

**Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension,
and the Epistemology of Testimony**

Endre Begby, Simon Fraser University

endre.begby@gmail.com

Abstract: Most testimonial exchange occurs by way of linguistic communication. This suggests that the epistemology of language comprehension is importantly implicated in the epistemology of testimony. But how? This paper takes its departure from a recent argument developed by Sanford Goldberg. According to Goldberg, reflection on the connections between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony provides a novel argument for linguistic normativity: without positing public linguistic norms we would be at a loss to account for widely assumed epistemic entitlements to immediate language comprehension and to testimonial belief acquisition. After examining Goldberg's arguments in detail, I conclude that public linguistic norms cannot shoulder the explanatory burden that is placed on them. Nonetheless, it is plausible that speakers' *normative attitudes* toward language do play a role in the epistemology of testimony. But as I argue, we do not need to postulate lexical norms to account for the provenance of these attitudes. Rather, we hold each other responsible for departing from generally accepted usage simply *because* this jeopardizes our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition, not out of regard for linguistic norms. In this sense, the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony turn out to be deeply intertwined from the start. Linguistic normativity, such as it is, yields no explanatory force in its own right, but emerges naturally out of a collective effort to maintain language as a reliable medium for the dissemination of knowledge.

Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension, and the Epistemology of Testimony

1. Debates about the normativity of language remain a familiar feature of the philosophical landscape.¹ Although these debates continue to produce new and insightful work,² it is hard to shake the sense that both sides are by now so entrenched that real progress is difficult. Integral to this stalemate, I believe, is a loss of sense of why the question is important. The normativity of language appears to have become *explanatorily isolated*: debates are conducted without a shared sense as to what affirming or denying the normativity of language really commits one to in the larger philosophical scheme of things.

Recent work by Sanford Goldberg, however, promises to move us beyond this stalemate, and does so precisely by reconnecting the normativity of language with exciting ongoing debates elsewhere. More specifically, if Goldberg is right, then the normativity of language turns out to have important explanatory connections with current debates in epistemology: denying the normativity of language will have the crippling consequence of undermining widely assumed epistemic entitlements pertaining to language comprehension and to testimonial belief acquisition.

This paper agrees with Goldberg that there are deep and important interconnections between the epistemology of language comprehension and the epistemology of testimony, connections which have yet to be fully explored in the literature. But after examining Goldberg's arguments in detail, it concludes that lexical norms cannot shoulder the explanatory burden that is placed on them. Nonetheless, it is plausible that speakers' *normative attitudes* toward language do

¹ Key works include Burge 1979, Kripke 1982, and Boghossian 1989.

² Cf., Wikforss 2001, Glüer and Wikforss 2009, Ebbs 2001, Hattiangadi 2006; 2007, Kusch 2006.

play a role in the epistemology of testimony. But we do not need to postulate lexical norms to account for the provenance of these attitudes. Rather, we reliably speak in similar ways, and hold each other to presumptive (though often controversial) norms of speaking, simply *because* this optimizes our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition. We hold others responsible for departing from generally accepted usage simply *because* this jeopardizes that entitlement, not because it violates linguistic norms. In this sense, the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony turn out to be deeply intertwined from the start. Linguistic normativity, such as it is, contributes no explanatory power in its own right; rather, it emerges simply and naturally from our need for language to serve the ends of testimony.

Here is fuller outline of what follows. In section 2, I detail the general argument by which Goldberg claims to show that we cannot account for the reliability of testimony without invoking lexical norms. I point out that even when taken at face value, it remains unclear from Goldberg's argument exactly what the explanatory contribution of these norms is. This question becomes pressing when, in section 3, we turn to consider views, such as those of Donald Davidson, according to which linguistic uniformity in a group of speakers may simply be the contingent product of "mechanisms of social approbation" that have no real normative import. According to Goldberg, such contingency would undercut the reliability of linguistic communication and hence our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition. This line of thought is criticized in section 4: I point out that the mere existence of lexical norms is consistent with any degree of non-compliance among speakers. So for Goldberg's arguments to be relevant to the reliability of linguistic communication, they must postulate not merely the existence of norms, but norms which speakers have internalized in the right sort of way. I argue, however, that this internalization could only occur by way of similar sorts of social-approration mechanisms as those appealed to by Davidson,

and so would be hostage to the same kind of contingency. In section 5, I consider one line of response to this argument: alluding to Grice, Goldberg acknowledges that lexical norms determine literal sentence meaning, but not speaker meaning. This concession, Goldberg argues, serves to remind us of the limited scope of our epistemic entitlements, but otherwise leaves them intact. I argue to the contrary that the concession undermines Goldberg's whole project, since testimonial belief acquisition must track speaker meaning, not literal sentence meaning. Hence, if lexical norms do not determine speaker meaning, they shed no explanatory light on the epistemology of testimony. Finally, in section 6, I outline my own model of the interconnections between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony.

