

# SEMANTIC MINIMALISM AND SPEECH ACT PLURALISM APPLIED TO 'KNOWS'

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This chapter is an introduction to how the combination of two views – semantic minimalism and speech act pluralism ('SM+SAP', for short) – can be used explain some aspects of our practice of making knowledge attributions. SM+SAP wasn't developed to account for issues in epistemology in particular. It was proposed as a solution to a very general linguistic phenomenon – a phenomenon that also happens to be exhibited by sentences containing 'knows'. The chapter is structured as follows:

- I first outline the general linguistic phenomenon/puzzle: how to resolve a tension between inter-contextual stability and variability, and I show how that puzzle arises with respect to sentences containing 'knows'.
- The next section outlines speech act pluralism and the arguments for it.
- I then outline semantic minimalism and the arguments for it.
- I show how SM+SAP explains the data/puzzle we started with.
- The final section outlines how SM+SAP has been used to defend skepticism.

First, a brief overview of where these topics are first discussed and the subsequent literature. There is now an extensive literature on semantic minimalism, speech act pluralism and their combination. Most of the discussion of those views is general, i.e., is not specifically about their application to epistemically relevant terminology. In what follows I focus on the version presented in Cappelen and Lepore (2004). Extensive discussion of the proposal in that book can be found in, e.g., Preyer (2007). A version of semantic minimalism is presented by Borg (2004, 2012). Relativism, e.g., the version advocated by John MacFarlane (2014), is also a version of minimalism, but that won't be discussed here.<sup>1</sup> A version of speech act pluralism is first advocated by Salmon (1991) and Cappelen and Lepore (1997), and later taken up by Soames (2002). While semantic minimalism is often discussed in connection with efforts to understand the semantic features of 'knows', speech act pluralism is less often appealed to, but one such effort is found in Cappelen (2005).

## **The general motivation: the tension between stability and variability**

SM+SAP is a theory that was introduced in order to account for the following puzzling data pattern:

- **Variability:** On the one hand, contexts shape what we say to each other by uttering sentences. The context-sensitivity of what is said is wide-ranging along two dimensions: many words are context-sensitive and the range of potential meanings is wide. Moreover, what is said by an utterance is sensitive to features of context that are non-transparent to us: speakers and audiences have no easy cognitive access to the contextual mechanisms that shape what we say.
- **Stability:** On the other hand, what we say in uttering a sentence in a given context can easily be grasped and said again in a different context. We can tell others what someone told us, repeat a point we've made before, discuss the same question over and over again and remember what we have been told. In all these cases we say (or think) the same thing in different contexts. If someone says to me, 'There are many naked mole rats in Sweden and John knows that their behavior is very interesting', then I can easily tell this to other people. I can, for example, say to you, my reader:

There are many naked mole rats in Sweden and John knows that their behavior is very interesting.

I'm confident that what I just told you, reader, is the same as what I was told, no matter what context you are in. This is so despite the fact that 'There are many naked mole rats in Sweden and John knows that their behavior is very interesting' is a paradigm of one of those sentences that variability applies to.

One of the central challenges for those trying to understand the nature of linguistic communication is to figure out how this tension is resolved. If what we say is fixed in all kinds of ways by our speech contexts, how can what we say be so easily transferred across contexts?

Below I say more about both stability and variability, but for ease of exposition, I will here sketch the solution provided by SM+SAP:

**Preview of how SM+SAP resolves the tension between stability and variability:** According to speech act pluralism, many propositions are said by any one utterance. According to semantic minimalism there is one stable semantic content among the many propositions expressed: this minimal content is what is said in all contexts of utterance. The solution assumes a sharp distinction between semantic content, on the one hand, and what is said, on the other. With that distinction in hand, there is not even the appearance of a tension left: we can have variability in the plurality of propositions expressed/said (i.e. some of the propositions said can change between contexts) at the same time as we have stability (one content, the semantic content, is stable across contexts).

I now first say a bit more about the variability data and the stability data and then show how knowledge attributions instantiate the tension between stability and variability.

