ii) and (iii) seem plausible is because for both there is a sense of ‘knows’ that makes the claim true.¹¹¹ The skeptic and the Moorean go wrong only to the extent that they fail to recognize that there is a sense of ‘knows’ in which the respective opponent can sensibly affirm the proposition which they themselves reject.¹¹² Thus, like contextualism, the ambiguity theory is able not only to provide a solution to this type of paradox but is also able to explain the initial plausibility of each of the premises.

This examination of the responses the proponent of the ambiguity theory can give to such epistemological puzzles also shows how the ambiguity theory preserves the truth of everyday knowledge ascriptions. This results from the fact that on the ambiguity theory, skeptical arguments are unsound when the low, everyday sense of knowledge is employed. (Or at the very least, if they are unsound on contextualism, they are also unsound on the ambiguity theory such that no theory has an edge over the other in this regard). This shows that not only is the ambiguity theory able to solve the same epistemological puzzles that contextualism claims to solve, but that it also preserves the truth of everyday knowledge ascriptions just as well.

In this section I’ve aimed to show that the ambiguity theory has the same strengths as contextualism. Contextualism explains how Smith and John and Mary can be correct in Cohen’s airport case, but so does the ambiguity theory. Contextualism offers a solution to skeptical arguments and explains the appeal of each of the premises in such arguments, but so does the ambiguity theory. Contextualism preserves the truth of everyday knowledge ascriptions, but so does the ambiguity theory. In Section 4 I aim to

¹¹¹ It would be a mistake for one to claim that the ambiguity theory leads to a failure in closure. On the ambiguity theory, the only situations in which (i) would not hold would be situations in which there was an equivocation in the sense of ‘know’ between the antecedent and the consequent of (i). And falsity due to equivocation of course does not lead to a failure of closure.

¹¹²This is a claim I’m making which goes strictly beyond what the ambiguity theory entails. After all it could be the case that there are many sense of ‘knows’ and we do not, in any sense of the word, know we have hands or we do not lack, in any sense of the word, knowledge that we are BIVs. But at the very least the ambiguity theory provides the conceptual space for both the skeptic and the Moorean to be right and only go wrong so far as they fail to realize the other party is using the word ‘know’ differently.

show that the ambiguity theory has several distinct advantages over contextualism. But before turning to those arguments, I want to point out an explanation available to the ambiguity theorist about why it is that a proponent of contextualism could easily misidentify context as the key to solving these epistemological problems as opposed to the different senses of ‘knows’. This is the topic of the next section.

2.3 An Ambiguity-Theory-Friendly Explanation of the Appeal of Contextualism

What is crucial in explaining why the proponent of contextualism could easily misidentify context as opposed to ambiguity as the key to solving a number of epistemological problems is the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. The explanation the ambiguity theorist has available is that the role of context is purely pragmatic instead of semantic as the contextualist claims.¹¹³ In other words, on the ambiguity theory context affects only which knowledge ascriptions and denials it would be *appropriate* to endorse while it is the sense of ‘knows’ which affects the *truth conditions* of those knowledge ascriptions and denials. This is not a novel suggestion. Jessica Brown and Patrick Rysiew have both developed detailed accounts of the pragmatic role of context in their respective defenses of a moderate, subject-insensitive form of invariantism,¹¹⁴ and more recently Baron Reed has made appeal to this distinction in defending his preferred form of the ambiguity theory.¹¹⁵ The appeal of this explanatory option is noted by proponents of contextualism as well. For example, Keith DeRose writes that “the chief bugaboo of contextualism has been the concern that the contextualist is mistaking variability in the conditions of warranted assertability of knowledge attributions for a variability in their truth conditions”¹¹⁶ and acknowledges that this idea is a frequent first reaction to contextualism.¹¹⁷

Brown, Rysiew and Reed all appeal to Grice’s Cooperative Principle, which is the maxim to “make conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it

¹¹³ I take this to be another key feature which distinguishes the ambiguity theory from epistemic contextualism.

¹¹⁴ Brown (2005, 2006) and Rysiew (2001, 2005, 2007).

¹¹⁵ Reed (2013, 56-57).

¹¹⁶ DeRose (2002, 167).

¹¹⁷ DeRose (2002, 170).

occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”¹¹⁸ Thus, a shift in our intuitions about whether an ascription or denial of knowledge is correct is to be explained by a context-derived shift in what’s appropriate to endorse. For both the advocate of the ambiguity theory and the advocate of invariantism, this pragmatic explanation of context provides a tidy solution to the type of data that contextualists typically offer in favor of their position. However, the fact that the ambiguity theory allows for differing truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials depending on which sense of ‘knows’ is used gives the pragmatic explanation of context additional power on the ambiguity theory which it lacks when combined with the moderate subject-insensitive invariantism of Brown and Rysiew.¹¹⁹

To see why the ambiguity theory has this explanatory advantage, consider that on invariantism, meaning and therefore truth conditions must remain fixed even when context changes what is appropriate to say. Thus, those defending invariantism via a pragmatic explanation of context will need to account for instances in which it is appropriate to utter or otherwise endorse literally false assertions and most likely will also need to explain why utterances that intuitively seem true are literally false. (For example, an invariantist who holds a moderately non-skeptical classical view of knowledge will need to explain why Mary’s and John’s knowledge denial of Smith is literally false despite appearing true.) There is disagreement over how much of a cost this is for a theory,¹²⁰ and I myself do not see this challenge as insurmountable. However, the ambiguity theory appears to be able to skirt this difficulty entirely.

Unlike proponents of invariantism, ambiguity theorists are able to avoid dealing with instances of literally false but either appropriate or seemingly-true utterances. They can claim that on the ambiguity theory the pragmatic role that context plays is merely to indicate or convey *which* sense of ‘knows’ is likely being used by the speaker via the

¹¹⁸ Grice (1975, 45).

¹¹⁹ And, as I will argue in much greater length in the next chapter, this feature of the ambiguity theory is what allows it to circumvent the most pressing problems DeRose raises for the pragmatic account of warranted assertability.

¹²⁰ DeRose argues that the fact that the invariantist proponent of a pragmatics explanation of context requires one to use pragmatic implication to explain the falsity of truth-seeming attributions is a mark against the view (DeRose, 2002). Brown argues that this is not the case (Brown, 2006).

speaker's context. This is because on the ambiguity theory, unlike on either invariantism or contextualism, in a given context there is more than one proposition that can be picked out by any given knowledge ascription or knowledge denial.

This phenomenon of context pragmatically conveying which sense of an ambiguous word a speaker is using is perfectly clear in dealing with homonyms whose homonymy is a mere morphological accident like 'bank' (the financial institution) and 'bank' (the side of a river). Imagine that we are having a picnic by a river and that there is a duck down by the side of the river. If I tell you that "There's a duck down by the bank" it is clear to you that by 'bank' I mean the side of a river. And, given that there is a duck down by the river, I've said something true. Whether or not there is a duck down by any financial institution isn't relevant to whether or not I've said something true, and you most likely will not take it to be relevant because the context has pragmatically indicated to you that by 'bank' I mean the side of the river. And if it is false that there is a duck down by any financial institution, this does not cause my utterance of "There's a duck down by the bank" to be a case in which I've said something strictly speaking false but only appropriate or seemingly true. In short, the ambiguity theory has the advantage over invariantism of being able to utilize a pragmatic explanation of context on which context serves to pragmatically convey which proposition a knowledge utterance picks out as opposed to pragmatically conveying something potentially false given the fixed proposition that the knowledge utterance picks out.

The fact that context plays an important role in what is being pragmatically conveyed in many knowledge ascriptions and denials provides the ambiguity theorist with an even stronger explanation for why one might mistakenly take context to be doing the semantic work that the ambiguity theorist claims the sense of 'knows' is doing. The source of this additional explanatory power is rooted in the fact that it seems very reasonable to think that there is a strong correlation between usages of certain senses of 'knows' and certain types of contexts.

For example, it seems plausible to surmise that in most everyday situations the "low" sense of 'knows' is the sense that speakers use in casual conversation. Similarly, those situations in which someone is likely to use the "high" sense of 'knows' are almost

always situations in which there is some other mark which indicates that the context has shifted into a high standards situation (e.g. “Are you sure you *know* that? After all couldn’t it be the case that you’re a brain-in-a-vat?) and in which there is a corresponding reason for why the high sense of ‘knows’ is (at least taken to be) relevant. Given this high correlation between certain types of contexts and the usage of certain senses of ‘knows’, it would be easy to mistake the high correlation that results between certain types of contexts and certain truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions and denials as a case in which the change in context was responsible or a sufficient reason for the change in the truth conditions.

2.4: The Advantages of the Ambiguity Theory over Epistemic Contextualism

As was noted in Section 2, endorsing the view that ‘knows’ is context-sensitive allows contextualism to solve certain problems. However, the view that ‘knows’ is context-sensitive creates problems as well. In this section I will argue that the ambiguity theory is able to avoid several of these problems and that as a result, unless counterbalancing evidence can be offered, the ambiguity theory is the theory that ought to be preferred.

A first problem is noted by Ernest Sosa who writes that,

“An argument might be endorsed in any of at least three ways: (a) by public affirmation, (b) by conscious and occurrent thought, and (c) by implicit belief. DeRose’s contextualism implies that Moore’s argument could not be correctly endorsed at least in ways a and b, and perhaps not in way c either...According to DeRose’s contextualism, the Moorean combination...may be the abstractly sound argument, as compared with its rival arguments favored respectively by Nozick and the skeptic; but it can remain so only at the *cost* of being unuttered and un-thought.”¹²¹

The rationale behind Sosa’s position is that any attempt to utter or consciously endorse the Moorean position puts one into a high-standards context where the Moorean position is made false. Thus, “Moore’s position may hence be correct but unendorsable.”¹²²

¹²¹ Sosa (1999, 1450; emphasis added).

¹²² Sosa (1999, 145).

There are at least two ways in which the contextualist can try and argue that this is not a mark against contextualism. The first is to argue that, *contra* Sosa, the unutterability or unendorsability of the Moorean argument is *not a very high cost*. So long as we can truthfully utter and endorse claims like “I have hands” in most everyday contexts, it doesn’t matter that we cannot truthfully utter or endorse the Moorean argument. I find this response plausible, and were it the case that no other alternatives were available, this might be a bullet worth biting. However, biting this bullet would mean that there would be a permanent sort of cognitive dissonance for most of us, as our (supposedly) best reflective efforts would always be at odds with our ordinary practices.¹²³ This result is clearly less than ideal.¹²⁴

The second way a contextualist could offer a defense would be to argue that it is false that one could never utter or endorse the Moorean argument on contextualism. The contextualist could argue that in some situations one is able to control the context such that the low-standards remain in place despite the fact that a skeptical alternative has been brought into the context.¹²⁵ Once again, this strikes me as a plausible response but less than ideal. It is a bullet that one could bite, but it does not seem wise to bite it when there is a better alternative available.

I think the ambiguity theory is this better alternative. On the ambiguity theory, the problem of whether the Moorean position can be uttered or endorsed does not even arise. For on the ambiguity theory both the Moorean position and the skeptical position can be uttered and endorsed in *any* context so long as the proper sense of ‘know’ is used throughout the argument for either position. A speaker interested in defending a Moorean position can reply to the skeptic simply by pointing out that the skeptic was referring to knowledge in a different sense.

¹²³ Thanks to Baron Reed for helping make this point clear to me.

¹²⁴ DeRose (2004) to an extent puts forward a view for which this is an implication.

¹²⁵ Cohen (1999) shows some support for this position writing that “though when skeptical alternatives are salient, there is strong upward pressure on the standards, this can sometimes be resisted. One device for doing this is adopting a certain tone of voice. So in response to the skeptic, one might say, ‘C’mon, you’ve got to be kidding—I know I am not a brain-in-a-vat!’. If this is the dominant response among the conversational participants, then everyday standards may remain in effect” (Cohen, 1999, 85, footnote 27). Similarly, DeRose endorses a form of contextualism that may also be able to avoid certain levels of upward pressure (for example DeRose (2005, 176-78) and DeRose (2013, 89-91)).

The ambiguity theory also fares better in response to those like Palle Yourgrau who claims that contextualism licenses conversations like the following:

A: Is that a zebra?

B: Yes, it is a zebra

A: But can you rule out its being a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, I can't

A: So, you admit you didn't know it was a zebra?

B: No, I did know then that it was a zebra. But after your question, I no longer know.¹²⁶

DeRose rejects Yourgrau's claim that contextualism licenses such conversations writing that,

“If in the context of a conversation the possibility of painted mules has been mentioned, and *if* the mere mention of this possibility has an effect on the conditions under which someone can be truly said to ‘know,’ then any use of ‘know’ (or its past tense) is so affected, even a use in which one describes one’s past condition. B cannot truly say, ‘I did know then that it was a zebra’...B *can* say, ‘My previous knowledge claim was true’...”¹²⁷

DeRose's response successfully shows that contextualism does not license such conversations. But with DeRose's point taken into account contextualism would still license the following conversation,

A: Do you know that to be a zebra?

B: Yes, I know it is a zebra

A: But can you rule out its being a cleverly painted mule?

B: No, I can't

A: So, you admit you didn't know it was a zebra?

B: Well, it's complicated. My previous claim that “I know it is a zebra” was true. However, it is not the case that I knew it was a zebra.

¹²⁶ Yourgrau (1983, 183).

¹²⁷ DeRose (1992, 925); emphasis in original.

This conversation, although more in keeping with the spirit of contextualism, does not seem much better than the first. The reason B ends up in this unfortunate position on contextualism is that the context in which B gives his first reply “Yes, I know it is a zebra” is a context in which the epistemic standard is low enough for this to be true. However, by the end of the conversation the context has changed such that B can neither claim to know the animal is a zebra or claim to have known the animal is a zebra. But this does not mean that B cannot comment on the truth of a previous knowledge ascription.

It does not strike me as unreasonable for a proponent of contextualism to simply acknowledge that contextualism does license such conversations and then claim that this is not particularly problematic for one reason or another. But this position may be a hard sell. After all, it seems reasonable to find it problematic that we would accept a conversation like the above for other context-sensitive terms (like ‘here’) but may balk at doing so for ‘knows’? Can a term really be context-sensitive if competent speakers do not recognize it as such, even upon reflection? The kind of “semantic blindness” that would result from contextualism being true and our resistance to seeing this truth remaining is something that advocates of contextualism have worked to explain.¹²⁸ Whether or not those arguments succeed are not part of the focus here. But what is important to note is that, regardless of the success of these maneuvers by contextualists, the ambiguity theory offers a much more attractive option. The ambiguity theory does not license this conversation or the previous one. Instead the proponent of the ambiguity theory can clarify that B was using ‘know’ in the low, everyday sense (know_L) in which one’s inability to know in a high sense (know_H) that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule does not threaten either the truth of B’s original knowledge claim or the fact of the matter that B does know_L the animal is a zebra.¹²⁹

One might think that the ambiguity theory still has some explaining to do—namely, the ambiguity theory needs to explain B’s concession that she is not able to rule out that the animal is a cleverly painted mule. There are at least three ways in which the

¹²⁸ See for example Cohen (1999, 2010) and DeRose (2006, 2009).

¹²⁹ I am assuming here that the kind of circumstantial evidence cited by Jonathan Vogel (Vogel (1990), 14) is sufficient for B to know_L that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule. Once again, closure is preserved. The only instances of seeming closure failure would be those situations in which there is an equivocation between the senses of ‘know’ present and these would not be genuine cases of closure failure.

proponent of the ambiguity theory can respond. First, the proponent of the ambiguity theory can claim that B's concession is unproblematic. It is true that B cannot rule out that it's a cleverly painted mule, but that's not important because it is not relevant to whether or not B can truly say "I know_L that the animal is a zebra." Part of the value of know_L is that we can know_L propositions without having to rule out any old alternative an interlocutor might mention. Second, the proponent of the ambiguity theory could claim that B does not need to concede that she can't rule out its being a cleverly disguised mule. The idea would be something like this—that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule cannot be ruled out *with certainty*, but the type of circumstantial evidence and background knowledge that B has makes the possibility unlikely enough that the option can be ruled out practically speaking. This leads to the third response—namely, the proponent of the ambiguity theory could claim that just as there is more than one sense of 'knows' there is also more than one sense of 'ruling out.' The response could then be something along the lines that B cannot rule-out_H that what B sees is a clearly painted mule, but that B can rule-out_L that it is a cleverly painted mule, and that this type of ruling out is sufficient to know_L.

Another advantage which the ambiguity theory has over contextualism is that it can accommodate situations in which both a knowledge ascription and a knowledge denial seem true. Take, for example, the following case provided by Jessica Brown which she titles SURGEON.¹³⁰

“A student is spending the day shadowing a surgeon. In the morning he observes her in clinic examining patient A who has a diseased left kidney. The decision is taken to remove it that afternoon. Later, the student observes the surgeon in theatre where patient A is lying anaesthetized on the operating table. The operation hasn't started as the surgeon is consulting the patient's notes. The student is puzzled and asks one of the nurses what's going on:

Student: I don't understand. Why is she looking at the patient's records? She was in clinic with the patient this morning. Doesn't she even know which kidney it is?

¹³⁰ I am not using SURGEON for the purpose that Brown originally intends for the case.

Nurse: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She should not operate before checking the patient's records."¹³¹

In this case the nurse's claim that the doctor knows which of the patient's kidneys is to be removed is meant to be taken intuitively as a true statement and an appropriate response. On its own, this case poses no problem for contextualism or the ambiguity theory. However, things get more complicated once we consider Fantl's and McGrath's claim that "the nurse in Brown's surgeon case could just as easily and just as properly have said, 'Well, of course she's checking the chart; it's not enough to rely on her memory that it's the left kidney. She needs to know it is'."¹³² The implication of such a claim on the nurse's behalf amounts to an implicit denial that the doctor knows which of the kidneys is to be removed. Let us label the response that Fantl and McGrath claim the nurse could give *Nurse Response 2 (NR-2)* and the original response that Brown claims the nurse could give *Nurse Response 1 (NR-1)*. Our options are then as follows:

NR-1: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She should not operate before checking the patient's records

NR-2: Well, of course, she's checking the chart; it's not enough to rely on her memory that it's the left kidney. She needs to know it is.¹³³

Both NR-1 and NR-2 deal with the same subject (the surgeon), the same proposition (it is the left kidney of the patient that is to be removed) and are given in response to the same context. NR-1 contains an explicit knowledge ascription, while NR-2 contains an implicit knowledge denial concerning the same subject, proposition and context.¹³⁴ For those

¹³¹ Brown (2008, 176).