2. Goldberg's argument constitutes a significant development of ideas from Tyler Burge's anti-individualism. Burge (1979) argued the correct interpretation of a word, as uttered by a particular speaker at a particular time, can be determined not by what the speaker believes the word means, or by what he intends to communicate with it, but by what the word *in fact* means in the language. Famously, Burge argued that even though a person is demonstrably incompetent with a word such as "arthritis," we can be right to take his word – even as embedded in a sentence like "I have arthritis in my thigh" – to mean what "arthritis" means in English, and so to express the concept *arthritis*.

In that article, Burge draws only a relatively loose connection between such linguistic norms and the epistemology of testimony. Thus he speaks of a language learner as taking on "a certain responsibility to communal conventions governing, and conceptions associated with,

symbols that he is disposed to use” (Burge 1979: 148). One grounds for this responsibility is the fact that

Symbolic expressions are the overwhelmingly dominant source of detailed information about what people think, intend, and so forth. Such detail is essential not only to much explanation and prediction, but also to fulfilling many of our cooperative enterprises and to relying on one another for second-hand information. (Burge 1979: 149)

Goldberg’s account builds on this remark, adding significantly more detail to the picture. Goldberg assumes from the start that we do possess an entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition (i.e., to “rely on one another for second hand information”). I am inclined to grant this assumption.³ What Goldberg’s account aims to do, then, is to explore *the conditions of possibility* for this entitlement. Among these conditions of possibility, as suggested if not argued by Burge, will be the fact that our language is governed by norms, and that individual language users are rightly held responsible to these norms.

Goldberg reasons as follows: for testimony to constitute a path of knowledge, it must satisfy a criterion of reliability.⁴ There are at least two aspects to this criterion. First, our informants would themselves have to be epistemically reliable. Second, the process by which information is transmitted from informant to recipient will likewise have to be reliable. This process is, in

³ This is by no means a trivial concession: see Fricker 1994 for complications.

⁴ Reliability, according to Goldberg (2007: 13), is to be understood as a necessary condition on knowledge, not a sufficient condition.

overwhelming part, linguistic in nature, and will provide our starting point here. We will, however, have occasion later to return to the first aspect of the reliability criterion.

Accordingly, we should begin by looking more closely at the epistemology of language comprehension. As Goldberg puts it (2007: 209), if linguistic interaction is to provide a reliable avenue for testimonial belief acquisition, it would have to be the case that we are possessed of a “reliable method for recovering the proposition attested to” from the testifier’s utterance. Reliability is of the essence:

What is required here is not just the recovery of the proposition attested to, but the *reliable* recovery of that proposition: a correct guess as to what another said in her testimony would be incompatible with acquiring knowledge through the testimony. (Goldberg 2007: 29)

A guiding idea here, drawn from later work by Burge (Burge 1993), is that in order for it to play its role in the epistemology of testimony, language comprehension must be *content preserving*. We can think of testimonial exchange as occurring in something like the following way: in addressing an audience in the assertoric mode, a speaker stamps her epistemic authority on a particular proposition. Let this proposition be the content of the assertion. Plainly, if the hearer could not reliably retrieve *the particular proposition attested to* from the testifier’s utterance, then the usefulness of language for the purpose of disseminating knowledge would be severely limited, and testimony could not be reliable in the way that we assume it to be. These observations raise two questions right away: (1) How do we go about retrieving the propositional content of assertoric utterances?; (2) what guarantees the reliability of this method?

The method of recovery that Goldberg proposes is simple and familiar: essentially, we recover the asserted proposition by disquoting and correcting for obviously context-sensitive expressions. Accordingly, I proceed on the assumption that the sentence *S* means on your lips what it would mean on mine, modulo indexicals and demonstratives. It counts in favor of this disquotational account that it is “linguistically undemanding” (Goldberg 2007: 54) and is thereby well suited to the exigencies of real-time communication. For any arbitrary utterance of English, any minimally competent speaker can, with little or no conscious cognitive involvement, simply apply the disquotational method to recover the proposition attested to.⁵

This answers the first question above. Let us call the product of implementing this disquotational method, our *immediate comprehension* of the utterance. It is “immediate” in the sense that it does not rely on further reflection, evidence, or inference. We can now turn to the second question: what makes disquotation a *reliable* method of recovering the proposition attested to? What entitles us to rely on our immediate comprehension in this way, and so, to presume that what is apparently understood is in fact understood?

To see the force of this question, it is important to be aware of just how widely this presumptive entitlement ranges. We presume an entitlement to immediate comprehension with respect to the linguistic productions of any mature and not manifestly irrational speaker of our language, not just of people we happen to know well, and with whom we have a long history of (evidently successful) linguistic interaction. A crucial part of the explanandum, then, is that this entitlement holds also in cases of what Goldberg calls *Radical Communication*, such as when we

⁵ Here, Goldberg’s program dovetails nicely with the program of semantic minimalism, as developed, for instance, in Cappelen and Lepore 2005 and Borg 2004. Bezuidenhout 1998 raises the question of whether such a model of language comprehension can really cover much of the reliable information transactions that take place in everyday linguistic exchange. I have a lot of sympathy for this line of thinking, but will not pursue the angle here. See Rysiew 2007 for an illuminating discussion.

ask a stranger on the street for directions. In Radical Communication, the only datum we have access to is that the utterance matches the phonological profile of a possible well-formed sentence of English.⁶ But in such cases, no less than in communication between intimates, linguistic exchange “proceeds smoothly and efficiently even though the hearer and speaker know nothing of each others’ speech and interpretive dispositions beyond what is manifest in their brief speech exchange itself” (Goldberg 2007: 56). The stranger says: “Take a left on Elm Street, and after two blocks, there will be a red house on the right hand side of the street.” Simply by mentally removing the quotation marks, I gain reliable access the content of his utterance. I can then store this proposition and use it to guide my actions much as though I were guided by my own previously acquired knowledge of the layout of the city.