### The variability data<sup>2</sup>

Start by considering some facts about sentences containing indexicals and demonstratives, i.e. expressions such as 'I', 'you', 'now', 'that', and 'here'. Sentences containing such words can exhibit three kinds of variability between contexts:

- (i) Variability in reference: what is referred to by, e.g., 'you' varies between contexts of utterance.
- (ii) Variability in what is said: as a result, what is said by such utterances varies. An utterance of 'I am happy' by John says something about John, but when Nora utters it she says something about

Nora. This is, in part, because of the change in reference. It is because John's utterance of 'I' refers to John and Nora's utterance of 'I' refers to Nora that they end up saying different things.

(iii) Variability in truth value: John's utterance of 'I am happy' can be false while Nora's utterance of the same sentence is false.

This kind of variability isn't restricted to obvious cases such as indexicals and demonstratives. The same data pattern can be found throughout language. For one illustration consider so-called gradable adjectives. In many settings, it would be true to say 'Josh is fast' because he runs marathons in under three and a half hours. However, when salient comparison is the speed of rockets, particles in accelerators, Olympic runners or leopards, it wouldn't be true to say 'Josh is fast' because, compared to any of those, he's not fast. It looks like, roughly, an occurrence of 'fast' is understood, in context, as 'fast for a . . .', where the dots are filled in by something like a comparison class (i.e., a class of objects we compare Josh to). Compared to the class of leopards Josh is not fast, but compared to the class of professional philosophers he's very fast. This comparison class is fixed in context.<sup>3</sup> What we find is variability along the three dimensions mentioned above: (i) variability in extension (the set of things that's in the extension of 'fast' varies between context utterance); (ii) a resulting variability in what is said (in one context the sentence is used to say that Josh is fast for a middle-aged philosophy professor and in another that he is fast compared to a leopard); and finally (iii) a variability in truth value (it's true that Josh is fast compared to middle-aged philosophy professors and false that he's fast compared to a leopard).

According to many epistemologists, 'knows' is one of the expressions that exhibits this pattern of variability. Here is a classic illustration from a paper by S. Cohen:

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 to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, 'How reliable is that itinerary? It could 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. They decide to check with the airline agent. . . . [N]either standard is simply correct or simply incorrect. Rather, context determines which standard is correct. Since the standards for knowledge ascriptions can vary across context, 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.

(1999: 58–9, emphasis in original)

The pattern is the same as in the previous cases. There is variability in the extension of 'knows' between contexts: the set of person/proposition pairs such that the person knows that proposition varies between contexts of utterance. As a result, what is said by an utterance of 'A knows that p' differs between contexts of utterance. Finally, truth values can vary: In one context of speech, it is true to say Smith knows (at t) that the flight stops in Chicago, while in another (John and Mary's context), that very same sentence is not true. There's disagreement about just what the source of the variability is. According to Cohen, the source is that what he calls 'standards of knowledge' vary between contexts – standards can go up and down, and evidence that suffices for knowing in one context will not suffice

in another. For more on the various kinds of variability involved in contextualist views, see, e.g., Cohen (1986, 1987), DeRose (1992, 1995), Lewis (1996), and Schaffer (2004, 2005).

### **The stability data**

The previous section presented some evidence that what is said by sentences, and hence their truth values, can vary between contexts of utterance. The same sentence can be true when uttered in one context, and false when uttered in another. The goal of this section is to introduce a seemingly essential feature of language that, at least at first glance, appears to be in tension with the data in the previous section. It seems essential to language that we have inter-contextual stability in what we say. It is hard to see how language can perform the functions it in fact performs unless there is a fundamental form of inter-contextual stability in what is said by utterances of sentences (i.e. unless what is said does not vary between contexts). This section provides a brief introduction to the stability data. The goal of the next section is to show how SM+SAP can reconcile stability with variability.

There are two kinds of data that appear to show that what our sentences say does not vary between contexts:

- (i) Gathering, transmitting and using information requires contextual stability.
- (ii) The way we say what other people have said requires stability across contexts.