¹³² Fantl and McGrath (2012, 71).

¹³³ If one felt the case would be more compelling if the knowledge denial was made explicit, one could restructure NR-2 so that the knowledge denial was explicit.

¹³⁴ Obviously, once NR-1 or NR-2 is asserted the context is different than one in which the other claim had been asserted instead. But prior to the assertion the context for the two scenarios is identical.

with the intuition that both NR-1 and NR-2 represent plausibly true and plausibly appropriate responses, there is a problem for contextualism. For on contextualism, the intuition that both NR-1 and NR-2 are plausibly true and appropriate responses cannot be explained by a change in the context between NR-1 and NR-2 because the context prompting each response is identical to the other. Thus, some other explanation is needed.

I take the most obvious candidate for providing an explanation to the plausibility of the truth and appropriateness of NR-1 and NR-2 to be the ambiguity theory. For on the ambiguity theory, what changes is the sense of ‘knows’ the nurse chooses to use. Both the lower sense and the higher sense are practically relevant in this instance. (The nurse validates the competency of the surgeon when refusing to retract the claim that the surgeon knows_L that the left kidney is the one to be removed, or the nurse validates the importance of getting it right in an important matter like surgery when claiming that the surgeon needs to know_H that the left kidney is the one to be removed).

This same feature of the ambiguity theory can also accommodate what Steup calls “the problem of upward-pressure resistance”—i.e. “the fact that when error possibilities become salient, not everybody responds to the upward pressure on the standards of knowledge by shifting to a high-standard meaning of the word ‘know’.”¹³⁵ Steup offers Roderick Chisholm’s resistance to such upward-pressure as an example. It is hard to see how contextualism can render Chisholm as anything other than wrong or confused about what he meant by ‘know’ when he discussed the meaning of ‘know’ in high-stakes or other upward-pressure contexts (and if contextualism could avoid this, the result may be that anyone who did give in to upward-pressure was wrong or confused about the meaning of ‘know’ in situations of upward-pressure). The contextualist cannot avoid in this situation that someone was confused: either Chisholm for resisting or others for giving in. But on the ambiguity theory a simple explanation is available—Chisholm chose to continue to use a lower sense of ‘knows’ than those who embraced a higher sense of ‘knows’ when giving in to upward-pressure.

All these advantages reflect a general advantage that the ambiguity theory has over epistemic contextualism, namely, that on the ambiguity theory speakers and thinkers

¹³⁵ Steup (2005, 5).

are not slaves to the whim of context. It seems like someone's asking whether or not you are a brain-in-a-vat shouldn't make it such that you can no longer affirm the truth of a Moorean argument if you otherwise could have. Nor should the fact that you have an important bill due tomorrow make it such that you can no longer claim you knew, in some sense of the word, that the bank would be open tomorrow if you would have otherwise been able to truthfully say so. It is difficult (if not impossible) to get around such unpleasant outcomes on contextualism, but easy on the ambiguity theory.

In this chapter I've shown how the ambiguity theory is distinct from both contextualism and invariantism. And I've argued in favor of the ambiguity theory by showing how the ambiguity theory shares the major strengths contextualism has and by showing that the ambiguity theory has certain important strengths that contextualism lacks. My case for the ambiguity theory has been geared towards the proponent of contextualism. For the proponent of invariantism, much more will need to be said in favor of the ambiguity theory, but that will have to wait for another occasion. In conclusion, I suggest that the considerations here have shown that those drawn to contextualism should give serious consideration to the ambiguity theory as well.

CHAPTER 3: MODERATE CLASSICAL INVARIANTISM, WARRANTED ASSERTABILITY MANEUVERS, AND THE AMBIGUITY THEORY OF 'KNOWS'

The goal of the last chapter was to defend the ambiguity theory of 'knows' against contextualism. This was done by making clear what the differences between contextualism and the ambiguity theory are, by arguing that the ambiguity theory has the same strengths as contextualism, and by arguing that the ambiguity theory has certain strengths that contextualism lacks. In this chapter a similar format has been adopted, but the competitor has changed. In this chapter I will argue that the ambiguity theory fares better than the view that Keith DeRose has called "the real threat to contextualism"¹³⁶ and "the most influential source of resistance to contextualism"¹³⁷—namely, a form of classical, moderately non-skeptical invariantism that employs what DeRose calls a "warranted assertability maneuver".¹³⁸ (For those not familiar with the terminology, what all this means will be explained shortly.)

More specifically, the outline of this chapter is as follows. In Section 1, I briefly review the definitions of contextualism and the ambiguity theory and give a definition and explanation of both classical moderately non-skeptical invariantism and of a warranted assertability maneuver. I conclude Section 1 by laying out what the relevant differences and similarities are between contextualism, the ambiguity theory, and this particular form of moderate invariantism. In Section 2, I present a set of cases in which I argue that our intuitions are better accounted for by the ambiguity theory over the form of moderate invariantism being put forward. In Section 3 I look at the data that DeRose thinks poses a problem for the form of moderate invariantism under discussion. I argue

¹³⁶ DeRose (2004b, 349-350).

¹³⁷ DeRose (2002, 170-171).

¹³⁸ DeRose (1999, 2002, 2005, 2009).

that this moderate invariantist view is in a better position than DeRose claims that it is, but that DeRose has identified at least one important weakness for this form of moderate invariantism. In Section 4 I look at a problem that the ambiguity theory seems to have which moderate invariantism does not and provide an account of how the ambiguity theory can deal with this potential problem. I conclude that both the form of moderate invariantism under discussion and the ambiguity theory are reasonable views to hold given the data and that in neither case are their difficulties insurmountable. But I further conclude that, on balance, the ambiguity theory is the stronger of the two views.

3.1 The Views Defined, Explained, and Compared

As outlined in the previous chapter, epistemic contextualism (hereafter referred to simply as contextualism) is the view that the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials, in virtue of making a knowledge claim, shift in accordance with certain changes in the context of utterance. This is contrasted with the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ (hereafter referred to simply as the ambiguity theory), which is the view that ‘knows’ and its cognates have more than one sense that can properly be used in propositional ‘knows that’ constructions, and that which sense of ‘knows’ is used in a knowledge ascription or denial determines, in part, the meaning (and as a result the truth conditions) of that knowledge ascription or denial.¹³⁹

The two key differences between the views can be described as follows. The first difference is that according to contextualism context plays an essentially *semantic* role which helps *determine* or *fix* the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions, while on the ambiguity theory context plays an essentially *pragmatic* role and only *guides* speakers in their sense selection and *assists* hearers in their recognition of what a speaker’s ascription means.¹⁴⁰ An upshot of this situation is that on both contextualism and the ambiguity theory the following principle is true:

¹³⁹As in the previous chapter, from here on out the phrases ‘and its cognates’ from ‘‘knows’ and its cognates’ and ‘and denials’ from ‘‘attributions and denials’’ will typically be omitted, but should be understood as implied where appropriate.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Meaning’ is, of course, itself an ambiguous term. As used in this paper, ‘meaning’ will refer to that which the speaker literally says and is a product of the intentions and proper use of a language by a

Surface Conflict Without Inconsistency (SCWI): There are cases in which, for the same subject *S* and proposition *p*, one speaker can truly say “*S* knows *p*” and another speaker, at the same time, can truly say “*S* does not know *p*”.

However, only on the ambiguity theory and not on contextualism is this second principle true:

Diverging Responses Without Inconsistency (DRWI): There are cases in which, for the same subject *S* and proposition *p*, one and the same speaker says truly “*S* knows *p*” but instead could have truly said “*S* does not know *p*”.

Contextualism must reject DRWI because context-sensitivity (via whatever the semantic mechanism may be) allows sentences and/or utterances to pick out different propositions and to have varying truth-conditions *across different contexts*, but doesn’t allow for a sentence to pick out varying propositions or to have varying truth-conditions *within a particular context*. In contrast, the ambiguity theory allows for DRWI because the semantic mechanism of ambiguity allows sentences and/or utterances to pick out different propositions and to have vary truth-conditions *both across different contexts and within a particular context*. SCWI requires only what context-sensitivity and ambiguity have in common, namely, the ability for varying truth-conditions for a sentence and/or utterance across contexts. But DRWI requires what only ambiguity allows for, namely, the ability for varying truth-conditions for a sentence and/or utterance within a particular context.¹⁴¹ That the ambiguity theory is compatible with DRWI, but that contextualism is not, is the second key difference between the ambiguity theory and contextualism.

competent speaker of that language. The term ‘meaning’ here is interchangeable with the term ‘sense’ as used technically in a Fregean way.

¹⁴¹ From here on out the relevant difference between the truth-conditions of sentences versus the truth-conditions of utterances will be suppressed with phrases like ‘the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing sentences’ and ‘the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing utterances’ being used interchangeably unless otherwise specified. On certain views, such as Geoff Pynn’s pragmatic contextualism (2015a, 2015b), this distinction between the truth-conditions of utterances and sentences is relevant. But the distinction is not relevant for our purposes.

Now let's take a look at how invariantism—and specifically the type of invariantism we're going to be stacking up against the ambiguity theory—fits into the picture. As noted in the last chapter, there has been some inconsistency in how invariantism has been defined. But that won't cause us a problem here because it's pretty clear what constitutes classical, moderately non-skeptical invariantism even if it is not clear what the boundaries of invariantism itself is. So let's go piece by piece in order to get a clear understanding of what this competing view to the ambiguity theory is.

One point of agreement among all parties is that the invariantist denies the truth of epistemic contextualism. It is also typically assumed that invariantism denies SCWI (and implicitly that it denies DRWI.) In this chapter I will assume that the invariantist denies the truth of contextualism, SCWI, and DRWI. Thus defined, the ambiguity theory doesn't count as a type of invariantism (although it seems like it would count as a type of invariantism on certain broad understandings of that term).

What Jessica Brown and Christoph Kelp (among others) have called classical invariantism¹⁴² adds to invariantism the denial of the following claim:

Pragmatic-Encroachment (PE): A difference in pragmatic circumstances can constitute a difference in knowledge.¹⁴³

Therefore, classical invariantism does not include views like the interest-relative invariantism of Jason Stanley or the subject-sensitive invariantism of John Hawthorne, Jeremy Fantl, and Matthew McGrath.¹⁴⁴ Rather, the classical invariantist seeks a view more akin to that advocated in the post-Gettier program, where a single concept (and analysis) of knowledge was typically assumed and it was assumed not to have any pragmatic constituents or purely pragmatic features.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Brown (2005, 2006), Kelp (2008).

¹⁴³The phrasing of this claim comes from Ichikawa and Steup (2014). Like many others in the literature on knowledge ascriptions, in this context, I take the terms 'pragmatic' and 'practical' to be interchangeable.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Stanley (2005), Hawthorne (2004), and Fantl and McGrath (2009).

¹⁴⁵ Here seems to be as good a place as any to include a note on why subject-sensitive invariantism (SSI) has received relatively little attention in this dissertation. The reason for this is because, among the dominant views in the literature on the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials, SSI is the most distant view from the ambiguity theory. More specifically, the things that separate SSI from the

As has been noted by Brown, DeRose, and Hawthorne (among others), there can be different types of classical invariantism depending on the level of stringency required for knowledge.¹⁴⁶ In general, two broad categories of classical invariantism have been put forward. First, skeptical invariantism, a view held perhaps most famously in the post-Gettier era by Peter Unger in his younger years,¹⁴⁷ refers to a type of invariantism on which the standards for knowledge are high enough that most of our everyday knowledge attributions are false, strictly speaking. Due to the relative unpopularity of this view, it will not be focused on in this chapter.¹⁴⁸

Instead, we will focus on the second view, which John Hawthorne has labeled moderate invariantism.¹⁴⁹ Moderate invariantism is a form of classical invariantism on which the standard for knowledge is low enough such that most of our everyday knowledge attributions are true. (What exactly those standards are isn't an essential element of the family of views picked out by the term moderate invariantism and what those standards are exactly won't be important for our purposes.) Thus, in short, classical moderate invariantism (hereafter referred to simply as moderate invariantism or MI) is the view that contextualism, SCWI, DRWI, and pragmatic encroachment are all false, and that the single invariant standard of knowledge is low enough such that most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions turn out true.

But in order to understand fully the type of invariantism we'll be comparing the ambiguity theory to, we also need to understand the response it gives to the typical contextualist data (by contextualist data, I mean the things that contextualists usually put forward to support their view—things like DeRose's banks cases, Cohen's airport case, inconsistent brain-in-a-vat/hands triads etc.), which initially don't seem to jive well with

ambiguity theory are things also shared by *either* contextualism or non-sensitive forms of invariantism like the one being discussed in this chapter. Thus, in making the cases for the superiority of the ambiguity theory over contextualism or other forms of invariantism I've already trotted out all the major reasons why I think that the ambiguity theory is superior to SSI. Thus, I was unable to see any way of making a separate chapter on the matter that was not awkwardly and unhelpfully redundant.

¹⁴⁶ See Brown (2006), DeRose (1999), and Hawthorne (2004, ch. 3).

¹⁴⁷ Unger (1975).

¹⁴⁸ For a more modern (and in my mind quite plausible) defense of this view see Wayne Davis (2007). Davis argues that most of our everyday knowledge claims are cases of loose use in which the claims are strictly speaking false but appear both true and appropriate. This is roughly the skeptical parallel of the invariantist view being considered in this chapter.

¹⁴⁹ Hawthorne (2004, ch 3).

moderate invariantism. The dominant (and I believe most compelling) method put forward is to make, what DeRose calls, a *warranted assertability maneuver*. DeRose explain a warranted assertability maneuvers (hereafter a WAM) as follows.

“A WAM involves explaining why an assertion can seem false (or at least not true) in certain circumstances in which it is in fact true by appeal to the fact that the utterance would be improper or unwarranted in the circumstances in question.”¹⁵⁰

In the case of the debate between the contextualists and the classical invariantists, the specific WAM employed by the proponent of MI is the following: “what the contextualist takes to be a variation in the truth conditions of knowledge attributions is in reality only a variation in the conditions for the warranted assertability of those claims.”¹⁵¹

In order to see more clearly how the WAM operates let’s look at a concrete example of the WAM as used in response to DeRose’s popular bank cases.

Bank Case A: My wife and I are driving home on a Friday afternoon. We plan to stop at the bank on the way home to deposit our paychecks. But as we drive past the bank, we notice that the lines inside are very long, as they often are on Friday afternoons. Although we generally like to deposit our paychecks as soon as possible, it is not especially important in this case that they be deposited right away, so I suggest that we drive straight home and deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning. My wife says ‘Maybe the bank won’t be open tomorrow. Lots of banks are closed on Saturdays.’ I reply, ‘No, I know it’ll be open. I was just there two weeks ago on Saturday. It’s open until noon.’

Bank Case B: My wife and I drive past the bank on a Friday afternoon as in Case A, and notice the long lines. I again suggest that we deposit our paychecks on Saturday morning, explaining that I was at the bank on Saturday morning only two weeks ago and discovered that it was open until noon. But in this case, we have just written a very large and very important check. If our paychecks are not deposited into our checking account

¹⁵⁰ DeRose (2002, 171).

¹⁵¹ DeRose (2002, 171).

before Monday morning, the important check will bounce, leaving us in a *very* bad situation. And, of course, the bank is not open on Sunday. My wife reminds me of these facts. She then says, ‘Banks do change their hours. Do you know the bank will be open tomorrow?’ Remaining as confident as I was before that the bank will be open then, still, I reply, ‘Well, no, I don’t know. I’d better go in and check.’¹⁵²

DeRose then adds the following: “Assume in each case that the bank will in fact be open on the Saturday in question, and that there is nothing unusual about either case that has not been included in the description of it.”¹⁵³

The intuition that the contextualist expects and desires of listeners (and that listeners often seem to have) is that both the speaker’s first person knowledge attribution in Case A and the speaker’s knowledge denial in Case B are true and appropriately made statements, and that this is so despite the fact that it remains true in both cases that the bank will be open, the degree of confidence of belief remains the same, and the level of justification remains the same. The contextualist argues that these intuitions are evidence in favor of contextualism. I argued in the last chapter that this move is too quick, and that this evidence just as strongly supports the ambiguity theory. However, that’s not the point here.

Moderate invariantists must offer an explanation of these intuitions. For, on moderate (or any form of classical) invariantism the knowledge assertion in Case A and the knowledge denial in Case B cannot both be true, given the circumstances of the case. For the moderate invariantist who employs a WAM, the basic response goes as follows. The speaker’s knowledge assertion in Case A is both true and pragmatically appropriate to assert. In Case A, the truth of the claim and the appropriateness of assertion are in tandem. However, in Case B, the warranted assertability conditions of what it’s pragmatically appropriate to assert come apart from the truth of the claim. In Case B, according to our moderate invariantist, the knowledge denial is strictly speaking false, but it is appropriate to assert given the circumstances. The details and merits of the

¹⁵²These versions of the cases come from DeRose (2009). Similar iterations of these cases have been presented by DeRose and others on many other occasions.

¹⁵³ DeRose (2009, 2).

invariantist's reasons for this claim will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3, but for now the important point is that an invariantist who uses a WAM claims that the truth conditions for knowledge assertions and denials remain constant across contexts, but that what it's appropriate to assert varies contextually. From here on out the only form of classical invariantism that will concern us will be a form of moderate invariantism that employs a warranted assertability maneuver in order to explain the contextualist data. From here on out that view will be referred to simply as MI-WAM.

With the basics of MI-WAM before us, we can now compare the relevant essential features of the view to its competitors, contextualism and the ambiguity theory. To start, recall that while on contextualism context played a semantic role, on the ambiguity theory context played a pragmatic role. MI-WAM, like the ambiguity theory and contra contextualism, also gives context a pragmatic role. According to MI-WAM, context changes what we're attentive to and what it's appropriate or warranted to assert, but does not play a semantic role in altering the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions or denials beyond the normal ways in which context determines the truth values of claims generally. On this first point the ambiguity theory and MI-WAM are aligned in opposition to contextualism.