Having noted the scope of the entitlement in question, we are now in a position to ask, what has to be the case about language for disquotation to be a reliable method of recovering the proposition attested to? What, in short, could explain our remarkable ability to immediately and unreflectively extract a unique propositional content from any arbitrary utterance in our language?

This finally brings us to linguistic normativity. For as Goldberg argues, a condition of possibility for our entitlement to rely on immediate comprehension is that natural language be *governed by norms*: “the only plausible account – indeed, the only *remotely* plausible account –” of our entitlement to comprehension and thus, further down the line, to testimonial belief acquisition, “is one that postulates public linguistic norms” (Goldberg 2007: 57). Without relying

⁶ This point invokes what Jennifer Lackey (2008: 178-185) calls the Scarcity of Information Objection to reductionism about the epistemology of testimony. I will allow Goldberg’s description to stand for the sake of argument. But it is clearly controversial. The use of language typically occurs in a rich cultural context that provides a lot more information than is encoded in the linguistic utterance itself. Much of this information is clearly relevant to the justification of testimonial uptake. On this issue, see, e.g., Kenyon 2013; Adler 1996:107-108; and, from a somewhat different perspective, Clark 1996: ch. 4. (Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.)

on norms, we would simply lack any warrant for transitioning from “apparently understood” to “understood” in situations of Radical Communication. In Radical Communication cases,

the hearer has the relevant sort of understanding if and only if there are public linguistic norms – norms which (together with other features of the context of utterance) serve to determine the content asserted by the speaker, and by reliance on which the hearer recovers that content. (Goldberg 2007: 56)

Without such norms, Radical Communication cannot but appear “miraculous”; by postulating such norms, we can recognize it as the routine incident that it really is. (Goldberg 2007: 57).

We have, then, a chain of distinctively transcendental arguments taking us from reflection on the epistemology of testimony to the existence of public linguistic norms via reflection on the epistemology of language comprehension. Our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition requires reliable comprehension; comprehension, in turn, could not be reliable unless language were governed by public linguistic norms. Thus, in matters of knowledge dissemination by language, public linguistic norms are first in the order of explanation.

3. How are we to evaluate this sort of transcendental argument? In particular, what sense can we make of the idea that public linguistic norms *explain* our entitlements to language comprehension and testimonial belief acquisition? To see the force of the question, it will be

helpful to contrast Goldberg's position with the sort of view that we find, for instance, in Donald Davidson.⁷ Davidson is sometimes read as issuing a blanket denial of the normativity of language altogether. But arguably, there is nothing in his views on language and communication which would require him to adopt quite so strong a stance. In particular, his views do not require him to deny the existence of linguistic norms *per se*, and should certainly not commit him to denying that speakers often assume normative attitudes towards each others' linguistic performance (I will return to this point in my final section). Rather, Davidson is best understood as denying that such norms could have any explanatory relevance with respect to language production and comprehension. And as should be clear from the previous section, such explanatory relevance is precisely what Goldberg asserts. So far, then, the question at stake is not whether norms *exist*, but whether norms *explain*.

Where does this leave us? Davidson writes: "Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption" (Davidson 1973: 125).⁸ What Davidson sometimes calls "homophonic interpretation" is materially equivalent to the procedure that Goldberg calls disquotation. Moreover, the concession that we *can* go on this assumption, rather than just *do* go on it, presumably speaks to the question of epistemic entitlement. So Davidson evidently agrees with Goldberg that we possess an entitlement to rely on immediate comprehension. But as he points out, this observation does not itself indicate the grounds of this entitlement. So what could provide this ground, if not public linguistic norms?

⁷ See, for instance, Davidson 1984, 1986, 1994, but also Bilgrami 1992; 1993.

⁸ Contra Burge 1999, who reads Davidson as maintaining that all language comprehension proceeds by explicit inference from behavioral data.

While Davidson is never too explicit about this, it is plausible to assume that he would hold that our entitlement to immediate comprehension is grounded simply in the empirical fact of a high degree of linguistic uniformity among speakers of a language. I use the word “w” to mean *w*. Others I have interacted with seem to use the word in the same way. So I possess a sort of inductive justification for assuming that any arbitrary speaker whose utterances consist of what I recognize as words of English will use those words with the same meanings as I do.⁹ Norms really play no role here: rather, as Davidson puts it in response to Burge, “it is always an empirical question, though one we normally do not raise, whether what we take for granted others mean is what they do in fact mean” (Davidson 1999: 252).