Stability 1: information storage. Imagine a case where someone utters a sentence and thereby tells you something. Suppose this is done by uttering the sentence, 'Samantha, who is very smart, loves her friend Alex'. Call the context of this utterance the Original Context. Suppose what you've been told is somewhat important to you so you want to remember it. You want to store that information and be able to recall it later. This information can play a role in your reasoning about what to do later. For example, because she's very smart, you might ask Samantha for help with a project you're working on. Since you are a social creature, you might also want to tell others what you have been told. The central point in the argument is that widespread context-sensitivity makes these roles for what is said difficult, if not impossible to fulfill. Here is why: suppose what is said by uttering a sentence in a context is massively influenced by the specific features of that context. There are many contexts and so a large number of different things the sentence could say. It now seems challenging both to figure out how to store that information in memory and to figure out how to rearticulate it in new contexts. Suppose what you do is store the sentence in memory. Then remembering what it said would require keeping track of all the relevant contextual features that determined its content. We don't do that (even experts don't know what the relevant features are and it would be a massive cognitive burden to keep it all in mind.) Alternatively, we could try to remember a context insensitive sentence that contains the same information. However, we don't know how to do that, and there might be no way to do that (or so the proponents of SM+SAP argue, see Carston 2002).

Stability 2: saying what others said. In slogan form, the easiness of homophonic speech reports is direct evidence of inter-contextual content stability. Here is what that means: imagine Jill uttering the sentence, 'In St Andrews, you can see the impressive ruins of a huge cathedral which took about 150 years to complete and was consecrated on July 5, 1318' while standing on Market Street at 1pm on July 1, 2015. Call that the Original Context. If you, the reader of this entry, ask yourself how you would report what Jill said, one answer you might come up with is the following:

The Report: Jill said that in St Andrews you can see the impressive ruins of a huge cathedral which took about 150 years to complete and was consecrated on July 5, 1318.

You can use The Report to say what Jill said, no matter what context you are in. Even when you vary all aspects of the conversational setting (time, place, audience, topic, etc.) you can use The Report to say what Jill said. This is important because in The Report the words after 'Jill said that' are exactly the same words as Jill used in the Original Context. What this shows is that we can use the same words as she used to say the same thing that she said even as all the relevant aspects of the context vary. That makes it look as if those words say the same in every context (because in every context they can be used to say what she said). This is evidence that those words don't vary in meaning between contexts. If they did, they couldn't be used to say the same in each context – there would be contextual variability in what is said. In sum, what Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009) call 'the easiness of homophonic speech reports' can be used as evidence against claims of context-sensitivity. (For an introduction to this line of argument, see Cappelen and Dever 2016, Cappelen and Lepore 2005, Hawthorne 2006, and Williamson 2005).

Stability 1 and 2 applied to 'knows'. 'Knows' exhibits both kinds of stability. When we hear knowledge attributions, we need to store them in memory and to rearticulate them in new contexts. So inter-contextual storing and inter-contextual re-articulation is crucial. This seems assume an important level of content stability. This is exhibited in the ease of homophonic inter-contextual speech reports: If I hear Nora say, 'Naomi knows flight KL407 stops in Chicago', I can use that very sentence as the complement of an indirect report and say something true about what was said by uttering, 'Nora said that Naomi knows that flight KL407 stops in Chicago'. I can do that in any (or at least a very broad range of) context(s). But if 'Naomi knows flight KL407 stops in Chicago' is context-sensitive, how then can it be used to say the same thing in every context, or at least a very broad range of contexts?

Strengthening of stability 2: indexicals and demonstratives don't exhibit that kind of stability. The case against widespread context-sensitivity can be strengthened as follows: for indexicals and demonstratives, homophonic saying-reports of the kind considered above are often not possible. Suppose Jill utters, 'I am happy', or 'I am here now', or 'I had fish for dinner yesterday'. Suppose you are tasked with saying what Jill said. How would you do it? Note that you cannot do it the simple way by just using her words to say what she said. If you tried any of the following homophonic reports, you would end up misreporting her:

- Jill said that I am happy.
- Jill said that I am here now.
- Jill said that I had fish for dinner yesterday.