Second, recall that both the ambiguity theory and contextualism entail that SCWI is true, but that SCWI is not consistent with MI-WAM. This difference between MI-WAM and its competitors is what allows the ambiguity theory and contextualism to conclude that the speaker speaks truly in both Bank Case A and Bank Case B, while MI-WAM must explain away the apparent truth of the speaker's knowledge denial in Bank Case B via a WAM. On this second point, the ambiguity theory and contextualism are aligned in opposition to MI-WAM.

Finally, recall that both contextualism and MI-WAM deny DWRI. That is, on both contextualism and MI-WAM, given a particular context, there is only one sense for which a speaker can properly use 'knows' in propositional constructions. This is in contrast with the ambiguity theory which claims that any propositional sense of 'knows' remains properly available for a speaker to use in any context (so long as the proper

syntax is present.) On this third point, contextualism and MI-WAM are aligned in opposition to the ambiguity theory.

These similarities and differences may be more readily grasped graphically. They are depicted in the following two tables:

View	True Claim Made in Case A?	True Claim Made in Case B?
Contextualism	Yes	Yes
Ambiguity Theory	Yes	Yes
MI-WAM	Yes	No (But Still Appropriate)

View	# of senses of ‘knows’ available per context	Role of context
Contextualism	One	Semantic
Ambiguity Theory	More than one (as many as there are)	Pragmatic
MI-WAM	One	Pragmatic

In the three sections that follow, I aim to make a case that the differences between the ambiguity theory and MI-WAM as outlined above given the ambiguity theory the upper hand (although not decisively so). In Section 2 I begin my case by presenting cases in which the most desirable theory of ‘knows’ appears to be one on which more than one sense of ‘knows’ remains available within a context—a feature, that among the views being considered, only the ambiguity theory has.¹⁵⁴

3.2 The Case for the Ambiguity Theory via DRWI

Recall that the ambiguity theory entails the following principle,

¹⁵⁴ If having this feature is an advantage—which I will argue that it is—this is also an advantage that the ambiguity theory has over SSI, which doesn’t allow for more than one sense of ‘knows’ to be properly available within a given context of utterance.

Diverging Responses Without Inconsistency (DRWI): There are cases in which, for the same subject *S* and proposition *p*, one and the same speaker says truly “*S* knows *p*” but instead could have truly said “*S* does not know *p*”.

Recall also that this principle is incompatible with both contextualism and MI-WAM. Thus, if we have reason to accept DRWI, then we have good reason to accept the ambiguity theory over contextualism and MI-WAM. But what reason do we have to accept DRWI?

In the spirit of the frequent appeals to ordinary language usage, which are regularly made by both proponents of contextualism and MI-WAM in the literature, I want to offer a couple of cases for which I think an acceptance of DRWI is the best explanation of our linguistic intuitions. The base for the first case comes from Jessica Brown (and was presented in the last chapter). The base for the second one comes from Baron Reed. I’ve added to both cases in order to modify their original purposes to better serve my own. Let’s begin with Brown’s SURGEON case. The case as originally presented goes as follows.

“A student is spending the day shadowing a surgeon. In the morning he observes her in clinic examining patient A who has a diseased left kidney. The decision is taken to remove it that afternoon. Later, the student observes the surgeon in theatre where patient A is lying anaesthetized on the operating table. The operation hasn’t started as the surgeon is consulting the patient’s notes. The student is puzzled and asks one of the nurses what’s going on:

Student: I don’t understand. Why is she looking at the patient’s records? She was in clinic with the patient this morning. Doesn’t she even know which kidney it is?

Nurse: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She should not operate before checking the patient’s records.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Brown (2008, 176).

In this case the nurse's claim that the doctor knows which of the patient's kidneys is to be removed is meant to be taken intuitively as a true statement and an appropriate response. Initially, it likely is not clear why this case should favor either DRWI or its rejection. However, the relevance of the case comes clearly into focus once we consider Fantl and McGrath's claim that "the nurse in Brown's surgeon case could just as easily and just as properly have said, 'Well, of course she's checking the chart; it's not enough to rely on her memory that it's the left kidney. She needs to know it is'."¹⁵⁶ The implication of such a claim on the nurse's behalf amounts to an implicit denial that the doctor knows which of the kidneys is to be removed. Let us label the response that Fantl and McGrath claim the nurse could give (along with an explicit knowledge denial for good measure) *Nurse Response 2 (NR-2)* and the original response that Brown claims the nurse could give *Nurse Response 1 (NR-1)*. Our options are then as follows:

NR-1: Of course, she knows which kidney it is. But, imagine what it would be like if she removed the wrong kidney. She should not operate before checking the patient's records

NR-2: Well, of course, she's checking the chart; it's not enough to rely on her memory that it's the left kidney. She needs to know it is, and without double-checking she doesn't know it.

Both NR-1 and NR-2 deal with the same subject (the surgeon), the same proposition (it is the left kidney of the patient that is to be removed) and are given in response to the same context. NR-1 contains an explicit knowledge ascription while NR-2 contains an implicit knowledge denial concerning the same subject, proposition and context.¹⁵⁷ For those with the intuition that both NR-1 and NR-2 represent plausibly true and appropriate responses, this poses a problem for views that deny DRWI like contextualism and MI-WAM, because the context prompting each response is identical to the other, yet both claims seem very plausibly true. Thus, on contextualism and MI-WAM some explanation

¹⁵⁶ Fantl and McGrath (2012, 71).

¹⁵⁷ Obviously, once NR-1 or NR-2 is asserted the context is different than one in which the other claim had been asserted instead. But prior to the assertion the context for the two scenarios is identical.

as to why both the knowledge ascription and knowledge denial appear true (even though one of them is not) is needed. In a moment I consider several attempts at giving such an explanation, but before turning to those possible explanations, let's look at another scenario.

This following case comes from Baron Reed:

Punishment/reward case 1. You are participating in a psychological study intended to measure the effect of stress on memory. The researcher asks you questions about Roman history—a subject with which you are well acquainted. For every correct answer you give, the researcher will reward you with a jelly bean; for every incorrect answer, you are punished by an extremely painful electric shock. There is neither reward nor punishment for failing to give an answer. The first question is: when was Julius Caesar born? You are confident, though not absolutely certain, that the answer is 100 BC. You also know that, given that Caesar was born in 100 BC, the best thing to do is to provide this answer (i.e., this course of action will have the best consequences—you will be one jelly bean richer!).¹⁵⁸

Reed then points out, however, that due to the significant stakes if you are wrong, you may not want to answer. Reed says “it would be natural for a subject to say” the following:

Subject Response 1 (SR-1): I know this one, but I'm not going to risk an answer.¹⁵⁹

Aside from those who have a commitment to a knowledge-action principle who, for theoretical reasons, may want to resist the conjunction, most of us will likely find this an appropriate and accurate response. However, it also seems that the following would have been a true, appropriate, and natural response as well:

Subject Response 2 (SR-2): I'm pretty confident about this one, but I don't know this one, so I'm not going to risk an answer.

¹⁵⁸ Reed (2010, 228-229). As with the SURGEON case, I am not using this example for its original purpose.

¹⁵⁹ Reed (2010, 229).

One again, in both SR-1 and in SR-2 we have the same subject (you via your first person attribution or denial of your own knowledge), the same proposition (“this one” referring to the proposition that Julius Caesar was born in 100 BC), and the same context. And once again this looks initially like it causes a problem for MI-WAM.

MI-WAM may be able to explain why both claims strike us as appropriate responses using its preferred WAM strategy. Its ability to do so is the topic of Section 3, but the basic case usually goes as follows. In the case of SR-1 the appropriateness is grounded in the truth of the claim. And in the case of SR-2, the advocate of MI-WAM tells a story about how SR-2 implies something true (even though it is strictly speaking false) and as a result strikes us as appropriate. However, MI-WAM cannot account for why both responses might still seem true even after careful reflection, because, if this is what is going on, the true implication generated by the false statement should be cancellable. And on MI-WAM one response from each pair must be false. But it seems that a reasonable case can be made that neither claim from either pair is false. Thus, cases of this sort pose a problem for MI-WAM because they seem to imply the truth of DRWI. The ambiguity theory can easily avoid this difficulty entirely by claiming that ‘know’ is being using in a different sense in SR-1 than it is in SR-2.

I think it’s pretty clear that for someone who has the intuition that either both NR-1 and NR-2 are true or that both SR-1 and SR-2 are true (or both these intuitions), at first blush, these intuitions support the ambiguity theory. We can imagine the nurse to have in mind the ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ standard of knowledge, and we can imagine her to have in mind a more demanding standard of knowledge according to which knowledge requires double or even triple checking. Perhaps this argument can be undercut via a WAM. But before considering that move in Section 3, it seems worth pausing to consider what other sorts of explanations, might be given in order to offset this initial advantage that the ambiguity theory seems to have. In what follows I’ll consider two other explanations for the intuitions of the truth of both NR-1 and NR-2 and of SR-1 and SR-2. The first potential explanation is that ‘knows’ is not ambiguous, but vague, and that these cases pull us in inconsistent directions because they are in the fuzzy boundary area of ‘knows’. The second potential explanation is that while ‘knows’ is not vague, the

situations in SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* represent “close calls”, where the threshold for knowledge is either just met or just not quite met. On this account, it is because it is close call we are apt to be swayed that both the knowledge ascription and the knowledge denial are true because neither is obviously false in virtue of it being a close call.

Let’s start with the first potential alternative explanation, namely, that ‘knows’ is vague.¹⁶⁰ At the outset it’s worth noting that ‘knows’ being vague is compatible with contextualism, the ambiguity theory, and MI-WAM. A contextualist could claim, for example, that while ‘knows’ is context-sensitive, the standards generated by context still have a fuzzy boundary resulting in a certain amount of vagueness in the term even within a context. The ambiguity theorist could claim that, while ‘knows’ is ambiguous, one or more of its senses are also vague.¹⁶¹ And the proponent of MI-WAM similarly could claim that the single, invariant meaning of ‘knows’ is vague.

Given that the intended role that SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* are meant to play in this chapter (namely, as evidence for the ambiguity theory over MI-WAM), I think the appropriate question to ask is the following. Can vagueness function as a plausible explanation for our intuitions from SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* in a way that is compatible with MI-WAM? I will argue that it cannot. But before giving my reason for that conclusion, let’s make more explicit how ‘knows’ being vague could serve as an explanation on an invariantist account for the intuitions one may have that both responses in SURGEON and/or in *Punishment/Reward* are true.

I’m assuming that if ‘knows’ is vague that this vagueness enters via the vagueness of the level of justification required to count as knowing.¹⁶² How one accounts for the vagueness in the level of justification required for knowledge will change

¹⁶⁰ That ‘knows’ is vague is the view that Stephen Schiffer seems to favor in response to contextualist data in his influential and oft cited “Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism” (1996).

¹⁶¹ Additionally, there has also been some interesting work done in linguistics suggesting that ambiguity and vagueness ought to be seen as on a spectrum with polysemy (the type of ambiguity I claim ‘knows’ possesses) occupying the middle portion of that spectrum. On such a view, it might in fact be indeterminate or vague as to whether or not ‘knows’ is in fact vague or polysemous. For details on this view about the relationship of ambiguity and vagueness see Langacker 1987. Confer also Geeraerts (1993) and Tuggy (1993).

¹⁶² I think this assumption is warranted, given that I think most invariantist proponents of a vagueness view of ‘knows’ would say the same.

depending on other epistemological assumptions. For example, on an evidentialist account, there will be a fuzzy strength of evidence threshold marking the difference between knowing and not knowing; on a reliabilist account, there will be a fuzzy degree of reliability threshold that marks that difference; same for safety theories, etc. The important point unifying all these views is this: the justification threshold is not precise but fuzzy. On any such account combined with invariantism, the resulting single sense of 'knows' is one with a fuzzy boundary, meaning that there likely will be cases where there is no clear matter of fact about whether or not one knows. In order for SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* to be cases where the vagueness affects the truth of the utterances, the level of justification that the nurse and you have respectively must be in that grey area where it is not clear that the level of justification is high enough.

Thus, even though the claims made in the responses to SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* may not be true (whether or not they are depends on your theory of the semantics of vague terms), given that the state of the putative knower in question was in the penumbra, one can easily understand both the intuition that NR-1 is true and that NR-2 is true. Similarly, one may have the intuition that a speaker referencing a man with one hundred hairs on his head may be saying something true if she says of the man that he is bald (due to the low number of hairs on his head) or if she denies that he is bald (due to her focus on the fact that he does indeed still have one hundred hairs on his head).

This on its own strikes me as a plausible explanation of the intuitions one may have about SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward*. However, I don't think this explanation is available for the defender of MI-WAM. The reason being that a constitutive part of MI-WAM is that the standard of knowledge is low enough that most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions turn out true. However, recall that in SURGEON the doctor has strong justification for her belief that it is the left kidney that is to be removed (after all she had consulted with that same patient earlier that very day). In order for the standard of knowledge to be low enough for most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions to turn out true, it would seem that the surgeon's evidence ought to be strong enough to be a clear case of knowledge. If that level of justification is part of the penumbra, it seems many of our other everyday knowledge claims will also be in that penumbra—or worse,

beyond the penumbra and no longer instances of knowledge. Note also that the defender of moderate invariantism, if she is appealing to vagueness, cannot cite anything about the practical importance of getting the matter right in the case of SURGEON as an explanation for why this is an instance of a knowledge ascription in the penumbra. That practical concerns like this affect whether one knows is one of the claims that the moderate invariantist denies. In short, the SURGEON case is not a plausible case of a fuzzy area on the MI picture.

I think this problem presents itself all the more clearly in *Punishment/Reward* where we are told that “[y]ou are confident, though not absolutely certain, that the answer is 100 BC.” Assuming that your confidence is warranted, it seems like it is the lack of absolute certainty which is motivating the knowledge denial in SR-2. And for the moderate invariantist, this should clearly put the level of justification past the fuzzy boundary area. Trying to explain *Punishment/Reward* as a case of a fuzzy boundary for knowledge will lead to either an implausibly large boundary area or to something akin to skepticism. And neither option is desirable on moderate invariantism. Thus, while vagueness may make a plausible response in its own right to what’s going on in SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward*, it won’t be of much help to the moderate invariantist.

Let’s turn now to our second potential explanation, that this is the case of a close call where, because these cases are on the border of what counts as knowledge, our intuitions are easily pulled both ways. Given what we’ve already established, this suggestion can be treated much more quickly. This is because this second suggestion, while once again plausible in its own right, cannot be paired up successfully with moderate invariantism. The reason for this is that, unless the category of “close calls” is very large (which seems perhaps antithetical to the concept of a close call in the first place), SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* being cases of close calls won’t allow for most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions to be true. This is because the boundary region where close calls happen would be at a justification level so high that many of our everyday ordinary language assertions would cleanly fall outside of this close call region and into the region of the clearly false. That this is so is once again a product of the fairly

high level of justification had by the speakers in both SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward*. Thus, this suggestion does no favors for MI-WAM.

This leaves the moderate invariantist with a third option: making a warranted assertability maneuver on SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* akin to the one made to explain away the contextualist data. Because this maneuver mirrors what moderate invariantists have done in responding to contextualist data (e.g. explaining away the appearance of truth for a false claim via an appeal to a shift in warranted assertability conditions), this third option as applied to SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* will not be assessed separately here, but will be addressed via the more general examination of such maneuvers in Section 3. We'll now turn to that section, noting that unless the warranted assertability maneuver fares better than the other alternative explanations, the appearance of truth for both responses in SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* will continue to function as evidence in favor of the ambiguity theory over MI-WAM.

3.3 The Viability of Moderate Invariantism's Warranted Assertability Maneuver

Keith DeRose, who coined the term warranted assertability maneuver and its shorthand WAM, is quick to acknowledge that many who reject contextualism are inclined to appeal to a WAM in order to ground their rejection of the view. However, DeRose believes that the WAM employed by the proponent of MI-WAM fails to have the appropriate good-making features of an acceptable WAM.¹⁶³ To begin this section, we'll look at the features DeRose claims are required for a good WAM along with why he believes that MI-WAM fails to contain these features. We'll then look at the responses given by the most prominent and well-developed versions of MI-WAM, those put forward by Jessica Brown and Patrick Rysiew, both of whom argue that DeRose is mistaken here. I'll then provide my own assessment—arguing that MI-WAM is in a much better position than DeRose thinks it is, but that it still comes with an important cost which has been downplayed by its defenders. This sets up the central question for the final section of this paper—does the ambiguity theory fare any better than MI-WAM in explaining its own problematic data? This current section is quite long and may feel like

¹⁶³ DeRose (1999, 2002, 2009).

a departure from the question at hand, but I trust that this detour is worth it in order to get a better sense of how well MI-WAM currently fares in responding to the objections it's faced from the contextualist camp. It is only via an understanding of the pros and cons of both MI-WAM and the ambiguity theory that a sensible assessment of the strength of the views can holistically be made.

So to begin our detour of sorts, let's look at what DeRose has to say about what makes for a good or a bad WAM.¹⁶⁴ DeRose begins his presentation by giving the example of a hypothetical view of an imaginary "crazed philosopher of language" who claims that the sentence 'S is a bachelor' is true if and only if S is a male. According to this view, our intuitions that the truth conditions "contain any condition to the effect that S be unmarried" are generated by our focusing on what's appropriate to assert—i.e. the warranted assertability conditions—and mistaking that warranted assertability condition for an additional truth condition.¹⁶⁵ On this view it would be false, strictly speaking, to say of a married man that he is not a bachelor, but it would be appropriate and have warranted assertability.¹⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, this hypothetical view serves as DeRose's model of a bad WAM.

This is in contrast with the view DeRose puts forward as the model of a good WAM. On this view our WAMer accepts the following account for the truth conditions of 'It's possible that P' (where P is a proposition in the indicative):

DKO: S's assertion, 'It's possible that P' is true iff (1) S doesn't know that P is false.

However, DeRose notes that if a speaker knows that P but claims that 'It's possible that P' (without any qualifier), we will often be inclined to think that what the speaker has

¹⁶⁴ DeRose's general take on WAMs remains the same in the works where he discusses the matter, although he adds additional points about the success of MI-WAM in particular in later works in response to the work of Brown and Rysiew. In most of what follows I've cited DeRose (1999), but much of what is said here can be found again in DeRose (2002 and 2009).

¹⁶⁵ DeRose (1999), 197.