Could this view stand on its own as a grounding account of the reliability of language comprehension? Presumably, Goldberg will agree that the reliability of language comprehension does require a substantial degree of linguistic uniformity. So evidently, our language must be marked by the relevant degree of uniformity, otherwise we would not possess the entitlement in question. What more could a philosophical account of the grounds for this entitlement require?

According to Goldberg (2007: 64), however, this whole way of thinking is a “non-starter.” It may be true that we could not have the entitlement to immediate comprehension were it not for a high degree of linguistic uniformity. But philosophical analysis cannot stop there. For we also need to explain how this level of uniformity could “come to pass” (Goldberg 2007: 64, 78). And according to Goldberg, such uniformity could only “come to pass” because our verbal behavior is governed by a shared set of norms.

⁹ See, for instance, Davidson 1984: 278.

In other words, the reliable comprehension requirement cannot be satisfied simply by the empirically verifiable existence of “*de facto* uniformity in usage, and hence in ideolectical semantics, across speakers” (Goldberg 2007: 63). Appealing to regularities in the way that Davidson does will only succeed in postponing the problem, since these regularities themselves will stand in need of explanation in due course, and the only explanation can come from public linguistic norms.

To illustrate the problem, Goldberg considers one possible, non-normative account of how such uniformity might come to pass. On this account, there exist “mechanisms of social approbation,”¹⁰ by which “uniformity in usage is encouraged, and idiosyncrasy discouraged” (Goldberg 2007: 64). Goldberg presumably does not mean to deny that there are such mechanisms, any more than Davidson needs to deny that speakers hold normative attitudes toward language. Rather, what Goldberg denies is that such social approbation mechanisms are sufficient (or even relevant) to explain the degree of linguistic uniformity which is required for the entitlement to immediate comprehension to obtain.

The reason why the social approbation account is insufficient is that it still leaves it

simply a contingent feature of one’s linguistic environment whether or not the idiolect of a ‘co-lingual’ interlocutor overlaps in relevant respects with one’s own – something that depends on whether one’s interlocutor has had the relevant portions of her idiolect shaped by the forces of social approbation. (Goldberg 2007: 64).

¹⁰ Goldberg here refers specifically to Bilgrami 1992. But see also Davidson 1984: 278-279 on “social conditioning.”

Such contingency is precisely incompatible with the requirement that the mechanism of language comprehension which underwrites testimony be *reliable*.

So, while it is true that empirical uniformity in language use is required for immediate comprehension, merely *de facto* uniformity is not sufficient. For reliability to obtain, the uniformities must be grounded in norms. Thus, Goldberg argues, even the averred non-normativist will, sooner or later, have to accede to the postulation of public linguistic norms. Only such norms could explain why communicative success is both linguistically undemanding and reliable.

4. All the major elements are in, and we are finally in a position to assess this line of argument as a whole. Recall that we have allowed, for the sake of argument, that such norms might *exist*. Inspired by Davidson, we have instead raised the question of what such norms might explain. In other words, we need to ask, what follows from the existence of such norms with respect to our actual verbal behavior? Note that Goldberg does not really tell us what their explanatory contribution is, so much as point out an evident explanatory deficit that would be accrued by any account that failed to postulate them.

But is that so? Consider the following widely accepted and evidently domain-general view about norms: the existence of a set of norms holding in some domain *D* of human behavior does not entail that our behavior in *D* actually comports with the norms. (Think of this as the converse of the “no ought from is” principle.) Applying this view to the domain of linguistic behavior, we

would obtain the following result: the existence of a set of public linguistic norms governing some language *L* is evidently compatible with any degree of non-compliance among speakers of *L*. So far, then, the postulation of public linguistic norms does little to help Goldberg's case. For it is presumably how people *actually* use language, not how they *ought to* use it, which determines how reliable their linguistic practice is for the purposes of disseminating knowledge. The mere postulation of public linguistic norms does not explain regularities in linguistic behavior, since the existence of such norms is evidently compatible with any degree of non-compliance. If this is so, we should resist the assumption that any empirically ascertainable regularity in language use – a “norm” in the statistical sense – must also manifest a linguistic norm in Goldberg's sense.

This, then, cannot be what Goldberg has in mind: presumably, he means to postulate not the mere existence of public linguistic norms, but rather norms which speakers of the language have internalized in the right kind of way, and which are appropriately manifested in their verbal behavior. But this refinement will not help either: recall how Goldberg objected to the Davidsonian view by reflecting on the question of how these empirical regularities of language use could “come to pass.” This question can now be turned back on Goldberg: we can now ask how it came to pass that these norms would have the relevant kind of currency among speakers of the language. Whatever Goldberg has to say about this, it will be hostage to the same objections as he himself launched against the non-normative view. The “only remotely plausible account,” the Davidsonian will say, is one that works on the assumption that these norms would be internalized by speakers by way of mechanisms of social learning and approbation. But then, *if* it was a problem for the Davidsonian view that it is simply a contingent matter “one's interlocutor has had the relevant portions of her idiolect shaped by the forces of social approbation” and thus whether “the idiolect of one's ‘co-lingual’ interlocutor overlaps in relevant respects with one's own” (Goldberg 2007:

64), the same must hold for Goldberg's normativist account. To have any explanatory purchase on actual verbal behavior, Goldberg's norms must depend on the same mechanisms of social approbation as do Davidsonian regularities. Thus, if shadows of contingency hover over the Davidsonian approach, they must also hover over Goldberg's approach.