Jill didn't talk about you, your time or your place. To report correctly, you have to make adjustments. You would have to take away the original indexical expressions ('I', 'here', 'now', 'yesterday') and replace them with ones that in your context denote what her words denoted in her context. You could try 'Jill said that Jill was happy' or 'Jill said that Jill was happy there and then' or 'Jill said that Jill had fish for dinner on Thursday' (assuming the original speech took place on Friday). The argument continues, and this is exactly as expected if a word is context-sensitive. Context-sensitivity implies that you have to adjust and coordinate meanings between contexts. Genuinely context-sensitive expressions (such as 'I', 'here', 'now' and 'yesterday') typically block homophonic disquotational reports. So, this argument concludes, expressions that make such reports easy, such as 'knows', are not genuinely context-sensitive. (For more on this argument, see Cappelen and Lepore 2004).

### **How SM+SAP resolves the tension between stability and variability**

So far we have seen an apparent tension (or at least an explanatory challenge) posed by stability and variability. Here is one way to structure responses to this tension:

- (a) Deny variability (e.g., by questioning the judgments about contextual variability).
- (b) Deny stability (e.g., by saying we typically recall and transmit similar information, not the same information).
- (c) Preserve both stability and variability.

SM+SAP is a version of (c), and in what follows I don't outline the various version of (a) and (b). The goal of this entry is an exposition of SM+SAP, not of the whole field of possible solutions. For an overview of all solutions, see Cappelen and Dever (2016: ch. 3).

The basic idea behind SM+SAP is to deny a tacit but fundamental assumption that generates the appearance of a puzzle. The puzzle, as I articulated it, assumes that there is just one thing which is said by the utterance of a sentence. If we make that assumption, then it looks mysterious how we can have both variability and stability in what was said. Take a sentence like 'There are many naked mole rats in Sweden and their behavior is very interesting'. According to variability, that sentence can be used to say many different things in different contexts. According to stability, what it says is stable across contexts. Now, suppose instead that each time one utters the sentence, it says many different things. If so, then one of those can be stable across contexts while others may vary.

Let's call the view that an utterance of a sentence says only one thing (that there is only one what is said per utterance per context, so to speak) what-is-said-monism (monism for short). One salient option when faced with the problem outlined at the beginning of this chapter is to give up monism. The alternative is what I call speech act pluralism (pluralism for short). Pluralism is the view that in each context many things are said by an utterance of a sentence. If pluralism is true, we can easily reconcile the stability and variability data: one what is said is stable and then there is variability in the rest of what is said.

Structurally, the solution is clear enough, but it raises at least two tricky questions:

- (i) Do we have any positive reason to think pluralism is true or is it simply an ad hoc move to solve the puzzle?
- (ii) What is the stable element in all these cases?

First some brief remarks in reply to the first question. In the next section I turn to the second question.

### ***Speech act pluralism***

The primary evidence for pluralism is independent of the tension outlined above. Consider the following case: Jones is under suspicion of the murder of Smith, and is being interrogated by the police. Eventually Jones says, 'I'm the one who killed Smith'. The police can tell the press either of the following:

- 'Jones said that he is the murderer'.
- 'Jones said that he is guilty'.
- 'Jones said that he committed the heinous crime'.

These are all correct reports of what Jones said. Moreover, if you know that Smith is a Swede, and if that is important and relevant in your context, you can report Jones as having said that he killed a Swede. In short, the situation is this: Jones uttered the sentence, 'I'm the one who killed Smith', and we have a range of true speech reports. It follows that Smith said many things (he

said that he is the murderer, that he is guilty, that he committed the heinous crime, that he killed the Swede, etc.).

There is nothing special about this particular case. In general, when someone utters a sentence there are many different true ways to say what he or she said. And so the point applies very generally: by uttering one sentence, a speaker says a plurality of things, not just one thing. (for more on speech act pluralism see Cappelen and Lepore 1997, 2004, 2005; Salmon 1991; and Soames 2002).