¹⁶⁶ As Brown (2005) notes the usage of 'warrant' here should not be confused with epistemic warrant (i.e. something akin to justification or that thing which takes us from true belief to knowledge), but rather as referring to what is conversationally appropriate. In what follows, warranted will be used consistently in this latter sense.

said is inappropriate and/or false. (For example, if I ask you if a certain book is in your office. If you know the book is there but respond with “It’s possible that the book is in my office” this response certainly seems inappropriate and perhaps also seems false). Thus, our WAMer may note that many people are inclined to accept the following principle instead:

DKEW: S’s assertion, ‘It’s possible that P’ is true iff (1) S doesn’t know that P is false and (2) S doesn’t know that P is true.

On this principle a second truth condition for ‘It’s possible that P’ has been added, namely, that S doesn’t know that P is true. Our WAMer then suggests that the reason that DKEW seems appealing, despite its falsity, is the fact that (2), S doesn’t know that P is true, is a warranted assertability condition for when it’s appropriate to state that ‘It’s possible that P’, but that it is not a truth condition. Thus, while you may be saying something strictly speaking true when you claim “It’s possible that the book is in my office” (even though you know the book is in your office), you have said something misleading (via the conversational maxim of “Assert the Stronger”¹⁶⁷) which generates the false implication that you don’t know that P is true. It is for this reason that the assertion *seems* false even though it is not.

Whether or not one thinks DKO is the right account of the true conditions of ‘It’s possible that P’, it seems clear that there is a large gap in the plausibility and quality of this second WAM over the initial WAM which tried to salvage the view that the true conditions of ‘S is a bachelor’ are merely that S is a male. Recognizing this gap in quality, DeRose identifies several key differences between the ‘bachelor’ WAM and the DKO WAM to come up with a set of criteria for a good WAM. At least five such criteria can be found in DeRose’s writings on the matter.

The first criterion that DeRose identifies for a good WAM is, as Brown puts the matter, the criterion that the WAM “should start from a conflict of intuitions which

¹⁶⁷ DeRose (1999), 197.

requires explanation.”¹⁶⁸ In the case of DKO it seems that many of us do indeed have conflicting intuitions (both between and within hearers) about what’s going on here, but in the case of the bachelor WAM, aside from our hypothetical proponent of the view, competent speakers are in agreement about the meaning of the term bachelor and there are no conflicting intuitions.

The second criterion is that a WAM should explain away the problematic intuitions via an appeal to a false implicature—i.e. something false that is conveyed by the making of the assertion that is not, strictly speaking, part of the utterance, and not truly part of what is said.¹⁶⁹ Note that in the case of ‘it’s possible that P’ the false implicature generated is that one does not know that P. According to the DKO interpretation of ‘it’s possible that P’ that one does not know that P is not strictly speaking part of what is said when one claims that “it’s possible that P.” What the DKO WAMer suggests is that this is instead something that is pragmatically conveyed. However, in the case of ‘bachelor’ as equivalent in meaning to being a male, DeRose claims that what happens is a “bare warranted assertability maneuver” according to which it is simply claimed, without an additional layer of explanation, that it is inappropriate to say of a married man that he is a bachelor even though this is not strictly speaking false.¹⁷⁰

But it seems that our philosopher of language in favor of this theory of the meaning of ‘bachelor’ can satisfy this second criterion by simply adding to the view that there is a false implicature generated, and that this philosopher can do so by positing a rather peculiar conversational rule. DeRose expounds the point as follows:

“Suppose our crazed philosopher were to get even more resourceful, and argue as follows: There’s a conversational rule to the effect that you shouldn’t assert ‘S is a bachelor’ when S is married. Thus, when you make such an assertion, your listener, assuming that you’re following the rule, will

¹⁶⁸ Brown (2006, 410). As far as I can tell, this criterion is never put forward as clearly by DeRose as Brown states it, but it seems to be something that can quite reasonably be seen as implied in the sources of DeRose’s that Brown cites for the criteria (namely, DeRose (1999, Sections 10 & 11) and DeRose (2002, Section 3.2)).

¹⁶⁹ DeRose (1999, 199).

¹⁷⁰ DeRose (1999, 199).

gather that S is unmarried. Thus, making such an assertion will generate an implicature to the effect that S is unmarried. When S is married, this implicature is false. That explains why we find such assertions to be false, when they're made of married men..."¹⁷¹

The fact that the proponent of this crazy theory about 'bachelor' is able to add this refinement doesn't undermine DeRose's second criterion for a good WAM. It just means that, with modification, our crazy theory of 'bachelor' can at least satisfy this particular criterion. However, the way in which the WAM for 'bachelor' is able to satisfy this criterion leads to DeRose's third criterion for a good WAM.

This third criterion is about the way in which a false implication is generated. DeRose claims that a WAM ought to apply a general rule of conversation as opposed to a special rule in order to explain the generation of a false implicature. The rationale for this is a practical one—if we allowed such special rules to function as grounds for implications, virtually any piece of recalcitrant linguistic data could be explained away via an appeal to such a special rule.¹⁷² The WAMer defending DKO uses a general rule of conversation, namely, "Assert the Stronger", to explain why the weak claim of "it's possible that P" seems to imply that the speaker doesn't know that P. But in the case of the WAM for 'bachelor' a highly idiosyncratic and otherwise unmotivated rule is posited in order to explain why a false implicature is generated when one says of a married man that he is not a bachelor.

The fourth criterion DeRose puts forward is that a WAM should only explain away an intuition of falsehood, but not an intuition of truth as well.¹⁷³ To see more precisely what this means let's think about what is actually being explained on both the DKO WAM and 'bachelor' WAM respectively. In the case of DKO, all one needs to explain is why the claim "it's possible that P" appears false when the speaker knows that P, even though on DKO this claim is true. Thus, the WAM is being used to explain why a true statement appears false—i.e. it's explaining an intuition of falsehood. But things

¹⁷¹ DeRose (1999, 199).

¹⁷² DeRose (1999, 200).

¹⁷³ DeRose (1999, 198-9). Cf. Brown (2006, 410).

don't stretch beyond that. For all other combinations of relevant epistemic states (knowing that P, knowing that not-P, and neither knowing or not knowing that P) and relevant utterances ("it's possible that P" and "it's not possible that P") when the utterance is literally speaking false according to DKO, our intuitions are that the claim is false as well. There is no instance among these options in which something appears true, but we have to explain why, in actuality, it is false according on DKO.

Contrast this with the 'bachelor' WAM. Like the DKO WAM, the 'bachelor' WAM needs to explain why certain true statements (according to the crazy 'bachelor' theory) appear false (e.g. 'That married man is a bachelor'). But it also needs to do the reverse. It needs to explain why certain false statements (according to the crazy 'bachelor' theory) appear true (e.g. 'That married man is not a bachelor').¹⁷⁴ DeRose thinks doing the latter is more problematic and explains the problem as follows:

“Even if you can come up with a good explanation for why the assertion would generate some true implicature, this wouldn't seem to help much. For don't we want to avoid falsehood both in what we implicate and (especially!) in what we actually say? So, it would seem that it would be unwarranted to assert a falsehood, even if doing so generates a true implicature. Thus it's no wonder that most clearly successful WAMs involve explaining away apparent falsehood by appeal to the generation of a false implicature; none I know of involve explaining away apparent truth by appeal to the generation of true implicatures.”¹⁷⁵

DeRose's understanding of the asymmetry between explaining away intuitions via false implicatures and explaining away intuitions via true implicatures seems to rest on the recognition of a general asymmetry in our assessment of the truth value of conjunctive claims. When all the conjuncts are true, the conjunction is true. When all conjuncts are false, the conjunction is false. But when some conjuncts are true and others false, we still consider the conjunction as a whole to be false. Thus, there is an asymmetry between the

¹⁷⁴ DeRose (1999, 199).

¹⁷⁵ DeRose (1999, 200).

circumstances where we judge a conjunction to be true as compared to when we judge it to be false.

If we think of what a claim literally says as one (or more) conjunct(s) in the set of things the claim conveys, there will be an asymmetry between what happens when the literal claim is true but false implications are added on the one hand and when the literal claim is false but true implications are added on the other. In the case of a true literal claim with false implications, we should go from having an intuition of truth when focused solely on the literal meaning, to an intuition of falsehood when we look at the whole conjunction of what is conveyed. However, in the case of a false literal claim with true implications, we should have an intuition of falsehood whether or not we are focusing merely on the literal claim made or the set of things the claim implies. The force of this line of reasoning will be further examined later in this section.

A fifth criterion DeRose offers (and the final criterion in terms of the order of presentation here) is that a WAM should be posited in circumstances where “we’re going to have to explain away the misleading appearance of falsehood of something.”¹⁷⁶ In the case of DKO, both “it’s possible that P” and “it’s not possible that P” at least plausibly carry the implication that the speaker doesn’t know that P, but, as DeRose notes “it seems quite unlikely” that both of these claims are false (in a given context) and this gives us “good reason to believe that *something* is not as it seems here.”¹⁷⁷ The reason why this makes the positing of a WAM particularly plausible is because it seems hard to see how we could get by without it—at least not without biting a bigger bullet somewhere else.¹⁷⁸ But when it comes to the misguided theory of ‘bachelor’ under discussion we don’t have the sort of initial circumstances that require us to think that something’s got to give. Rather, if one understands a bachelor to be by definition an unmarried male (or even simply as a male, as our theorist wants to say) it will always be the case that either “X is a

¹⁷⁶ DeRose (1999, 198).

¹⁷⁷ DeRose (1999, 198).

¹⁷⁸ I think it’s worth noting here that one plausible way in which to avoid having to use a WAM altogether is by positing that ‘it’s possible that...’ is itself ambiguous. Something similar can be said in the case of ‘knows.’ The reason why one can avoid a WAM here if one posits ambiguity is the same reason why the ambiguity theorist about ‘knows’ can avoid positing a WAM (while still utilizing the pragmatic role of context in helping hearer understand what speakers are intending to say).

bachelor is true” or “X is not a bachelor is true” in any case with a fixed referent for X. Unlike the other criteria we’ve discussed, DeRose seems to treat this more as a condition for an ideal WAM and not as a necessary condition for a good WAM as he seems to treat the other criteria.

In general, this criterion has received little attention in the ongoing debate between DeRose, Rysiew, and Brown. (I suspect this has occurred in part because it is quite similar to the first criterion discussed here—namely, that a WAM should start from a conflict of intuitions. In a way this final criterion is a specific means by which a conflict in intuitions is likely to be generated.) Regardless of the reason for its diminished attention in the literature, this criterion will also play a smaller role in what follows here.

So in summary, using the DKO WAM as a model of a good WAM and the ‘bachelor’ WAM as a model for a bad WAM, DeRose has outlined five criteria for a good WAM. First, a good WAM should start from a conflict of intuitions which requires explanation. Second, a good WAM should appeal to a false implicature. Third, a good WAM should appeal to a general rule of conversation to explain the presence of the false implicature. Fourth, a good WAM should explain away intuitions of falsehood only, not intuitions of truth as well. And ideally a WAM should be posited in circumstances in which it seems like something must be explained away.

DeRose has concluded that the WAM employed by the moderate invariantist “is a prime example of a WAM we should *not* give any credence to, since it fails every test we discerned above.”¹⁷⁹ DeRose has remained particularly adamant that MI-WAM fails to successfully appeal to a general rule of conversation to ground its claim that false implicatures are the source of the conflicting intuitions and that MI-WAM suffers the defect of having to explain away intuitions of truth generated by true implications conveyed by false claims.

We now turn to the work of Jessica Brown and Patrick Rysiew, the two most sophisticated and detailed respondents to these charges against MI-WAM. Both Brown and Rysiew think that a response can be given to DeRose to the effect that, in Brown’s

¹⁷⁹ I take this reference to “every test we discerned above” to refer to criteria two through five as I’ve laid it out.

words, “his [i.e. DeRose’s] objections to a WAM against contextualism are not persuasive.”¹⁸⁰ And both Brown and Rysiew employ very similar strategies in making their cases.¹⁸¹

In aiming to rebut DeRose’s charges against the WAM of the moderate invariantist, two general lines of response can be adopted. First, one can argue that MI-WAM satisfies the particular criterion DeRose has suggested a good WAM must satisfy. Second, one can argue that a particular criterion DeRose has suggested a good WAM should satisfy is not in fact a criterion that a good WAM should satisfy. In looking at the responses given by our invariantists, both strategies are employed.

In responding to DeRose, Brown identifies three criteria that DeRose puts forward for a successful WAM, “namely, that it should start from a conflict of intuitions which requires explanation, that it should involve explaining away only an intuition of falsehood but not also an intuition of truth, and that it should appeal to a general rule of conversation.”¹⁸² These criteria correspond to the first, third, and fourth criteria, as outlined above, in that order. Narrowing our focus to what Brown focuses on will be sufficient in examining the responses. We can set aside the second criterion for the following reason. If one appeals to a general rule of conversation in order to explain the generation of a false implicature (which is precisely what Brown and Rysiew do), then

¹⁸⁰ Brown (2006, 407).

¹⁸¹ Geoff Pynn (2015a) has argued that Rysiew’s position is actually a type of what Pynn calls “pragmatic contextualism” which is the view, roughly, that the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying *utterances* are context-sensitive, even though the truth conditions of knowledge ascribing and knowledge denying *sentences* are not (see Pynn 2015a and 2015b). This strikes me as a plausible interpretation of Rysiew, especially given some of the non-minimalist semantic positions Pynn seems to favor, and given that Rysiew likes to speak of two difference senses of what it means to “say something” (what he calls strict and loose senses). DeRose also occasionally seems to see Rysiew’s view along these lines (e.g. DeRose (2002), fn. 17). However, I do not think this is the best reading of Rysiew, given that the loose sense of ‘say’ seems equivalent to what others in the discussion mean by ‘convey’ (see Rysiew 2001, 2005, 2007 and compare with Brown 2005, 2006 and DeRose 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2009). Not to mention it seems Rysiew likely has a good grip of what view it is he means to defend and he identifies it as a invariantist response. (For example “Here, I outline the invariantist account I have previously proposed” (2005) and his labeling of his position as a type of “sophisticated invariantism” (2001, 2005, 2007).) Thus, I think it is prudent to treat Rysiew as an invariantist, and even if he were to turn out to be holding some form of pragmatic contextualism, the responses he gives would apply just as clearly in response to DeRose’s charge that the WAM of the moderate invariantist is unsuccessful (in virtue of the fact that Rysiew’s WAM shared the relevant features of Brown’s WAM, which, as far as I know, is uncontroversially considered to be a form of MI-WAM).

¹⁸² Brown (2006, 410). Cf. Brown (2005, 283).

one has also satisfied the second of our criteria, namely, one has made an appeal to a false implicature as opposed to making a “bare warranted assertability maneuver.” Thus, by addressing the third criterion, we will automatically address the second as well. Thus, there isn’t any need for a separate treatment of criterion two. Additionally, as stated earlier, the fifth criterion—that our WAM be generated from a situation where it’s very likely that something needs to be explained away due to the set of intuitions present—ought, first, to be seen as an ideal criterion for a WAM and not a necessary one, and second, can be viewed as a special form of the first criterion. Thus, we will follow Brown’s model and focus on the three criteria she responds to.

Let’s start with the easy one. Regarding the first criterion, Brown thinks conflicting intuitions are pretty easy to come by. She cites the conflicting intuitions we commonly experience about incompatible triads such as “I don’t know I’m not a brain-in-a-vat”, “I know I have hands” and some kind of closure principle that would entail that if I know I’m not a brain-in-a-vat, then I don’t know I have hands as evidence that the conflicting intuitions are present in the case of ‘knows’.¹⁸³ It seems to me clearly right that the presence of such conflicting intuitions is indeed a desideratum of a good WAM. But it seems just as clear to me that, in the case of MI-WAM, Brown is right that the relevant conflict in intuitions is present. I take it, therefore, that the moderate invariantist’s WAM meets the first criterion. As a result, I won’t discuss it further. I think such a move is further legitimized by the fact that denying this has not been a point of focus in DeRose’s responses to Brown and Rysiew as far as I can tell.

This brings us to the two criteria that will be our central concerns moving forward: 1) that a good WAM only explains intuitions of falsehood, and 2) that a good WAM appeals to a general rule of conversation in order to explain what generates the false implicatures. But before seeing how Brown and Rysiew defend their WAM against these charges it will be useful to have before us the basic nature of the WAM they employ.

As moderate invariantists, Brown and Rysiew are aiming to show that, for the portion of the contextualist data where many of us have intuitions that we ought to retract

¹⁸³ Brown (2006, 411).

a knowledge ascription and instead put forward a knowledge denial in moving from a situation like Bank Case A to one like Bank Case B, these intuitions can be explained away by pragmatic factors. That is, they want an account on which we can explain why a knowledge ascription is true both in Bank Case A and in Bank Case B despite the fact that many of us have an intuition that an ascription is appropriate in Bank Case A but a denial is appropriate in Bank Case B. As moderate invariantists employing a WAM, they are aiming to do this specifically via an appeal to warranted assertability conditions. And in avoiding making a “bare warranted assertability maneuver” they seek to do this by claiming that knowledge denials in scenarios like Bank Case B are inappropriate (and as a result may appear false) because such knowledge denials generate false implicatures.

DeRose has suggested that a good WAM will appeal to a general rule of conversation in order to explain why these false implicatures are generated. Appealing to such a general rule of conversation is what Brown and Rysiew have aimed to do. Rysiew was the first to put forward such a theory by appealing to H. P. Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CP) which is to “make [one’s] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [one is] engaged.”¹⁸⁴ Rysiew appeals specifically to a subprinciple—the maxim of Relation—which simply states the conversational rule “be relevant”. Rysiew claims that this rule is “plausibly underwriting” the generation of the false implicatures.¹⁸⁵ Rysiew puts forward the following hypothetical train of thought of the listener in the Bank Case B scenario to show how this general conversational rule makes the knowledge denial appropriate and, as a result, may also make it appear true:

“He has just said ‘I [guess I] *don’t* know that bank’ll be open tomorrow.’ And he has said this in response to my raising a doubt as to whether he can really be so sure—after all banks, as I’ve just reminded him, do change their hours. Presumably (on the assumption that he’s conforming to CP), he wouldn’t have said what he has unless he thought that there were possibilities incompatible with the bank’s being open tomorrow—specifically, that it has recently changed its

¹⁸⁴ Brown (2006, 421), originally in Grice (1975). Rysiew doesn’t ever define the principle, so I’ve used Brown’s presentation of Grice here.