5. Goldberg believes he has a ready answer to this charge. The answer draws on the Gricean distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning (Grice 1989), though in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner: on the standard Gricean approach, sentence meaning and speaker meaning are distinguished with view to making room for the fact that a speaker's *intentional* communicative strategies may go beyond what is included in the literal content of the sentence he uttered – as it does in familiar cases of irony, metaphor, and so on. By contrast, on Goldberg's proposal, sentence meaning and speaker meaning are to be distinguished with a view to making room for a speaker's (very much unintentional) *incomplete mastery* of the norms which govern the words she nonetheless uses. Here, Goldberg once again draws on Burge 1979, according to which we can see lexical norms as

constituting a complex *standard* by reference to which the subject's mental states and events are estimated, or an abstract grid on which they are plotted. Different people may vary widely in the degree to which they master the elements and relations within the standard, even as it applies to them all. (Burge 1979: 148)

The public linguistic norms which Goldberg postulates are clearly meant to determine sentence meaning – what the sentence actually means in the language –, but not speaker meaning, which Goldberg glosses, again borrowing Gricean terminology, as what the speaker “made-as-if-to-say” (Goldberg 2007: 95). Plausibly, Goldberg might concede that there is even a sense in which Davidson is right when he says that “it is always an empirical question, though one we normally do not raise, whether what we take for granted others mean is what they do in fact mean.” That is, it is always an empirical question, though one we normally do not raise, whether sentence meaning and speaker meaning (as specified by Goldberg) coincide in the case of a particular utterance. But this does not affect Goldberg’s point, for it was always assumed that what linguistic knowledge, strictly speaking, entitles us to can only ever be immediate comprehension of *sentence* meaning, not speaker meaning. Retrieval of speaker meaning must rely on different cognitive capacities altogether, and is, on the whole, hostage to a much greater degree of contingency.

Thus, if a speaker has incompletely internalized the linguistic norms – if she has not “had the relevant portions of her idiolect shaped by the forces of social approbation” (Goldberg 2007: 64) – then speaker meaning will not reliably coincide with sentence meaning. This does not undermine our entitlement to language comprehension, however, so much as serve to remind us of its scope. For the epistemologies of comprehension and testimony, according to Goldberg, must track sentence meaning, not speaker meaning: “insofar as our interest is in knowledge transmission through speech, there are good reasons to construe the reliability of testimony in terms of the reliability of testimony *on its literal* (sentence meaning) *construal*” (Goldberg 2007: 98). In this way, the distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning helps defang the objection that it is a contingent matter how well the norms are internalized in a body of speakers.

Reflection reveals, however, that this line of thought is pretty much *exactly wrong* for the purpose to which Goldberg wants to put it, namely that of connecting linguistic normativity with the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony in an explanatorily satisfactory manner. Here is why: as we saw above (section 2), in sincerely uttering a declarative sentence, the speaker means to stamp her epistemic authority some proposition or other. But which proposition? Presumably, the answer to this question must reflect what the speaker *believes* her words mean, not what they *actually* mean according to the applicable norms. It is this proposition – what she made-as-if-to-say – which a hearer would be entitled to adopt on the basis of her testimony, if anything.¹¹ Here, there opens up a chasm between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony which threatens the integrity of Goldberg’s whole project: for even if Goldberg were correct to say that our entitlement to immediate language comprehension must track sentence meaning, it would still remain the case that our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition must track speaker meaning. In other words, appealing to a distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning can save the explanatory connection between lexical norms and the epistemology of language comprehension only at the expense of letting go of the explanatory connection between the epistemology of language comprehension and the epistemology of testimony.

For illustrations of the underlying problem, we need – ironically, perhaps – look no further than standard examples from the anti-individualist literature. For instance, someone who is none too sure about the difference between elm trees and beech trees¹² might nonetheless think to offer an utterance like

¹¹ As I will explain later, this is compatible with Goldberg’s view that we nonetheless hold mature speakers responsible to standard usage.

¹² Drawing, of course, from Putnam 1975.

[1] “There are many beautiful elm trees in Denmark.”

Retrieving the sentence meaning of [1] is not a problem on Goldberg’s model. We simply identify it as a sentence of English and apply the disquotational principle. The sentence expresses the proposition *there are many beautiful elm trees in Denmark*. But recall that entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition requires not just a reliable method of transmission, but also reliable testifiers. Now in light of our informant’s unreliability with respect to elms and beeches, we would evidently not be entitled to take on the belief *there are many beautiful elm trees in Denmark* on the basis of his testimony. The point should be simple enough: people who suffer specific misconceptions with regard to the words they are nonetheless disposed to use are often not reliable testifiers with those words. From the perspective of the epistemology of testimony, it does not help to have a reliable method for retrieving the sentence meaning of an arbitrary utterance if the informant is importantly confused about that meaning.¹³

For further illustration, we can turn to Burge (1979). Someone who believes that “arthritis” may apply equally to ailments in joint or muscle, may utter a sentence like

[2] “My arthritis has been flaring up recently.”