### ***The minimal what is said***

I turn now to the second challenge for minimalistic pluralism: what is the stable component of what is said? When minimalists say that one thing said is 'minimal', they mean to indicate that context plays a minimal role in shaping it. This is as expected if we want a what-is-said that is shared across contexts (if it was influenced by context, it would vary between contexts and so not have cross-contextual stability).

Consider utterances of 'Naomi is smart' in different contexts. What is said by such utterances will depend on the contextually supplied comparison class. In some contexts, it can be used to say she is smart for a kid in kindergarten. In others, it can be used to say that she is smart compared to rocket scientists. This is just a way of repeating the variability data with respect to 'smart'. Speech act pluralism allows the proponent of SM+SAP to grant this. We are now looking for what these utterances have in common and why it is we can, for example, share that content across contexts in homophonic speech reports. There are many minimalistic answers to this question (for an overview, see Cappelen and Dever 2016, ch. 3). In what follows, I focus on the proposal in Cappelen and Lepore (2004). According to minimalists such as Cappelen and Lepore, the minimal what-is-said is this: that Naomi is smart. That is what is invariant between contexts. If we apply this line of thought to sentences containing 'knows', then the answer to the question would be analogous: the minimal content of 'a knows that p' is that a knows that p. There is nothing more to say. The obvious concern here is that this isn't very helpful. It is uninformative. Suppose you wonder: What exactly do these minimal what-is-said's tell us about the world? What is it to be known in the context-insensitive sense? A reply of the form "'a knows that p' is true just in case a knows that p" is unlikely to remove your puzzlement.

Cappelen and Lepore (2004, 2005) try to rebut this objection. Their central response goes as follows: if pressed on, for example, the question what it is to be know, simpliciter, the minimalist should explain why it is not her job to answer that question. In general, it is not the job of the theorist of meaning to tell us anything substantive about the conditions under which what we say is true. Consider Jill's utterance of 'Water is liquid'. Suppose a meaning theorist concludes that in uttering that sentence Jill says that water is liquid. Now consider the objection: that is insufficient as an account of what was expressed. To tell us what Jill said, you also have to tell us what it is to be liquid and what it is to be water. Surely, Cappelen and Lepore say, this is an unfair demand. It is unfair to demand from the meaning theorist that she provide answers to questions about what liquids are. That's a question for the physicist and the chemist. If we demanded such answers, then the meaning theorist would need a theory of the entire universe to present her theory of meaning and communication. That is clearly an unreasonable expectation. The same point applies to sentences containing 'knows': it's not that it's no more within the remit of a theory meaning to tell us what knowledge is than it is to tell us what it is to be a liquid.

That completes the brief overview of (a) the motivation for SM+SAP, (b) the motivation for speech act pluralism, (c) Cappelen and Lepore's version of semantic minimalism and (d) the relevance of these issues for efforts to understand how the English verb 'knows' functions.

## SM+SAP in defense of skepticism

In the final part of this chapter I briefly outline how Cappelen (2005) uses SM+SAP to defend a version of skepticism. One way to think of this proposal: it takes SM+SAP and adds an assumption about the nature of knowledge. Recall that Cappelen and Lepore say that the semanticist has no more of an obligation to specify the nature of knowledge than an obligation to specify the nature of water or liquid. That said, it could still be that the semantics make it easier to defend a specific account of knowledge. In this case, the claim is that SM+SAP makes it easier to defend a version of skepticism.

Skepticism is the view that it's extremely hard to know something. Most or perhaps all of our positive knowledge ascriptions are false. Cappelen (2005) construes this as the claim that the propositions semantically expressed by all or almost all utterances of sentences of the form 'A knows that p' are false. The arguments for this are old and familiar; they typically involve evil demons, brains in vats, etc. The focus in what follows will not be on these familiar arguments. It will focus instead on how SM+SAP helps defend skeptics against a familiar objection and provide some additional support for the view.