¹⁸⁵ Rysiew (2001, 491).

hours—that he could not rule out. For to say, ‘I don’t know...’ is to indicate that one isn’t sure.”¹⁸⁶

Despite the fact that a reasoner likely wouldn’t have put the matter quite like that, I think Rysiew’s general point rings true. It’s plausible to think that in order to utter a relevant response after one’s conversational partner has raised a possibility of error, one may put forward a knowledge denial. This is because a knowledge denial is an effective means by which to indicate that one can’t rule out the possibility of error raised. It would be uncooperative to continue to insist that one knows in such circumstances if the goal of the parties in conversation is to determine whether or not to remain in the lengthy bank queue.

DeRose has been quick to dismiss this suggestion—with his only detailed discussion of the matter (as far as I’ve been able to find) relegated to a footnote. The heart of DeRose’s criticism goes as follows,

“I am highly suspicious of accounts that help themselves to two such meanings in the way Rysiew’s does, disliking not only the loss of economy of explanation, but also worrying that we will not be able to combat all manner of absurd theories about the truth conditions of various sentences if defenders of those theories are able to posit separate pragmatic meanings that do the work of accounting for usage in the troublesome cases, allowing their account of the truth conditions to sit safely off in the corner, out of the fray.”¹⁸⁷

I see at least two major problems with this response. The first is with how DeRose interprets Rysiew. Rysiew speaks about what one “says_{Loose}” as well as what one “says_{Strict}”. Based on this DeRose seems to have taken Rysiew as positing a second sort of meaning for sentences that would be controversial in philosophy of language.¹⁸⁸ But this doesn’t seem to me to be the best way to read Rysiew here. Rysiew, in describing ‘says_{Loose}’ and ‘says_{Strict}’ writes that,

¹⁸⁶ Rysiew (2001, 491), emphasis and brackets in original.

¹⁸⁷ DeRose (2002, 198, footnote 17).

¹⁸⁸ This is similar to how Pynn reads Rysiew, only Pynn wants to restrict the second level of meaning to utterances only and not sentences themselves.

“Obviously, these two uses of ‘says’— *says_{Loose}* and *says_{Strict}*—correlate more or less closely with speaker meaning and linguistic meaning, respectively. Or, to use Salmon’s terminology, they correlate more or less closely with the proposition(s) *pragmatically imparted* or *conveyed* by an *utterance* of a sentence, and the proposition(s) *semantically encoded* or *expressed* by the *sentence itself* (relative to a context of utterance).”¹⁸⁹

While DeRose’s reading of Rysiew doesn’t seem implausible to me, neither is it obvious to me that Rysiew isn’t just using ‘*says_{Loose}*’ to refer to the sorts of mundane types of pragmatic conveyances we’re most all inclined to agree exist.

But second, and more importantly, this criticism of Rysiew’s usage of ‘*says_{Loose}*’ and ‘*says_{Strict}*’ doesn’t say anything critical about the usage of Grice’s Cooperative Principle itself. It seems quite clear that if one agreed that Rysiew’s semantics was problematic for one reason or another, that one could simply appeal to this general rule of conversation coupled with a less controversial theory of semantics. And this is precisely what Brown has done.¹⁹⁰ Thus, at least for the time being DeRose hasn’t provided a good theoretical reason to claim that the WAM of Brown and Rysiew fails to meet his criteria of appealing to a general rule of conversation.

At this point, our WAMers have been able to rise and meet all the challenges DeRose has put forward for them, minus one: the claim that a good WAM will seek to explain away only intuitions of falsehood, but not also intuitions of truth. Recall that the general reason why DeRose thinks this is an important point is because he perceives a difference in kind between explaining away an intuition of falsity generated by a false implicature of a literally true statement versus the explaining away of an intuition of truth generated by a true implicature generated by a literally false statement. DeRose explains this difference in kind, and the reason why he thinks the former is unproblematic while the latter is generally unacceptable as follows.

¹⁸⁹Rysiew (2001, 186); emphasis in original. Rysiew cites his reference to Salmon as Salmon (1986, 58-60) and Salmon (1991, 87-9).

¹⁹⁰Brown (2005) and especially (2006).

“It is not surprising that a true assertion will be inappropriate, and may seem false, if it generates a false implicature: We should avoid conveying falsehoods, whether the falsehood conveyed is part of truth-conditional content of the assertion or is an implicature generated by the assertion, and where *something false is* conveyed by the making of an assertion, it’s not surprising that we might mistake that for the assertion’s itself being false.

By contrast, it seems much more problematic to claim that an assertion that seems true is in fact false by means of a claim that, though the assertion itself is false, it generates a true implicature and is therefore a warranted assertion. For, except where we engage in special practices of misdirection, like irony or hyperbole, don’t we want to avoid falsehood both in what we implicate and (especially!) in what we actually say? So it would seem that a false assertion will remain unwarranted despite whatever true implicatures it might generate.”¹⁹¹

DeRose’s reasoning has a certain force that may seem hard to resist—and he certainly is correct in identifying the asymmetry—but can we generate from that the apparent blanket conclusion that a false assertion will remain unwarranted despite whatever true implicatures it might generate?

Brown argues that we need not accept this blanket claim, thus adopting the strategy of challenging DeRose’s criterion for a good WAM in this instance (rather than arguing that MI-WAM satisfies this particular criterion). Brown’s argument consists of two parts. First, she provides a theoretical explanation of how one might come to think that a literally true claim is false. Second, she attempts to offer counterexamples to DeRose’s general claim that a false assertion will remain unwarranted (in the sense of conversationally appropriate) despite whatever true implicatures it might generate.

Brown puts forward her theoretical explanation stating that “[i]f speakers concentrate on what the utterance pragmatically conveys rather than on what’s literally said, or if speakers mistake what the statement pragmatically conveys for what it literally says, then the utterance will seem correct even though it is literally false.”¹⁹² Surely

¹⁹¹ DeRose (2002, 192-3).

¹⁹² Brown (2006, 415).

DeRose is right that we don't want to assert or convey false things except in special circumstances, but Brown offers a psychological account of what's going on in circumstances in which false statements appear true due to true implicatures that offers an explanation for why there is no tension (at least psychologically) between our general desire and responsibility not to convey false things, and our intuitions that certain false claims are true. If for example we are focusing only on what's conveyed and not on what is said or if we mistake what is conveyed for what is said, we may think the literal utterance true despite its being false. Brown seeks to give this theoretical explanation concrete life by offering, what she takes to be, counterexamples to DeRose's general claim that successful WAMs occur only with cases of true statements generating intuitions of falsehood via false implications.

Brown provides two types of examples, the first of which is definite descriptions. Brown notes that on a Russellian account of definite descriptions there will be instances in which an utterance is literally false but seems correct since it pragmatically conveys a truth. For example, a speaker's claim that "The man in the corner drinking a martini is a lawyer" may be literally false if the man in the corner is actually drinking something other than a martini, but will pragmatically convey a truth if that man, whom one takes to be uniquely picked out by the description, is in fact a lawyer.

Brown is certainly right that such circumstances can arise, but does this provide the kind of counterexample Brown is looking for? I don't think so for a few reasons. First, Russell's theory of definite descriptions is not without its detractors, so one could avoid seeing this as a counterexample by rejecting Russell's theory. Second, this doesn't seem to be a case of a WAM, rather this seems to be a case of either reference failure and/or a deficient description of a referent (depending on one's account of definite descriptions), and it's not clear to me that the appearance of truth due to a reference failure or a deficient description of a referent is the type of thing that DeRose is claiming doesn't typically happen. Regardless, the case of the definite description seems so different from the claimed pragmatic conveyances of MI-WAM that the example provides minimal (if any) support for the acceptability of an intuition of truth generated

by a true implication from a false statement in the case of knowledge ascriptions and denials.

The second type of example Brown gives are sentences in which a particular parameter or constituent goes unarticulated—e.g. sentences such as ‘I have eaten’ which we typically understand to mean I have eaten recently or ‘It’s raining’ which we typically understand to mean it’s raining here. Brown notes that on views like Bach’s theory of implicatures these sentences can sometime constitute cases of literally true claims that appear false due to false implications. But this set of examples has the same weaknesses as the case of definite descriptions—it rests on a controversial interpretation of the linguistic data and it constitutes a very different sort of linguistic phenomenon to begin with from instances of knowledge ascriptions and denials. I am skeptical of such cases as counting as successful WAMs, and even if they did, I think they would provide little reason to diminish the concern DeRose has raised in the case of the WAM for knowledge ascriptions and denials.

Thus, for the time being, there seems to be at least one criticism of the moderate invariantist’s WAM which it appears the defenders of the view have yet to successfully counter. Brown’s examples may cast some doubt on DeRose’s blanket statement that there aren’t successful cases of intuitions of truth via true implications conveyed by literally false utterances, but to the extent that the asymmetry DeRose highlighted in the first place strikes one as forceful, the force largely remains in place.

To briefly recap: DeRose outlined a number of problems he saw with the WAM of the moderate invariantist. Rysiew and Brown were able to successfully respond to several of these challenges, but the proponents of MI-WAM have yet to generate a forceful response to DeRose’s charge that MI-WAM suffers from the weakness of claiming that our intuitions of truth in cases like Bank Case B are generated by true implicatures conveyed by strictly speaking false statements. The charge is that we ought to predict (via our general aversion to and duty to avoid falsehood) that one ought to retain the intuition that knowledge denials are false (and knowledge ascriptions true) in scenarios like Bank Case B. And the fact that this often isn’t what happens is a mark against MI-WAM.

Before moving onto the final section of this chapter, it's worth noting why this particular charge doesn't apply to the ambiguity theory, even though both the ambiguity theory and MI-WAM appeal to pragmatic considerations in explaining our intuitions about the Bank Cases. The answer is clear when one remembers that, despite an appeal to pragmatics, the ambiguity theory has the resources to posit that both the knowledge ascription in Bank Case A and the knowledge denial in Bank Case B are true. The role of pragmatics is only to help the hearer interpret which sense of 'knows' is being used. Thus, at no point is the ambiguity theory positing that one's intuitions about the truth or falsity of a claim are out of alignment with the literal truth of the claim. And it is the particular form of misalignment in the case of MI-WAM that DeRose has objected to.

3.4 Semantic Blindness and the Ambiguity of 'Knows'

Sections 2 and 3 each aimed to show a weakness with MI-WAM. In Section 2 the weakness identified was the inability of MI-WAM to explain cases like SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* which appear to support the truth of DRWI. In Section 3 the weakness identified was MI-WAM's need to posit that certain intuitions of truth, like the one in Bank Case B, are generated by true implicatures conveyed by false claims—a move that is generally not part of a good WAM. The ambiguity theory easily skirted both of these worries, giving the ambiguity theory a leg up.

However, there is a prominent advantage that MI-WAM has over the ambiguity theory, namely, that, as Patrick Rysiew notes, we are "intuitive invariantists" about 'knows'.¹⁹³ Most of us just don't have the gut reaction that 'knows' is ambiguous when we first start considering the matter (which is not the case with most homonyms, for example, when we are acquainted with both or all of the senses of the term). Rather, 'know' initially seems to most to be univocal. MI-WAM predicts that we will be intuitive invariantists about 'knows', but why so many people are such stubborn invariantists about 'knows' is a recalcitrant datum for the ambiguity theory. Given this, it might appear that MI-WAM and the ambiguity theory are counterbalanced (or that MI-WAM

¹⁹³ Rysiew (2011).

wins) if a plausible explanation for why it would be that we are intuitive invariantists on the ambiguity theory cannot be given. Providing such a defense is the goal of this section.

One might wish to argue that we are not in fact intuitive invariantists, but this seems like a fool's errand. Rather, the defense I offer here is an account of why the fact that we are intuitive invariantists is not really surprising on the ambiguity theory. Thus, just as contextualists like Cohen and DeRose have offered an "error theory" to try and explain our "semantic blindness" of the context-sensitivity of 'knows',¹⁹⁴ so I'll provide an error theory to try and explain our semantic blindness of the ambiguity of 'knows.' This defense can be broken into two primary parts. First, I aim to show that we are intuitive invariantists about a lot of other words which certainly are ambiguous. Second, I aim to show that the nature of the ambiguity of 'knows' has a number of features which makes it the ideal sort of ambiguous word that we'd be apt to fail to realize is ambiguous.

In order to get started, a few pieces of terminology will be useful to have before us. As I am using the term 'ambiguity' in this chapter, its use is restricted specifically to instances of a single word having more than one sense (i.e. lexical ambiguity). Lexical ambiguity can be broken into two types: 1) homonymy, which is when the different senses of a word are not closely related in meaning (e.g. words like 'bank' or 'bear') and 2) polysemy, which is when the different senses of a word are closely related, and often with a shared etymological root (e.g. words like 'arch' or 'crane'). It seems to me that any plausible theory of the ambiguity theory of 'knows' will consider 'knows' to be a polyseme, and in moving ahead we will be mostly concerned with the nature of polysemes and not homonyms.¹⁹⁵ Thus, more accurately, the first part of my error theory for the ambiguity of 'knows' is to try and show that we often fail to notice the polysemous nature of other polysemes, and that as a result we shouldn't be surprised that we often fail to notice the polysemous nature of 'knows' as well.

To begin, take, for example, the polyseme 'newspaper' and the following conversation.

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Cohen (1999, 2010) and DeRose (2006, 2009).

¹⁹⁵ More about the nature of this distinction is covered in chapter 4.

A: “Be careful if you go outside. I read in the newspaper this morning that a lion escaped from the zoo last night.

B: “No need to worry. The newspaper just printed a retraction on their website.

A: “Really? Why?”

B: “It turns out the article in the newspaper was just the result of a prank pulled by an intern.”

A: “Wow, I bet the newspaper didn’t waste any time before firing that intern!”

The first and third uses of the term ‘newspaper’ refer to the physical, paper-and-ink object which a paper boy might throw at your door. The second and fourth uses refer to the organization whose function it is to manage, write the content for, and print the physical paper. Given their conversation, it seems likely that A and B each understand both senses of ‘newspaper’ and are able to fluidly change usage from one sense to another. But what would A and B say if they were asked whether or not ‘newspaper’ is ambiguous or asked if they had changed back and forth between different senses of ‘newspaper’ during their conversation? The correct answers are that ‘newspaper’ is ambiguous and that they had changed back and forth between the senses of ‘newspaper’ during the conversation. However, it seems plausible that A and B would get the answers to these questions wrong if they answered without reflection and would likely get the answers to these questions right only if they reflected on the conversation and how they had used the term ‘newspaper’ first. My contention is that ‘knows’ works like that—we have the ability to use and switch between the term’s senses fluidly in conversation, but we are usually unaware of doing any sort of sense selection or sense switching when using the term in conversation.

Of course, more needs to be said in developing this line of reasoning. For example, why does it seem likely that A and B, upon reflection, would come to the conclusion that there is more than one sense of ‘newspaper’ while many, even after having carefully reflected on the matter, do not conclude that ‘know’ as used in ordinary English has more than one sense? At least part of the answer might rest with the fact that ‘newspaper’ functions as a noun in both these senses and there is a certain ease with

which the distinct things picked out by nouns can be shown to be separate. This is not as easy with certain other parts of speech like verbs, of which ‘to know’ is one.

So let’s turn to our attention to verbs for a moment. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘know’ is the eighth most commonly used verb in the English language.¹⁹⁶ The other fourteen verbs comprising the top fifteen most used verbs are ‘be’, ‘have’, ‘do’, ‘say’, ‘get’, ‘make’, ‘go’, ‘take’, ‘see’, ‘come’, ‘think’, ‘look’, ‘want’ and ‘give’.¹⁹⁷ In the next chapter I will argue that most commonly used verbs are ambiguous, which I argue provides us with further reason to think that ‘knows’ is ambiguous. But for now, let’s just focus on one of these verbs, ‘make’ in order to draw out the general line of reasoning.

Initially, if asked whether or not the word ‘make’ is ambiguous, I suspect many would say that it is not. ‘Make’ is not like ‘bank’ and ‘bank’—rather ‘make’ is the type of word that allows us to straightforwardly say either you made it or you didn’t make it. But of course, if one takes the time to reflect on the nature of ‘make’ one will see that this is not so. If I say, for example ‘you made the train’ there are a number of things I could be sensibly be saying in English even when the referents of ‘you’ and ‘the train’ are fixed. I could be stating that you *arrived at* the train successfully before it left the station, or I could be stating that you were the one who *crafted or constructed* the train by putting the pieces together. Similarly if I say ‘she made history’ I could be claiming that her actions will *keep her remembered* or I could be claiming that while she may not be remembered herself, she was one who *shaped* how the record of facts will be remembered and conveyed. The Webster-Merriman dictionary has twenty-five listings for the word ‘make’.¹⁹⁸

But I think more can be said in favor of the ambiguity of ‘know’ due to its status as a commonly used verb. Commonly used verbs, like ‘have’, ‘make’, and ‘want’ play a structural role in the English language whereby they need to be able to be used to cover a wide variety of situations in which certain specifics of the action are not as important as

¹⁹⁶ Retrieved from Oxford Dictionaries website on August 21, 2014 from:
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/the-oec-facts-about-the-language>

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁹⁸ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make>

more coarse-grained features. To take the example of ‘make’ again, when the specifics of how one crafted an item are important one might say “I carved this statue, I weaved this basket, and I baked this cake”. However, if one is interested only in conveying who the responsible artist is for an item (or if one is interested in conveying that the same individual was the artist for all such objects) one might say “I made this statue, this basket and this cake.” The verbs we use very frequently like ‘make’ are often used so frequently precisely because of their flexibility. ‘Know’ is by far the most commonly used epistemic verb. And it would seem sensible that ‘know’ would have the same type of flexibility as other common, more coarse-grained verbs. Of course, this is not to say that the word ‘know’ cannot be used as a technical term to pick out a particular epistemic relation of import like certain philosophers have done with the term ‘understand’.¹⁹⁹ But such a technical usage of a verb does not negate a broad usage of the verb outside the technical context.