¹³ This point must be handled with care: we can no doubt imagine circumstances under which a speaker could serve as a reliable reporter in spite of his linguistic misconceptions. For instance, we could imagine a would-be testifier who, though he has the term “beech” in his vocabulary, is peculiarly indisposed to use it, and who, moreover, never moves outside of an environment in which elm trees are in massive preponderance over beech trees. His elm-related testimonies might be reliably true, in spite of his incomplete mastery of the underlying concepts. But this will not help: as we shall see, the classic anti-individualist thought-experiments gain their urgency precisely from the way in which our incomplete understanding invades even our active everyday vocabulary. Following Goldberg’s account, to know whether a particular speaker is a reliable testifier, we would have to know the nature and extent of his incomplete understanding, as well as pertinent details of the environment in which he typically forms his beliefs. But this is just the sort of knowledge which we do not have in cases of Radical Communication. (See Goldberg 2007: 29-31 for an account of why our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition must also involve “a reliable capacity for distinguishing reliable from unreliable testimony” (Goldberg 2007: 31).)

We would, on Goldberg's model, be entitled to claim immediate comprehension of the sentence meaning of [2], but evidently not entitled to acquire a belief on the basis of the speaker's testimony. This is because the speaker is linguistically unreliable: given his incomplete mastery of the linguistic norm governing "arthritis," he may, for all we know, be offering testimony regarding a condition in his thigh.

Goldberg might have been able to accommodate these observations were incomplete understanding a rare or peripheral phenomenon. (I.e., there would be enough leeway in our notion of reliability to allow for such cases without threatening the general principle.) But that is exactly what is not the case, according to anti-individualists. As Putnam argues (1975: 227-229), the "division of linguistic labor" is pervasive and might even be essential to the functioning of language in any complex society. Similarly, Burge emphasizes how such "incomplete understanding" is not "in general an unusual or even deviant phenomenon." Rather, it is "common or even normal in the case of a large number of expressions in our vocabularies" (Burge 1979: 112).

It seems clear that Goldberg is sensitive to a certain kind of tension here. He attempts to reconcile these facts with his views on the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony in the following way:

if complete grasp is required in order to satisfy the reliable comprehension condition, then, since the satisfaction of the reliable comprehension condition is a necessary condition on acquiring testimonial knowledge [...], the result is that testimonial knowledge will be correspondingly rare as well. I need not repeat here why this implication is not an attractive one. (Goldberg 2007: 118)

He concludes, by modus tollens, that complete grasp is not required in order to satisfy the reliable comprehension condition.

But this is to grab to the wrong end of the stick, addressing the question of reliability and concept mastery on the side of comprehension rather than on the side of production. For the problem of incomplete understanding which is illustrated by the classic examples from Putnam and Burge is not about our status as reliable *recipients* of testimony but rather our status as reliable *sources* of testimony. The worry that Goldberg fails to address is whether someone with an importantly deficient grasp of some range of words *R* in her public language (which will likely be every speaker, although we differ with respect to which range *R* is afflicted) can nonetheless be a reliable testifier with the use of words in *R*. I have offered examples showing that they cannot, and certainly not by the standards of reliability that Goldberg advocates.

In the classic examples from Putnam and Burge, subjects display a mix of linguistic and more general epistemic ignorance, and it is not always easy to tell which of the two is the more fundamental notion. Accordingly, it is worth noting that testifiers can also be linguistically unreliable while being epistemically blameless in all non-linguistic respects. Thus, to introduce an example of my own, consider Gus, who knows (correctly) that peanuts are legumes, and that legumes are not nuts. When he brings brownies to his daughter's daycare, he volunteers the following bit of information:

[3] "There are no nuts in these brownies."

By accepting Gus's testimony on its conventional sentence meaning, a child's life may be in danger. But Gus appears to be epistemically blameless in all non-linguistic respects. He may even

be an expert of the sort that anti-individualists make frequent appeal to. However, since testimonial transactions typically occur by way of language, he is nonetheless an unreliable source of testimony with respect to the word in question.

In response to this, Goldberg may still argue that the norms are in effect, and that they determine what the words mean. For instance, he could call on familiar Burgean arguments about deference, and say that Gus intends his word “nut” to mean whatever it means in the public language, even though he, in a sense, fails to mean *nut* by nut. (What he actually means by “nut,” let us say, is *true nut*.) Or he could argue that whether or not Gus intends to defer to conventionally accepted usage, we still hold him responsible for having offered testimony which, on its literal or sentence meaning construal, is false. Both these protestations are fine, as far as they go, but neither has any bearing on the question of whether Gus, given his ignorance of the norms putatively governing the word “nut” in English, can be a reliable testifier with that word. In fact, both of these arguments pretty well concede that he is not: but his unreliability relates entirely to language – the medium of testimony –, not to facts of the matter regarding the subject matter of the testimony.