SM+SAP as a reply to an influential objection to skepticism. Here is an influential objection to skepticism: skepticism is inconsistent with fundamental aspects of our linguistic behavior and our pre-theoretic judgments (what some people call 'intuitions'). Pre-theoretically, the skeptic seems to have a hard time explaining the context-sensitivity of what speakers say when they utter sentences of the form 'a knows that p'. According to DeRose:

In some contexts, 'S knows that P' requires that S have a true belief that P and also be in a very strong epistemic position with respect to P, while in other contexts, the same sentence may require for its truth, in addition to S's having a true belief that P, only that S meet some lower epistemic standards.

(2002: 182)

What makes for this difference? In the examples favored by the contextualist it is various practical factors (such as what is practically at stake) that vary between contexts of utterance. In other words, this sensitivity to contextual standards is not just brought out when thinking about skeptical possibilities – it is not just when speakers are in philosophical contexts that their standards shift. As DeRose points out:

To make the relevant intuitions as strong as possible, the contextualist will choose a "high standards" case that is not as ethereal as a typical philosophical discussion of radical skepticism . . . it makes the relevant intuitions more stable if the introduction of the more moderate skeptical hypothesis and the resulting raise in epistemic standards are tied to a very practical concern, and thus seem reasonable given the situation.

(2002: 191)

The problem for the skeptic is supposed to be this: if the semantic content of 'knows' invokes a super-high standard, and this content is invariant between contexts of utterance, the semantics will provide no explanation of the variability pointed about by DeRose and, it is assumed, these are the kinds of pre-theoretic judgments that a semantic theory for English should account for.

The Reply. According to Cappelen (2005), SM+SAP can explain this kind of data in a skeptic-friendly way. The assumption has been that the skeptic has to say that these pre-theoretic

judgments are, somehow, mistaken, i.e. has to defend some kind of large-scale error theory about speakers' pre-theoretic judgments. A skeptic who endorses SM+SAP, can say the following:

- (a) The semantic content of 'a knows that p' is hardly ever true, because the semantic value of 'knows' has few if any person/proposition pairs in its extension. This is revealed by familiar skeptical arguments. They show that knowledge is very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.
- (b) We assert many different propositions when we utter sentences of the form 'a knows that p'. We do not just assert the proposition semantically expressed.<sup>4</sup>
- (c) Some of the propositions asserted (said, claimed, etc.) by an utterance of a positive knowledge attribution can be true even though the proposition semantically expressed is false.
- (d) The totality of asserted propositions can vary from one context of utterance to another.

This is a brief sketch of how a skeptic who endorses SM+SAP can try to account for (at least some of) the variability appealed to by contextualists. For more details of this strategy, see Cappelen (2005) – where it is explained how this can be made compatible with e.g., the knowledge norm of assertion.

It is important to note that this argumentative strategy is available to any invariantist about 'knows' (i.e., to anyone who thinks 'knows' has a stable semantic content – no matter what she takes that content to be). It provides a receipt for how a stable semantic content for 'knows' can be made compatible with variability in what was said by utterances of 'a knows that p'. Why apply the strategy specifically as a defense of skepticism construed as the view that the semantic content of 'knows' is such that knowledge is very hard if not impossible to obtain? The reason that moves Cappelen (2005) is the ease with which skeptical considerations can get a grip in any context. Semantic content on this view is always among the expressed propositions. The ease with which skeptical arguments get a grip in any context is makes it a good candidate being the semantic content, or so argues Cappelen (2005).

## Notes

1 See chs. 20–23 of this volume.

2 The material that follows is a summary of material that can be found in the first three chapters of Cappelen and Dever (2016) and that again is a summary of material that can be found in Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009).

3 Alternatively, think of it like this: there's a scale of speed and the cutoff for what counts as fast varies between contexts.

4 Here is one way to think about the connection between the semantic content, the proposition expressed and what is said on this kind of view: the semantic content is a proposition that is expressed by all utterances of 'Ka', and it is also always said by an utterance of 'Ka'. It is the stable part of the plurality of what is said. Utterances of 'Ka' will also express many other propositions, and all of these (or at least some of them) are also said. For more on how to think about the connection between semantic content, sayings and speech act pluralism, see Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

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