The cases of ‘newspaper’ and ‘make’ provide us with examples of a more general trend noted by linguists—namely that ambiguity is ubiquitous and that our savvy negotiations with subtly ambiguous terms allows us to fail to notice that we are doing so. Linguists Yael Ravin and Claudia Leacock note this point, along with several other points favorable to the ambiguity theory, when they write,

“We are so adept at using contextual cues that we select the appropriate sense of words effortlessly and unconsciously. The sheer number of senses listed by some sources as being available comes as a surprise: Out of approximately 60,000 entries in Webster’s Seventh Dictionary, 21,488, or almost 40 per cent, have two or more senses, according to Byrd (et al.) (1987). Moreover, the most commonly used words tend to be the most polysemous. The verb *run*, for example, has 29 senses in Webster’s, further divided into nearly 125 sub-senses.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ For example, Zagzebski (2001).

²⁰⁰ Ravin and Leacock (2000, 1).

Thus, while initially the fact that most of us are intuitive invariantists seems to count in favor of MI-WAM, this presumption in favor of MI-WAM is undercut to a certain extent by the fact that we are also intuitive invariantists about many other ambiguous words.

But this undercutting effect is not complete, for in the case of words like ‘newspaper’, ‘make’, and ‘run’, while we may initially be intuitive invariantists, if given enough time to reflect, most of us are probably willing to acknowledge that these terms are ambiguous (and more exactly, polysemous). But it is not so with the case of ‘knows.’ Many people (or at least a good number of philosophers) are resistant to accepting that ‘knows’ is polysemous even after reflection. Thus, a full explanation for the alleged semantic blindness that comes with the ambiguity theory will also provide reasons why we are extra resistant to accepting the claim that ‘knows’ is ambiguous over and above the normal sort of inattentiveness we experience to the ambiguity of many other words. In the concluding part of this paper, I want to offer two additional suggestions as to why this might be so. The first deals with the transient and developmental nature of polysemy and the multi-functionality of ‘knows’. The second deals with the nature of multivocal words and sense recognition across a linguistic community.

Polysemy is neither a necessary nor eternal property of a word. Rather it is something that develops, often slowly and subtly overtime. Similarly, it is something that can disappear slowly over time. Take the word ‘want’ for example. There is its primary sense in twenty-first century English meaning desire, as in ‘I want (i.e. desire) a new car’. There is also its more archaic meaning as lack or need, which in contemporary discourse typically only shows up in select constructions such as ‘She wants (i.e. lacks) for nothing’ or ‘He is in want (i.e. need)’. The usage of ‘want’ in this latter way remains common enough and well-understood enough such that this and the former sense of ‘want’ together constitute a case of ambiguity for ‘want’.²⁰¹ But there may come a point where the usage of ‘want’ in the archaic sense of ‘lacks’ becomes so marginalized and uncommon that the word ceases to be ambiguous (or at least ambiguous between those senses). Such a process would likely be slow (perhaps it has already begun) and there

²⁰¹ More specifically, this seems to me to be a case of polysemy. But, as will be noted in chapter 4, the boundary between polysemy and other types of ambiguity is fuzzy and whether or not the type of ambiguity ‘want’ has is polysemy is not relevant to the matter at hand.

would no doubt be a somewhat lengthy period (perhaps we are already in this period) where it is unclear whether or not ‘want’ remains ambiguous.

Conversely, as our understanding of the world (and the world itself) continues to change, so does our language. And these changes often result in new cases of ambiguity, and new cases of polysemy in particular. Take the word ‘web’ for example, which in the age of the internet gained a new sense as used in the phrase ‘world wide web’. The clear connection between the word’s original sense, as used in the phrase ‘the spider’s web’, and this new sense make ‘web’ a good case as a polysemously ambiguous word. It’s worth noting that the internet gave us a new linguistic purpose of sorts via a development in the needs and interests of English speakers. And it was our past usage of the term ‘web’ to refer to the structures created by spiders, along with salient features we wanted to capture about the nature of the networks forming the internet, that led to our adoption of the new sense of ‘web’. Of course, in the case of ‘web’ it was quite clear that the word was gaining a new meaning, and it happened in a relatively quick and concrete fashion. But subtle changes in the needs of speakers may lead to subtler implementations of ambiguity.

My claim is that something like this has likely happened in the case of ‘knows’ as well. As has been shown by the difficulties in reaching consensus in the Edward Craig-inspired project of trying to determine *the* purpose or reason why speakers think it is valuable to pick out certain individuals as knowers, there likely isn’t one such purpose or reason.²⁰² Rather, it seems far more likely that there are a set of related epistemic reasons as to why such labels are valuable.²⁰³ And certain distinctions among those purposes seem likely to have developed over time. Thus, it seems plausible to suppose that the polysemy of ‘knows’ is something that has been developing subtly and slowly over time, perhaps in accordance with evolving human needs (or desires) for more nuanced epistemic language. If the development at this point is either somewhat recent or incomplete (or both), this could help mask the ambiguous nature of ‘knows’ and make it

²⁰² Craig (1990).

²⁰³ Thus, those like Rysiew (2012) have advocated sensibly from moving about asking what *the role* is to what *the roles* are.

harder to detect even upon reflection. Thus, the developmental history of the ambiguity of ‘knows’ may be a factor that can partially explain semantic blindness.

This leads to a second factor that might explain our resistance to the ambiguity of ‘knows’—namely, that not all senses of a term need to be understood by all the competent speakers of a language (particularly in the case of polysemy) in order for that word to count as polysemous. Think about the words ‘want’ and ‘web’ once more. In the case of ‘want’ likely just about every current competent speaker of English (perhaps all truly competent current speakers of English) understand that ‘want’ has a sense similar in meaning to desire. However, there is no doubt a smaller percentage of current competent speakers of English who recognize the sense of ‘want’ as deficiency or lack. But that doesn’t change the fact that ‘want’ is ambiguous. Similarly, in the case of ‘web’—particularly if we think about the situation in the 1980s for example—a significantly smaller portion of the population was familiar with the modern tech sense of ‘web’ than were familiar with the organic sense of ‘web’. But at some point enough speakers recognized this new sense of ‘web’ that the word gained this new meaning as a proper part of English. That such circumstances could arise in the case of subtly polysemous words like ‘knows’ does not seem to me as unlikely.

I’ll take my own experiences as instructive here. Prior to the beginning of my formal study of philosophy, it struck me as obvious that in order to *truly* know something one required infallible evidence. I was comfortable using the word in other settings, but I likely would have appealed to some sort of loose use explanation to justify those usages. In fact, this seemed so clear to me that a great deal of epistemological questions seemed to have obvious answers, and I only came to see what the real problems were once I accepted that many other people didn’t understand the term ‘know’ to refer to a state of true belief with perfect warrant or infallible justification. (It took me a number of tries before I could see why the obvious answer to the Gettier problem wasn’t that the justification level was too weak to count as knowing, for example). I’ve since come to see that many English speakers (philosophers and non-philosophers alike) use the word ‘know’ in ways I initially didn’t recognize, and I’ve now accustomed myself to using and accepting these senses as well. Similarly, it’s not uncommon for me to have a certain

percentage of my undergraduate students (although almost always a minority) take it as intuitively obvious that what we mean when we say we know something is that we have an infallible true belief. Still others take it as obvious that we don't mean this, and still others lack a strong view or may even posit that we mean more than one thing.²⁰⁴

One response to these data would be to say that a certain percentage of individuals are simply wrong about what knowledge is. But it strikes me as harder to make the parallel claim that these significant portions of competent English speakers are simply wrong about what 'knowledge' is or what we mean by 'knows.' Rather, it seems to me more sensible to say that there is more than one meaning for such terms, but that all these meanings are closely related. However, in the case of many individuals, we can perhaps explain their inability to recognize 'knows' as ambiguous in virtue of their recognizing only one sense of 'knows', despite the availability of other senses. A larger number of English speakers could be in this position and 'knows' could still be ambiguous. Thus, for some, their resistance to the polysemy of 'knows' may be appropriately reflective of how they use and understand the word, yet still not accurately reflect the multiplicity of senses available.

The error theory I've put forward in order to explain why many are so resistant to the ambiguity of 'knows' can be summarized as follows. The specific form of ambiguity 'knows' embodies is polysemy, in which the different senses of the word are closely related. Due to the ubiquity of polysemy and our adeptness as users of ambiguous terms, we often fail to notice that words are polysemous. Beyond being polysemous *simpliciter*, a number of specific features of the polysemy of 'knows', including that it is a verb, that its polysemy may still be in its developmental phase, and that not all the senses of 'knows' available to a speaker of English may be recognized by all competent English speakers, each make it more likely that we would fail to notice, or see upon reflection, the ambiguity of 'knows.' Even with this error theory in place, our intuitions about the univocality of 'knows' are still more likely on MI-WAM (or invariantism generally) than

²⁰⁴ DeRose (1999) recounts that he too finds that some students are intuitive invariantists while other students put forward a "two sense" view of 'knows.'

on the ambiguity theory, but I think this explanation serves to lessen the gap in the level of support that our intuitive invariantism gives to MI-WAM over the ambiguity theory.

In review, we've seen that MI-WAM has a couple of significant costs—namely, it does a poor job explaining intuitions in situations like SURGEON and *Punishment/Reward* and it is saddled with the explanatory burden of trying to explain away intuitions of truth for literally false claims. We've also seen that the leg up that MI-WAM has over the ambiguity theory in virtue of a common resistance to accepting the ambiguity of 'knows' is not so great an advantage because a plausible error theory explaining our semantic blindness to the ambiguity of 'knows' is available. This leads me to conclude that, on balance, the view that currently better fits the data available is the ambiguity theory.

CHAPTER 4: A LINGUISTIC GROUNDING FOR A POLYSEMY THEORY OF 'KNOWS'

In his book *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Jason Stanley offers an argument for the conclusion that it is quite unlikely that an ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be "linguistically grounded."²⁰⁵ In this paper I challenge this conclusion by trying to offer a plausible linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows'. Given that a polysemy theory of 'knows' is a type of ambiguity theory of 'knows', if I succeed in linguistically grounding a polysemy theory of 'knows', then I have shown that at least one type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section presents and explains the relevant terminology needed for the rest of the paper. The second section provides a more detailed examination of Stanley's argument for the claim that an ambiguity theory quite likely cannot be linguistically grounded along with my rationale for why it is important to respond to this argument. The third section lays out my case for the linguistic grounding of a polysemy theory of 'knows'. The basis for this case is an examination of commonly used English verbs—of which the word 'knows' is one.

²⁰⁵ Stanley (2005), 81.

4.1 Ambiguity, Polysemy, and Context-Sensitivity²⁰⁶

As Adam Sennet notes, ‘ambiguity’ is itself ambiguous.²⁰⁷ In this paper I am concerned specifically with *lexical ambiguity*; i.e. the phenomenon of a single word²⁰⁸ having more than one sense or meaning.²⁰⁹ Thus, when the term ‘ambiguity’ is used in this paper, the reader should take this to refer to lexical ambiguity. In keeping with standard usage, I treat ‘ambiguity’ as an umbrella term that encompasses any way in which a word has more than one sense. Thus, as I am using the term, both homonymy and polysemy count as types of ambiguity.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ These terms, along with much of the other relevant linguistic terminology in this paper, are not used in precisely the same way across disciplines (or even within disciplines). I’ve done my best to make clear what I mean here by the relevant terms and to adopt meanings that align with the dominant usage of the most relevant communities of speakers employing these terms.

²⁰⁷ Sennet (2011).

²⁰⁸ There is some disagreement as to what kind of entity is (or entities are) the proper bearer(s) of ambiguity. In this paper I’ve assumed that words can properly be described as being ambiguous (without making any kind of claim limiting the proper application of the term ‘ambiguity’ to words only). Others may wish to claim that it is signifiers only, and not words, that are technically capable of being ambiguous. Others may claim it is vocables that are the proper bearers of ambiguity. Yet others may claim that ambiguity technically applies to a mapping relation between signifiers and words (or to some other mapping relation). While this debate is interesting and perhaps important, I do not think it is important for the purposes of this paper. For the sake of simplicity and ease of presentation, I’ve chosen to speak of words as ambiguous. I’ve also done this because it seems the most philosophically neutral and linguistically generic way of talking about the topic of concern—namely, what are we to say about the meaning of the entities like ‘know’ and ‘knows’ used in knowledge ascriptions and denials? For a reader who believes ambiguity applies only to signifiers, my choice to apply the term ‘ambiguity’ to words and my interchangeable usage of the differing conjugations ‘know’ and ‘knows’ of the root verb ‘to know’ may seem to require justification given that these different conjugations pick out different signifiers. My justification is two-fold. First, it is useful to be able to use examples in which the verb ‘to know’ is conjugated as ‘know’ and at other times as ‘knows’—so there’s a certain practicality in going ahead and using the two interchangeably. Second, I take it that if ‘know’ is polysemous, so is ‘knows’, and vice versa, and for roughly the same reasons. Thus, the reader could see me as putting forth a joint account for the polysemy of both the signifiers ‘know’ and ‘knows’. And I see no problem in combining the cases for both into one argument.

²⁰⁹ While acknowledging that both the terms ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ are also ambiguous, throughout this paper they will both be used to refer to roughly the Fregean *sinn* and will be used interchangeably.

²¹⁰ To say there is a “standard usage” of what counts as lexical ambiguity is likely simplifying things a bit—there seems to be enough idiosyncratic usage of the term ‘ambiguity’ that perhaps there is no such thing as a “standard usage”, but if there were to be a standard usage, viewing ambiguity as a class for which both homonymy and polysemy are sub-classes seems the most plausible candidate. The lack of uniformity (along with the choice to understand the relationship between ambiguity and polysemy roughly the way I do) occurs in Sennet (2011).

It is widely recognized that the line between homonymy and polysemy is blurry,²¹¹ but for our purposes so long as there is a clear conceptual distinction between homonymy and polysemy and paradigmatic cases of both, the fact that it is often difficult to determine whether a particular ambiguous word is homonymous or polysemous is unproblematic. Homonymy is the phenomenon of one word having two or more meanings that are unrelated, etymologically or otherwise. Words like ‘bank’ and ‘bear’ are examples of the former and are called homonyms.²¹² Polysemy refers to the phenomenon of one word having two or more *closely related* meanings which typically share an etymological history. Words like ‘crane’ and ‘arch’ are examples of this. I will call such words polysemes.²¹³

²¹¹ See for example, Ravin and Lcock (2000), 2-5 and Sennet (2011). Some have used this blurriness to call into question the distinctions between ambiguity, polysemy, and vagueness—arguing that a word’s (or signifier’s or vocable’s or what-have-you’s) being homonymous, polysemous, or vague is a context-dependent property (i.e. a word can be polysemous in one context and vague in another) or are properties that come in degrees on a continuum as opposed to being clear cut categories. See, for example, Geeraerts (1993) and Tuggy (1993).

²¹² Depending on one’s philosophy of language one may think this sentence would read more accurately as “Words like ‘bank’ and ‘bank’ and ‘bear’ and ‘bear’ are examples of the former and called homonyms.” And one may wish a similar modification for the sentence that follows. I have no problem with such alternations and find it inconsequential to the success of the arguments that follow.

²¹³ Polysemy may be described as distinct from homonymy both because the different senses of a polysemous word share an etymological root and because a polyseme’s meanings are more closely related. Of course, there may be circumstances in which an ambiguous word has meanings that share an etymological root but do not have related meanings and circumstances in which an ambiguous word has meanings that are closely related by a matter of accident and don’t share an etymological root. Because these two features can come apart, one might think it wise to make one of these features the fundamental or defining feature. Given the significance of closely related meaning over etymological history in this paper I’ve here described closely related meaning as the fundamental feature. This way of defining polysemy seems in keeping with definitions of polysemy such as those found in Lyons (1977, 550) and Zwicky and Sadock (1975, 2) in which polysemes are expressed as a single lexeme with distinct senses (as opposed to homonyms which are expressed with two (or more presumably) lexemes). However, if one wished to make a common etymological root the fundamental feature of polysemy, given the frequent connection between common etymology and relation of word meaning, I don’t think this would change the quality or outcome of my argument.

It is important to distinguish ambiguity from context-sensitivity which is a related, but distinct semantic phenomenon. Adam Sennet explains the distinction nicely writing that,

Context sensitivity is (potential) variability in content due purely to changes in the context of utterance without a change in the convention of word usage. Thus, ‘I am hungry’ varies in content speaker to speaker because ‘I’ is context sensitive and shifts reference depending on who utters it. ‘I’, however, is not massively ambiguous. ‘Bank’ is ambiguous, not (at least, not obviously) context sensitive. Of course, knowledge of context may well help disambiguate an ambiguous utterance. Nonetheless, ambiguity is not characterized by interaction with (extra-linguistic) context but is a property of the meanings of the terms.²¹⁴

Sennet’s examples clearly show that a word can be ambiguous without being context-sensitive and that a word can be context-sensitive without being ambiguous. Even if one were to make the case that ‘bank’ is context-sensitive, this wouldn’t be *because* it was ambiguous and vice versa with ‘I’. This is, in part, because ambiguity is the non-context-bound property of a word having more than one meaning, any of which can be the meaning used in *any* context where the appropriate syntax is present,²¹⁵ while context-sensitivity is the property of content variation *resulting from* a change in context.

Given the description I gave of ambiguity earlier as “any way in which a word has more than one sense,” and depending on one’s views about what it means for a word to have more than one sense, context-sensitivity could wind up counting as a type of

²¹⁴Sennet (2011).

²¹⁵I include the qualifier of “where the appropriate syntax is present” to cover instances where due to an ambiguous term’s meanings including different parts of speech certain meanings are blocked due to syntactic structure. Take for example the word ‘duck’ which has both noun-form and verb-form meanings. The syntax of the sentence “She saw him duck” blocks the possibility that the referent of ‘duck’ could be the animal instead of the action. This example is given by Emma Borg (2004, 143). Sennet (2011) uses a similar example to make a similar point.

ambiguity. Which answer one gives to this question doesn't really matter for our purposes so long as two things are noted. First, this would make context-sensitivity a type of ambiguity, not the other way around. Second, context-sensitivity would still be distinct from both polysemy and homonymy.

One may feel that this treatment of the distinction between context-sensitivity and ambiguity is too brief to fully explain what it is that makes the two phenomena distinct. I think this is likely true. However, taking the time to put forward a fuller account of the difference here seems to be unnecessary for the purposes at hand so long as the reader is willing to grant that these two semantic phenomena are distinct and that there are clear cases of both context-sensitive words (like indexicals) and ambiguous words (like homonyms).