So, the distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning will not help, insofar as it is speaker meaning that serves as a conduit of epistemic authority, not sentence meaning. The motivation for drawing the distinction in the first place is the apprehension that there might be systematic failures of coincidence between what a sentence means (as determined by the applicable norms) and what the speaker makes-as-if-to-say (as determined by her communicative intentions). But drawing this distinction in the present context amounts to saving the explanatory connection between norms and the epistemology of language comprehension only at the expense of severing the explanatory connection between the epistemology of language comprehension and the

epistemology of testimony.¹⁴ I conclude that Goldberg’s line of reasoning comes up short: the postulation of public linguistic norms does not secure the reliable comprehension condition unless what is to be comprehended is restricted to sentence meaning. But if so, then there is no route from the epistemology of language comprehension to the epistemology of testimony, since the latter must track speaker meaning, not sentence meaning.

6. Nonetheless, Goldberg is right to insist that there are deep and systematic interconnections between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony. This is a highly welcome development. That testimonial exchange is *causally* dependent on linguistic interaction in all but exceptional cases is widely noted in the literature. But few go on to note the extent to which this dependence introduces epistemological complexities in its own right. Perhaps encouraged by Burge (1993), some may believe that testimony’s dependence on language is *merely* a form of causal dependence, and so has no further epistemological consequences. But this is highly implausible. Notably, Burge himself (2013: 282) has now retracted this idea, acknowledging that the (empirical) fact of someone’s having uttered that *p* must constitute part of one’s epistemic warrant for acquiring the belief that *p* by way of testimony.¹⁵

¹⁴ An exception would be cases where we have specific reasons to believe that speaker meaning and sentence meaning will coincide; but again (see previous footnote) this is precisely what we do not have in cases of Radical Communication.

¹⁵ Jennifer Lackey goes further still, defending what she calls the *Statement View of Testimony*. On this view, linguistic utterances themselves – rather than the cognitive states that they express – are the “central bearers of epistemic significance” (Lackey 2006: 93). Accordingly, “genuine progress in the epistemology of testimony” requires us to “stop looking at what speakers believe and focus, instead, on what speakers say” (Lackey 2006: 97). Against this background, one might naturally expect the epistemology of language comprehension – the process by which we come to form beliefs about what speakers say – to take center stage. Unfortunately, neither the article nor her subsequent book (Lackey 2008) offers any sustained treatment of these issues.

Others (e.g., Fricker 1987: 71) have no qualms on that particular point, but believe nevertheless that the epistemology of testimony can be neatly cordoned off from the epistemology of language comprehension. On such a view, linguistic communication is essentially just the medium by which testimonial exchange occurs; accordingly, there is a sense in which epistemological questions pertaining to language comprehension must arise prior to and independently of those relating to testimony. If so, it seems that we can usefully seek a clarification of the latter even though we do not yet have a full grasp of the former. This idea is not entirely without warrant: clearly, there are some (very general and highly abstract) questions bearing on the epistemology of testimony (e.g., the rationality of trust) which may be fruitfully addressed in isolation from issues having to do with language. Nonetheless, it seems clear that for a wide range of testimonial contexts, the following two questions arise together and must be addressed together: (i) what is my warrant for understanding someone as having said that *p*?; (ii) what is my warrant for forming the belief that *p* partly on the basis that understanding?

Once the epistemology of language comprehension moves to center stage, the appeal to linguistic norms has an undeniable force. There is, obviously, no natural or law-like connection between linguistic expressions and their meanings. Instead, the connection is arbitrary, and, by standard accounts, conventional. But epistemology is a normative discipline, and unless these conventions have the force of norms – if they remain *mere* regularities–, it is hard to say what there is for speakers and hearers to be right or wrong about in matters of language. (Indeed, as one influential line of thought has it, without such norms, there could not be linguistic meaning in the first place.¹⁶)

¹⁶ Drawing, of course, on Wittgenstein 1953. For articulations of this idea, see, e.g., Dummett (1978: 424-425), Kripke (1982: 89), and Wiggins (1997: 522).

Such arguments rely heavily on *a priori* reasoning. And so, it is worth noting that the appeal to norms is also not entirely without empirical plausibility. In particular, Goldberg is right to observe that we hold *normative attitudes* toward language: people presume to correct each other (and themselves) when they fall out of linguistic line; moreover, we hold others culpable if we form false beliefs on the basis of their linguistically twisted testimony. This insight should form part of the explanandum of any comprehensive philosophical account of language comprehension and testimony. As I will argue in the remainder of this essay, however, we can account for the provenance of these normative attitudes, and for their role in connecting the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony, without invoking public linguistic norms in Goldberg's sense.