One might also be interested in making a distinction between ambiguous words that are equivocal because they have two and only two senses and multivocal words—i.e. words that have more than two senses. For our purposes, the only point worth noting about two-sense equivocality and multivocality is that both are compatible with polysemy. By this I mean that a polyseme can be either two-sense equivocal or multivocal. My own leanings are towards a multivocal polysemy theory of 'knows', but I am not arguing for that here. Rather, I am merely arguing that there exists good linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' (i.e., the view that 'knows' and its cognates²¹⁶ are polysemes).

²¹⁶ The phrase "and its cognates" from here on out will typically be omitted, but it should be taken as implied where appropriate.

4.2 Stanley's Argument Against the Ambiguity Theory of 'Knows'

In *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Jason Stanley devotes only a single paragraph to the view that 'knows' is ambiguous. Stanley's brief treatment of the view goes as follows:

There really is not much to be said for a version of contextualism according to which 'know' is ambiguous. To ground an ambiguity claim linguistically, one would need to show that there are languages in which the different meanings are represented by different words. But such a claim is unlikely to be substantiated in the cases of interest to the contextualist. It is quite unlikely that there are languages in which the word for 'know' in the epistemology classroom is different from the word for 'know' outside the epistemology classroom."²¹⁷

A number of noteworthy claims are made in this paragraph. First, there is Stanley's claim that there is not much to be said *for a version of contextualism* according to which 'know' is ambiguous. Using a standard understanding of (epistemic) contextualism as the view that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials vary according to the context in which they are uttered for distinctively epistemic reasons,²¹⁸ I would agree with Stanley that there isn't much to be said for such a view. This is because, as indicated in the previous section, I take it to be a mistake to see an ambiguity theory of 'knows' as a type of contextualism. Thus, on my view, one should reject the claim that there is *a type of contextualism* on which an ambiguity concerning 'know' is posited because such a view is not a type of contextualism at all. But clearly this is not what Stanley sees as the problem with an ambiguity theory. Thus, I will put aside this taxonomic concern and focus on what Stanley takes the problem with an ambiguity theory of 'knows' to be.

²¹⁷ Stanley (2006), 81.

²¹⁸ See, for example, Cohen (1999, 58), DeRose (1992, 914), (2002, 618), and Rysiew (2011).

Stanley puts forward a necessary condition for the linguistic grounding of an ambiguity claim—namely, one can linguistically ground an ambiguity claim only if one can show that the different meanings are represented by different words in other languages. In making this claim, Stanley likely has a rationale in mind something along the lines of the one Kripke offered in 1977 when he wrote that “we would expect the ambiguity to be disambiguated by separate and unrelated words in some other languages” (Kripke 1977). When one is thinking about homonyms, this line of thought makes a great deal of sense. It would be highly improbable of any given homonym that its meanings would be semantically encoded by a single word in all or even many other languages.²¹⁹

But the line of thought is less forceful when it comes to polysemes whose meanings are closely related. It seems plausible that in some cases whatever forces—cultural, linguistic, evolutionary, etc.—led a univocal English word to eventually become polysemous are forces that have led to similar developments from univocality to polysemy in the equivalent word in other languages. Certainly this is not always the case. There are cases where the different meanings of an English polyseme are semantically encoded by separate words in other languages. And this separate encoding can and does often function as evidence of the polysemous nature of such words. But the converse doesn’t hold—i.e. the lack of such separate semantic encoding in other languages for the (seemingly distinct) meanings of a word doesn’t show that the term is not polysemous.²²⁰

²¹⁹ An exception would be cases in which one or more senses of a word pick out a concept or object linguistically referenced only by speakers of one language. That such circumstances might arise initially seems to me to be all the more likely in the case of polysemes where a new sense might develop due to a conceptual idiosyncrasy of a particular shared-language-using community.

²²⁰ My conclusions here are in keeping with the wariness about such a test like Stanley’s for ambiguity in the field of linguistics. See for example Cruse (1982, 66-67) who provides proposed counterexamples to such a test for ambiguity and Lyons (1977, 404).

Of course, this claim is compatible with Stanley's. There is no logical inconsistency between the claims that 1) the lack of separate semantic encoding in other languages for the meanings of a word doesn't show that a word isn't polysemous and that 2) the only way to *linguistically ground* that a word is ambiguous (including when it is ambiguous in virtue of being polysemous) is to show that there are separate semantic encodings for the meanings of a word in other languages. On such a picture, a lack of such separate semantic encodings entails neither that one obtains a sufficient reason to accept nor a sufficient reason to reject that the term is polysemous (although one may have a sufficient reason to reject that the term is homonymous). However, this does entail that when such separate semantic encoding can't be found, there is no hope of linguistically grounding an ambiguity claim, because a necessary component of that grounding is absent.

But the difficulty of this position for the proponent of any form of ambiguity theory of 'knows' is exacerbated on Stanley's account because Stanley treats the ability of an ambiguity theory of 'knows' to be linguistically grounded as a necessary condition for taking an ambiguity theory of 'knows' seriously. While Stanley does not explicitly state this, I infer this from the following facts: 1) The only objection Stanley gives to the ambiguity theory of 'knows' is that it lacks linguistic grounding, 2) he concludes that there isn't much to be said for an ambiguity theory of 'knows', and 3) given the context, an implication of his conclusion that there isn't much to be said for an ambiguity of 'knows' seems to be that the view ought not be taken seriously. Thus, on Stanley's account a linguistic grounding for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' is needed if the theory is to be taken seriously. This, in conjunction with Stanley's claim that evidence of

separate semantic encoding in other languages of the meanings of a word is needed to show that the word is ambiguous, results in it being a necessary requirement, on Stanley's account, that there be evidence of separate semantic encoding in other languages of the meaning of a word in order for one to be able to take an ambiguity theory of 'knows' seriously.

Requiring a 'linguistic grounding' in this sense for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' in order to take it seriously strikes me as mistaken, but I won't argue for that in this paper. Rather, in the next section I'll argue that there is an appropriate linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' which does not rely on showing that there are languages in which the different meanings of 'knows' are expressed by different words, and that, because a polysemy theory of 'knows' is a type of ambiguity theory of 'knows', at least one type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded.

Before turning to that argument, there are a few additional points worth making about Stanley's treatment of an ambiguity theory of 'knows.' First, Stanley states that the claim that there are languages in which the different meanings of 'knows' are expressed by different words "is unlikely to be substantiated." But he provides no reason for why he thinks that. This seems to be merely armchair speculation on his part. Second, Stanley follows this claim by stating that "[i]t is quite unlikely that there are languages in which the word for 'know' in the epistemology classroom is different from the word for 'know' outside the epistemology classroom." This claim has the same problem as the one before—no reason for the claim is provided.

But I see a second problem with this claim. The second problem is that Stanley seems to assume that the senses an advocate for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' would

claim exist are an epistemology-classroom sense and a non-epistemology-classroom sense. But this need not be the case (either that the number of relevant senses is two or that they are divided along in- and out-of-the- epistemology-classroom lines).²²¹ Thus, even if Stanley were correct that the linguistic grounding of an ambiguity theory required showing that there are languages in which the different meanings are represented by different words in those languages, Stanley still has not provided us with a good reason to think that this requirement could not be met in the case of an ambiguity theory of ‘knows.’²²²

²²¹ A possible explanation for why Stanley made the step from an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ generally to a two-sense ambiguity view of an epistemology-classroom sense and a non-epistemology classroom sense of ‘knows’ is that Stanley may have just been following previous connections made between the two such as the connection made in DeRose (1999, 191-2) in which DeRose cites the two-sense ambiguity theory of ‘know’ put forward in Malcolm (1952) and writes that “[t]heories according to which there are two senses of ‘know’—a ‘low,’ ‘weak,’ or ‘ordinary’ sense on the one hand, and a ‘high,’ ‘strong,’ or ‘philosophical’ sense, which is much more demanding, on the other – can be viewed as limiting cases of contextualist views.’

²²² In fact, once we jettison this overly restrictive picture of the possible senses of ‘knows’ available, we find potential candidates for such sense differentiation via the history of philosophy. Descartes’ usage of the distinction between *cognitionem* and *scientia*, outlined perhaps most clearly in the Second Set of Replies (CSMII, 105-6), has been taken by some to be a case of the identification of two senses of what we call ‘knowledge’. For example, Fred Feldman, identifies two types of knowledge (and senses of ‘knowledge’) based on Descartes’ distinction. Feldman labels these senses ‘practical knowledge’ and ‘metaphysical knowledge’ respectively. One has practical knowledge when their true beliefs are “justified well enough for the ordinary affairs of life” (Feldman 1986, 34). On the other hand, metaphysical knowledge “is knowledge beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt” (Feldman 1986, 35). Metaphysical knowledge is the type of knowledge employed in the “search after truth”. See Feldman (1986, 33-37). Another possible example (and one which it has been suggested to me is a source from which Descartes pulled in drawing his own distinction) comes from the Stoics. René Brouwer identifies two definitions of ‘knowledge’ (*episteme*) in Diogenes Laertius and four definitions of ‘knowledge’ in Stobaeus (Brouwer 2014, 30). While all these senses are for the same word, *episteme*, and in that sense don’t meet Stanley’s criterion, Brouwer notes that the words used to define what knowledge is are distinct. Stobaeus defines knowledge both as a cognition (*katalepsis*) and as a tenor or disposition (*hexis*) (2014, 30). Brouwer refers to knowledge understood as *katalepsis* as knowledge “in the cognitive sense” and knowledge understood as *hexis* as knowledge “in the dispositional sense” (2014, 32-33). So at the very least we at least get two distinct words used to describe distinct types of thing that knowledge is in the case of the Stoics. (Of course, for this to be enlightening, both sense of ‘knowledge’ here need to refer to knowledge in the propositional sense. That this is so in the case of the Stoics is not as obvious as it is in the case of Descartes, but the fact that both the cognitive and dispositional senses of knowledge are types of *episteme* seems like good grounds in which to think it at least plausible that Stobaeus is picking out distinct types of what we would consider propositional knowledge.) See (SVF 2.130, LS 31B and SVF 3.112, LS 41H).

Finally, before changing gears, I want to address why I think responding to Stanley's argument is important. One might think that, given how quickly Stanley put forward this argument, my much lengthier response is not worth all this fuss. When looking at Stanley's argument in isolation, this is a sensible position. However, given the current state of the philosophical conversation regarding the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials, responding to Stanley's argument is very important for anyone interested in defending a polysemy theory of 'knows'.

For the past decade or so the conversation about the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials has been dominated by three camps—1) the epistemic contextualists (in their various guises), 2) the advocates of pragmatic encroachment (the view that there is a practical stakes or interests component in the analysis of knowledge) including Stanley who is a leading proponent of the view, and 3) the strict invariantists who tend to think there is a univocal, traditional meaning of 'knows' in the propositional sense. In the decade before that the conversation was dominated by two camps—the epistemic contextualists and the strict invariantists.

Throughout all this time relatively little attention (much less favorable attention) has been given to the view that 'knows' might be ambiguous.²²³ This is in part because the ambiguity theory has been assumed to be an inferior or rudimentary form of

²²³ That said, there are some who more recently have advocated for views that would count as ambiguity (or polysemy) theories of 'knows'. Rene van Woudenberg (2005) offers an argument for a multivocal version of an ambiguity theory of 'knowledge' while Fred Feldman (1986, 33-37) offers a case for a Cartesian-inspired two-sense version of such an ambiguity theory. Matthias Steup (2005) entertains an improvement on contextualism via a pair of views he calls "new contextualism" and the "multiple concepts theory." These views, taken in conjunction, at the very least lean strongly in the direction of an ambiguity theory of 'knows' and perhaps should be properly seen as such. Most recently, Baron Reed (2013) has put forward a case for a multivocal polysemy theory in which 'knows' is ambiguous in the same way that color words like 'blue' are ambiguous.

contextualism.²²⁴ Thus, Stanley’s choice to comment on an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ as a type of contextualism, and only very briefly, reflects the view’s current position in the dialectic. Given that the ambiguity theory has received little attention, it makes a great deal of sense for Stanley to give it little attention. (And I want to recognize that Stanley’s treatment was brief and that he very well may have further nuanced his position if the ambiguity theory hadn’t received so little attention in the time leading up to the publication of *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.) But for those of us interested in defending an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’, it is important that we respond to the scant objections—even those quickly given—that have kept the ambiguity theory from being a serious contender in the discussion about the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials.

4.3: A Case for the Linguistic Grounding of a Polysemy Theory of ‘Knows’

Before arguing that a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ can be linguistically grounded, it seems prudent to ask what it means to ground a claim linguistically. Stanley does not say. On the face of it, it would seem that for a claim to have linguistic grounding is for there to be sufficient linguistic evidence (i.e. evidence about language or language usage) to provide one with a defeasible reason to accept the claim.²²⁵ I see no reason to reject this natural first reading of the claim, and as a result that is what I will understand linguistic grounding to consist in. That being said, should Stanley’s understanding of what it takes to ground a claim linguistically differ substantially from my own

²²⁴ See, for example, DeRose (1999), 191-192 and 194-195.

²²⁵ This description is far from perfect (e.g. Who is this “one” who has this defeasible reason? What counts as “linguistic”?). But I take these matters to be tangential to the matter at hand.

understanding, I would need to assess whether or not my case for the linguistic grounding of a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ would count as a linguistic grounding in his sense (and if it doesn’t, I’d need to consider how important it is for those defending the ambiguity theory to have a linguistic grounding in Stanley’s sense).

My goal in this section is to argue that regardless of whether or not there are languages in which the different meanings of ‘knows’ are represented by different words, a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ enjoys a kind of linguistic grounding. More specifically, I aim to show that this grounding occurs in virtue of the type of word that ‘knows’ is—namely, a very commonly used English verb. That said, it is important to note that the case that follows is not meant to be an all-things-considered case for the view that ‘knows’ is polysemous. Such a complete case would have to deal more in depth with the expansive literature on knowledge ascriptions and denials. Rather, the goal of this paper is to argue against the claim that a component of such a case is in principle lacking—namely, to argue against the view that in principle a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ lacks a linguistic grounding.

The short version of my argument for this conclusion is simply this: The vast majority of very commonly used English verbs are polysemous. The best explanation for this is a functional explanation that commonly used verbs needs to be flexible and varied in order to accommodate the functions that they play in communication between English speakers. ‘Knows’ plays the same general type of functional role as these other common, polysemous English verbs and there seems to be no relevant difference between ‘knows’ and other commonly used English verbs that would lead ‘knows’ to lack the feature of polysemy possessed by most other commonly used English verbs. Thus, on linguistic

grounds, we have defeasible reasons to take ‘knows’ to be polysemous, that is, we have linguistic grounds for a polysemy theory of ‘knows.’ This in turn provides us with linguistic grounds for a type of ambiguity theory of ‘knows’. The rest of this section will be a defense of the claims made in this paragraph.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary ‘know’ is the fifty-ninth most commonly used English word and the eighth most commonly used English verb. The rest of the twenty-five most commonly used English verbs are (in order starting with the most common) ‘be’, ‘have’, ‘do’, ‘say’, ‘get’, ‘make’, ‘go’, ‘take’, ‘see’, ‘come’, ‘think’, ‘look’, ‘want’, ‘give’, ‘use’, ‘find’, ‘tell’, ‘ask’, ‘work’, ‘seem’, ‘feel’, ‘try’, ‘leave’ and ‘call’.²²⁶ I claim that most, if not all, of these verbs are ambiguous. Many may find this claim uncontroversial and be willing to grant me it without argument. However, it will not be difficult to use some standard tests for ambiguity to provide further evidence that many of these commonly used English verbs are ambiguous, so we’ll do so.²²⁷

Let’s start with the “Conjunction Reduction” test.²²⁸ In the Conjunction Reduction test, one takes two sentences in which the possibly ambiguous word is supposedly being used in different senses and combines the two sentences into one while using the ambiguous term only once. One then looks to see if this new complex sentence is a zeugma (i.e. a sentence in which a single words applies to two different parts of the

²²⁶ “The OEC: Facts About the Language” <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/the-oec-facts-about-the-language>.

²²⁷ As far as I know, there is no such thing as an ambiguity test that is widely consider to be infallible. It is hard to avoid both false positives and false negatives—especially since such tests are typically intuition driven. Still, the exercise of looking how these verbs fair on a few tests for ambiguity seems valuable in as much as this is a means employs by linguists and as much as the ways in which works are used in such tests often help elicit clearer intuitions about a word’s univocality or ambiguity.

²²⁸ I am using the name that Sennet (2011) uses for this test. Alan Cruse (1982) also discusses this test calling it “the pun test”.

sentence in two different senses).²²⁹ An example of a Conjunction Reduction that results in zeugma is the following:

- (1) The feathers are light.
- (2) The colors are light.
- (3) The feathers and colors are light.

The third sentence results in zeugma because ‘light’ means not heavy in regards to the feathers and not dark in regards to colors.²³⁰

Such zeugmas can easily be constructed using many of the verbs listed above.

Take ‘want’ as an example.

- (4) He wants for nothing.
- (5) He wants pie.
- (6) He wants for nothing and pie.²³¹

²²⁹ One might wonder about the value of this test. If you cannot tell if the word has changed senses going from one sentence to another, how would one be able to tell if the complex sentence is zeugmatic? This is a fine question. I am not sure what the rationale is of those who have endorsed this test, but I think there is something to be said for the particular juxtaposition that occurs in such a complex sentence that may make it easier to tell.

²³⁰ This example comes from Sennet (2011).

²³¹ It was once suggested to me that this example shouldn’t be counted as a proper case of zeugma because “wants for nothing” is an idiom. I think that the boundary for what counts as an idiom is fuzzy, but I take this suggestion as well motivated in the sense that it seems plausible to think that ‘wants for nothing’ currently functions as an idiom. However, I think it’s important to keep this example included for the following reason. If at this point in the development of the English language the sense of ‘want’ as lacking or in need is so archaic or marginalized that its remaining common uses in that sense (e.g. ‘wants for nothing’, ‘to be in want’) are now idioms, this is due to the evolution of the English language such that the once more robust meaning of ‘want’ as lacking or deficient has been overshadowed by its more common modern meaning as desire. Polysemy is neither a necessary nor eternal property of a word, and as a result, it is something that itself has a fuzzy boundary, at least during the periods in which certain senses of a word are coming in or out of existence. I think it is plausible to suppose that at one point, perhaps not that long ago, ‘knows’ was univocal (picking out a vague or perhaps incoherent epistemic concept) and that the polysemous status of ‘knows’ is the result of the evolution of speakers’ epistemic needs and desires. If the polysemy of ‘knows’ does happen to be a somewhat newer phenomenon, this may explain the tendency of many competent English speakers to be hesitant in embracing or treating ‘knows’ as polysemous. This relates back to the idea I discussed in chapter 3.

In this instance ‘wants’ means lacks in relation to nothing and desires in relation to pie. Zeugma can also be formed using ‘is’.

- (7) She is a talented artist.
- (8) She is running late.
- (9) She is a talented artist and running late.

The zeugma turns on the dual usage of ‘is’ as indicating a persisting trait and a current state.

Zeugma can also be formed where the word standing in both relations to the ambiguous word is the same word. Take for example the following case using ‘made’.

- (10) I made this [reed] basket.
- (11) I made that [last second] basket [to win the game].
- (12) I made this basket and that basket.

So far the use of two distinct direct objects has been used to show the presence of zeugma, but this can happen with constructions in subjects as well as in this example with ‘tells’.

- (13) He tells me that he has something to hide.
- (14) His nervous demeanor tells me that he has something to hide.
- (15) He and his nervous demeanor tell me that he has something to hide.²³²

If one were to go through all twenty-five verbs listed above, one would find most lend themselves to forming zeugmas. The ability to create zeugmas using most of the

²³² I was prompted to think of this example due to a useful conversation with Aaron Thomas-Buldoc.

commonly used English verbs is evidence for pervasive ambiguity of commonly used English verbs.

While my argument rests on the mere fact that most commonly used English verbs—of which ‘know’ is one—are ambiguous, it still seems worth asking if zeugma can be created specifically with ‘know’. There is a rather uninteresting sense in which zeugma can easily be obtained using ‘know’. Take the following:

(16) We know our neighbors

(17) We know that $2+2=4$.

(18) We know our neighbors and that $2+2=4$.

The zeugma here obtains from the use of ‘know’ in the acquainted with sense and the propositional sense. But most would agree that ‘know’ is ambiguous between acquainted-with and propositional senses. The interesting question is whether or not zeugma can be obtained using knows in a propositional sense—i.e. ‘knows that.’ As one who believes that ‘know’ has more than one propositional sense, it is easy for me to perceive many combinations as zeugmatic, but I don’t know of an example that seems so clearly zeugmatic that it would seem clearly zeugmatic to one who holds the view that there is only one propositional sense of ‘know.’ Still for good measure, imagine a philosopher who is convinced Descartes’ *cogito* provides one with an infallible belief in one’s own existence which is expressed as “I know” and also convinced of Moorean propositions because she takes herself to be capable of fallibly knowing things even if she can’t rule out all alternatives. Imagine she makes the following utterances:

(19) I know I exist

(20) I know I have hands

(21) I know I exist and have hands.

Given the background knowledge I have about the speaker, (21) to me sounds zeugmatic. My guess is it will not to some, but my hope is at the very least it will strike one as plausible that this could be a case of zeugma.

Another test for lexical ambiguity is the Contradiction test. On this test, a word is deemed ambiguous if a sentence uses a word twice and is not contradictory but, due to the form, would constitute a contradiction if the word used twice were univocal.²³³ That is to say, on this test if there is a way for the sentence which appears in virtue of its structure alone to be contradictory, to not be contradictory, the word used twice is deemed ambiguous. For example, the sentence:

(22) That bank isn't a bank.

Were 'bank' univocal, this sentence could only be interpreted in a contradictory manner, but so long as the two referents for bank are different in the two usages—i.e. a financial institution in one case and a riverside in another—it is not contradictory. Hence, because there is a non-contradictory reading of this sentence, which appears contradictory solely in terms of structure, the word 'bank' is deemed ambiguous.

In order for the contradiction test to avoid generating false positives, the conception of structure being employed will need to be fairly thick. For example, on a thin structure-as-mere-syntax conception 'He was over there, but not over there' might seem to satisfy the conditions of the contradiction test, even though it's fairly obvious that the demonstrative 'there' should not as a result be viewed as ambiguous. There may

²³³ This test is also put forward in Sennet (2011).

be more than one way to properly delineate how thick the concept of structure being employed should be.

For the time being I prefer the following elucidation. Structure includes syntax plus what counts as the semantic or “context-supplementing” (via unarticulated constituents) uses of context, in John Perry’s sense of those terms. But structure on this account does not include what Perry considers to be presemantic or pragmatic uses of context. To get a grasp of these four categories as Perry understands them, it will be useful to look at what he writes about the presemantic, semantic, context-supplementing, and pragmatic uses of context:

“Sometimes we use context to figure out with which meaning a word is being used, or which of several words that look or sound alike is being used, or even which language is being spoken. These are *presemantic* uses of context: context helps us to figure out meaning. In the case of indexicals, however, context is used *semantically*. It remains relevant after the language, words and meanings are all known; the meaning directs us to certain aspects of context. Both these uses of context differ from a third. In the third type of case we lack the materials we need for the proposition expressed by a statement, even though we have identified the words and their meanings, and have consulted the contextual factors the indexical meanings direct us to. Some of the constituents of the proposition expressed are *unarticulated* and we consult the context to figure out what they are. I call this the ‘context-supplementing’ use of context. Finally and importantly we use context to interpret the intention with which the utterance was made; what was the speaker trying to do? This is the *pragmatic* use of context.”²³⁴

On this account of structure, the sentence ‘He was over there, but not over there’ won’t pass the contradiction test, because the semantic indexicality of ‘there’ constitutes part of

²³⁴ Perry (2001, 39-40); emphasis in original.

its structure. This is because, as I understand it, part of the structural nature of indexicals is a certain emptiness that requires a referent for full meaning. Similarly, sentences formed with non-indexical kinds of context-sensitive terms like ‘flat’ or ‘imported’ also won’t be able to pass the contradiction test because the unarticulated constituent of a context is required in order to determine their meaning via “context supplementing”. This is in contrast with ambiguous words like ‘bank’ whose ambiguity is a non-structural, presemantic feature of language and for which context plays a purely pragmatic role of helping determine what sense the speaker is intending to convey. It is for these reasons that the sentence “That bank isn’t a bank” passes the contradiction test and the word ‘bank’ can be considered ambiguous while “He was over there, but not over there” fails and ‘there’ is determined to be indexical but not ambiguous.

The benefit of this account of structure is that the ability of commonly used verbs to pass the contradiction test not only favors a polysemy theory of commonly used verbs over a univocality theory of commonly used verbs, but it also favors a polysemy theory of commonly used verbs over views like contextualism or contrastivism about commonly used verbs.²³⁵ The downside is that it will likely be harder to get a strong intuition as to whether or not a sentence passes the contradiction test. Still, I think in many cases it is clear enough that the test is worth engaging in regardless.²³⁶

Before turning to sentences using commonly used English verbs, it’s worth pausing to address that the sentence ‘That bank isn’t a bank’ probably still sounds

²³⁵ For an examples of a contrastivist theory of ‘knows’, which appeals to unarticulated contrastive constituents in knowledge ascriptions and denials, see Jonathan Schaffer (2004).

²³⁶ I’m grateful to Maite Ezcurdia and Michael Veber who both helped show me in different ways the need for an account of what constitutes structure on the contradiction test. The account I’ve given here is likely still imperfect, and the fault for that lies completely with me and not them.

somewhat unnatural to many. It is important to note that for a word to be deemed ambiguous on the contradiction test, it need not be that the contradictory sentence sounds natural.²³⁷ Rather what is required is that there be a reading of the sentence on which the seeming contradictory sentence is not in fact contradictory.

Once again, it is relatively easy to craft sentences in which commonly used English verbs pass the Contradiction test. Take the following examples:

- (23) She made the basket but she didn't *make* the basket.
- (24) It seems red but it doesn't *seem* red.
- (25) Amy called Gerard, but she didn't *call* Gerard.
- (26) That's what I said, even though that's not what I *said*.
- (27) I use my friends but I don't *use* my friends.

We can see why (23) is not contradictory if we think back to (10)-(12) and assign sinking the shot as the meaning of 'made' and crafting or creating to 'make.' In (24) we can avoid contradiction by taking 'seems' to mean looks visually and 'seem' to mean strike one as. For (25) we can avoid contradiction when 'called' means harkened after and 'call' means contact via phone. With (26) contradiction is bypassed by taking the first 'says' in the loose sense to mean what is conveyed and the second 'said' to refer to the actual words uttered and their literal meaning.²³⁸ And (27) can pass the contradiction test if the first instance of 'use' refers to utilizing in a non-abusive sort of manner and the second

²³⁷ There are pragmatic reasons why these sentences often will not sound natural, despite the fact that they do in fact pass the contradiction test.

²³⁸ This example is a modified version of an example suggested to me by Jennifer Saul. Saul, among others, has noted in writing that 'says' is ambiguous in this way. See Saul (2015). Similarly, Patrick Rysiew identifies in uses these two sense of 'says' in his work contextualism and invariantism (Rysiew 2001, 2005, 2007).

instance of ‘use’ refers to a sort of mere-means type of abuse of another, which Kant famously condemned.²³⁹

Once again, my goal is to show that there is a linguistic grounding for ‘knows’ being ambiguous based on the ambiguity of most other commonly used English verbs. This makes showing that ‘know’ passes the contradiction test inessential to my argument. However, the ability of ‘knows’ to arguably pass the contradiction test would be further evidence of the ambiguity of ‘know’. As with the Conjunction Reduction test, it will probably seem to those that are sympathetic to ‘know’ being ambiguous that the “I know I have hands but I don’t *know* I have hands” can pass the contradiction test. Take ‘know’ in the first instance to mean some relatively low-threshold justified truth belief and the second usage to mean something more like certain, infallible proof that one’s belief is true, for example. But my guess would be most who are opposed to an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ are unlikely to be convinced by this.

The initial plausibility of the view that most of English’s most commonly used verbs are ambiguous, combined with the ability of many of those verbs to pass ambiguity tests, serves to provide us with strong reason to think that most of English’s most commonly used verbs are indeed ambiguous. Thus, without a reason to think that ‘know’ is unlike most other commonly used English verbs, this provides us with some reason to favor the view that ‘know’ is itself ambiguous.

²³⁹ It should be noted that an inability to pass a contradiction test does not show a word is not ambiguous. Some of the easier cases to identify are often those ambiguous words whose senses are different sentence types (e.g. certain words with noun and verb forms). However, even in the case of words where all the senses are different transitive verbs, passing the ambiguity test may be impossible. This can occur when the set of predicate objects which can sensibly be applied to a verb in one of its senses may contain no overlap with the set of predicate objects which can sensibly be applied to the verb in its other sense(s). Thus, it may be impossible for such a verb to pass the contradiction test despite being ambiguous.

But the force of this reason can be increased if we consider the best explanation for why commonly used English verbs are ambiguous. The best explanation seems to be a functional claim that these commonly used English verbs need to be flexible and varied in order to do all the work that we use them for. The question of whether or not these verbs became so commonly used because they were ambiguous or became ambiguous because they were so commonly used is an interesting question worthy of research. However, for present purposes, the answer is not necessary. For if commonly used English verbs tend to become ambiguous because they are commonly used, then the probability that ‘know’ is ambiguous increases. Conversely, if a verb’s being ambiguous contributes to the likelihood that it will become commonly used, once again the fact that ‘knows’ is a commonly used English verb raises the probability that it is ambiguous. Thus, regardless of what the causal impetus is for the high percentage of commonly used English verbs that are ambiguous, on this functional explanation of the correlation, the probability that ‘know’ is ambiguous further increases.

The connection between the functions a verb plays and polysemy can also be used to respond to an objection: namely, that all my argument here has shown is that ‘knows’ is likely polysemous in some sense or other, but not the more specific claim that ‘knows’ in the propositional sense—i.e. that ‘knows’ as used in ‘knows that’ constructions—is likely polysemous. As noted earlier ‘knows’ rather uncontroversially is recognized to have more than one sense generally (take for example the difference between the propositional and acquaintance senses of ‘knows’). An objector might suggest that recognizing these sorts of sense distinctions is all that we should expect given the general linguistic data of commonly used verbs being ambiguous. However, the force of this line

of reasoning is somewhat undercut if we posit that there is a connection between the functions that these verbs are meant to play and their polysemy. It is true that ‘knows’ serves the function of picking out that which subjects are acquainted with and well as picking out a particular positive epistemic relation subjects can stand in to a proposition. But, in addition, quite plausibly there are multiple functions that this latter type of knowing—i.e. ‘knowing that’ or propositional knowing—serves. This is evidenced by the variety of theories in place as to what the function of ‘knows’ is, and to the disagreement about what that function is.²⁴⁰ In view of the plurality of answers as to what the function or value of knowing is, one can either conclude that all but (at most) one of such answers is mistaken, or one can adopt the view that there are a plurality of functions that propositional knowledge serves.²⁴¹ This latter view strikes me as by far the more plausible view. But if there are a plurality of functions that propositional knowledge serves, then it seems reasonable to think that this flexibility of functionality for ‘knows that’ would lend itself to polysemy, even about ‘knows’ understood propositionally.

Before concluding, three types of remarks are worth making. First, throughout this section I’ve argued that an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ has a linguistic grounding due to its status as a commonly used English verb, yet at the outset I said I would be arguing for a polysemy theory of ‘knows’. I have chosen to frame the majority of the discussion in this section around ambiguity because I employed linguistic tests that check for ambiguity more generally and not polysemy in particular. However, I wouldn’t want to argue that we have good grounds to think most commonly used English verbs are

²⁴⁰ See for example Craig (1990), Hawthorne (2004), Kelp (2008), and Rysiew (2012).

²⁴¹ This view is adopted in Rysiew (2012).

homonymous—for indeed in most cases we can identify an etymological root and other types of relationships between these verbs’ various senses. So while I have argued that these verbs are ambiguous, more specifically I claim that they are polysemous.

Second, one might agree that the facts that most commonly used English verbs are polysemous and that ‘knows’ is a commonly used English verb do provide a defeasible linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of ‘knows’, but may protest that this linguistic evidence is too weak a to make it reasonable to conclude that ‘knows’ is polysemous. But such a protest would be the result of missing the point of this paper. I would remind such a critic that the goal of this particular project wasn’t to show that a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ is the all-things-considered best position to adopt. As stated before, to make a strong all-things-considered case for a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ requires a great deal of extra philosophical and empirical work. I think this work can be done. However, I am not arguing for that here. Rather, my goal in this paper is merely to argue that Stanley was mistaken in thinking there was *no linguistic grounding* for the claim that ‘knows’ is ambiguous. This argument is but a small part of a much bigger case to be made for a polysemy theory of ‘know.’

Third, my argument has relied implicitly upon there being no relevant difference between ‘knows’ and the majority of other commonly used English verbs that should give us reason to think that ‘knows’ would not share the feature of being ambiguous. If one is able to provide a characteristic that differs between ‘knows’ and most other commonly used English verbs that plausibly undercuts the likelihood that ‘knows’ shares polysemy in common with most other commonly used English verbs, that is the type of objection that requires response. One possibility for such a difference is that ‘knows’ is

factive and there is nothing relevantly similar with other commonly used English verbs. The reason one might think this characteristic is relevant is because factivity is non-gradable. For one who thinks that the plausibility of ‘knows’ being polysemous depends upon ‘knows’ being gradable, one might argue that the lack of factivity of ‘knows’ is evidence for the lack of gradability of ‘knows’, and that this lack of gradability in turn would suggest a lack of polysemy. As initially plausible as this line of reasoning might seem, I don’t think it will succeed. The reason is because factivity is related to truth—that is, only verbs that require truth (as it is commonly assumed is required in the dominant sense of ‘see’ as well as for ‘know’) can be factive. And more than that, requiring the truth of the propositions related to is what constitutes factivity. It is because generally we don’t think that the truth of a proposition comes in degrees that we think factivity doesn’t come in degrees. (And in fact, if one did think the truth-value for propositions came in degrees, one would likely also think that factivity is something that comes in degrees too.) But a plausible account of the polysemy of ‘knows’ won’t depend upon the gradability of the truthfulness of the proposition known. If it depends on gradability at all, it will be the gradability in the level of justification. And justification, it is typically acknowledged, does come in degrees. Thus, if there is a salient difference between ‘knows’ and the other commonly used English verbs, factivity is likely not it.

Without such a salient difference being at the ready, given ‘knows’ status as a commonly used English verb, and the strong evidence we have that most commonly used English verbs are ambiguous, I conclude that Stanley was mistaken when he claimed that an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ lacks linguistic grounding. My hope is that

this will help open up the way for a more holistic defense of the ambiguity theory of 'knows' in the future.²⁴²

²⁴² I'm grateful to helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this work from Rod Bertolet, Lydia Catedral, Nevin Climenhaga, Paul Dimmock, Maite Ezcurdia, Amy Flowerree, Baron Reed, Jennifer Saul, Aaron Thomas-Buldoc, Michael Veber, and Nathan Weston and to the audiences at a 2015 Northwestern University epistemology brownbag, the IV Colombian Conference in Logic, Epistemology and Philosophy of Science at the Universidad de los Andes, and the 2015 North Carolina Philosophical Society where an earlier draft of this paper received the graduate student paper prize.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this dissertation has been on arguing for the plausibility of the ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ as an explanation of the linguistic data regarding knowledge ascriptions and denials. There is significantly more work to be done on this front. There are also a number of other important areas of work relating to the ambiguity theory that I take to be relevant to epistemology as well, which haven’t been addressed in this dissertation.

The first area concerns providing a more specific account of what the senses of ‘knows’ are (or perhaps better put, a further assessment of the specific accounts already put forward and the examination of what additional plausible accounts might be given). The second area deals with what the philosophical upshots of the ambiguity theory are. Some of these we don’t have to go too far to discover. For example, the ambiguity theory provides a unique sort of response to the skeptic. However, there are a number of other implications of the truth of the ambiguity theory. For example, one will need to rethink principles like “knowledge is the norm of assertion” or any kind of knowledge-action principles. The third area concerns what account of epistemology fits best with the ambiguity theory’s linguistic proposal about ‘knows’. I tend to think that the ambiguity theory goes best with an epistemic value pluralism—perhaps for obvious reasons. However, questions about these three areas are questions for another place. My hope is that the work contained in this dissertation may provide enough interest and/or respect for the ambiguity theory that perhaps the space will be created in which these additional areas of concern for the ambiguity theory can be addressed more fully.

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