Let there be no doubt, then, that any linguistic community has preferred ways of speaking, such as might be recorded in a dictionary. But is our preference for certain ways of speaking a manifestation of internalized linguistic norms? No: in an important sense, they remain mere *de facto* regularities, and are widely recognized as such by speakers. As Quine once pointed out (1951: 49), lexicography is an empirical, not a normative, science. Moreover, preferred usage is forever changing: the dictionary will always lag behind the vanguard.¹⁷

However, our normative attitudes toward language do merit an explanation. But here we must proceed with caution: it is clearly tempting to look “upstream” for such explanation, toward some factor that would be suitably independent of the phenomena we seek to explain. In this context, however, this would be a mistake: rather than look upstream to linguistic norms (or anything else) to serve as an anchoring point for our normative attitudes to language, we should

¹⁷ See Begby 2013 for an application of this point to current debates on semantic minimalism and contextualism.

look “downstream” to role of language in the practice of giving and taking testimony itself. My contention, in brief, is that people reliably speak in the same way, and hold each other to presumptive (though often controversial) norms of speaking, simply *because* this boosts their entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition. Our linguistic practice is, in this sense, largely self-regulatory: there is no need for a further explanation upstream – such as linguistic norms –,to hold the whole thing in place.

To see better what motivates this reorientation, consider the fact that although my argument has been focused on lexical norms, the most striking feature of Goldberg’s view is perhaps not the invocation of norms *per se*, but rather the *linearity* of the explanatory model that he proposes. This linearity can be seen in how the argument progresses from a starting point in reflection on our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition: the argument asks, what are the conditions possibility for this entitlement? One such condition of possibility is the reliability of immediate language comprehension. But what, in turn, is a condition of possibility for our entitlement to immediate comprehension? We have now moved one step up from the question of testimonial entitlement itself. We are naturally led to look for something further upstream from both testimony and language comprehension to serve as the secure anchoring point of both. Public linguistic norms will seem the only plausible candidate for the job.

Instead of offering a different candidate for the task that norms cannot fulfill, I am arguing that we should reject the whole model that leads us to think that there is any such explanatory role to be filled in the first place. The resolution to our problem will come from the recognition that the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimonial belief acquisition are not linearly related but deeply intertwined from the beginning.

Simply put: we do not need anything above our testimonial practice itself to explain the relatively high degree of linguistic convergence among speakers. We can recognize at least two sources of such convergence. First is the fact (conspicuously absent from Goldberg's discussion) that we all learn language from each other, and that such language learning could only take place in the context of also learning about the shared world. In this sense, language learning and testimonial belief acquisition are deeply intertwined from the start.¹⁸ But second, once this deep connection between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimonial belief acquisition is in place, it should be no surprise that language will continue to organize itself so as to strike a balance between, on the one hand, conveying the maximal amount of informational content, with, on the other hand, means that would require the minimum amount of effort for comprehension. Quite simply, it is not a contingent matter that people generally speak in similar ways: rather, we do so, among other things, because this boosts the reliable information flow between us. This is what language *is*; we should not require an upstream explanation for how this "comes to pass."¹⁹

Thus, our normative attitudes to language do not stem from our having internalized linguistic norms; rather, they stem directly from our concern to maintain our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition. Too much linguistic idiosyncrasy will threaten that entitlement; accordingly we monitor people's usage to make sure that the entitlement stays in place and are prepared to censor them when their linguistic usage falls out of line. Our lack of concern for

¹⁸ Goldberg (2008) does address the issue of children's entitlement to testimony, though with a view to their relative insensitivity to more narrowly epistemic notions such as reason, justification, and evidence, rather than with a view to epistemological constraints on language learning. Clement (2010: 532n1) offers critical remarks on Goldberg's appropriation of the empirical literature on this point. For a broader perspective on these issues, see Stevenson (1993). (Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.)

¹⁹ Coady (1992, ch. 9) also offers a Davidson-inspired account to similar effect, though by way of a very different sort of argument.

linguistic norms as such can be seen from the fact that when we do correct others, we find it more natural to do so in the ontic mode rather than the meta-linguistic mode: to return to Burge, if someone presumes to offer the testimony that he has arthritis in his thigh, we let him know that arthritis can only occur in the joints, not that the term “arthritis” applies only to ailments in the joints.²⁰ Once the speaker is corrected on the facts about arthritis, we naturally expect that his use of “arthritis” will fall into line as well.

I argue, then, that the fundamental mistake was to implement a linear explanatory model in the first place. The appeal to public linguistic norms follows naturally once this model is in place. I argue to the contrary that the question of the reliability of language comprehension cannot be raised and answered prior to raising the question of the epistemology of testimony in the way that would be required by the linear model. Our linguistic practice is highly convergent – i.e., marked by a relatively high degree of empirical regularity – *because* this optimizes our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition. We hold others responsible for departing from generally accepted usage *because* this jeopardizes that entitlement, not because it violates linguistic norms. A corollary, to which anti-individualists attach much importance, is that we also hold *ourselves* accountable to this usage: when notified that our linguistic habits are out of line, we do not typically insist on our right to define our words as we please, but attempt, to the best of our ability, to align ourselves with common speech. Again, though, it would be too quick to assume that we do so out of regard for linguistic norms. Rather, we do so simply because this maximizes our ability to shape the public agenda with our testimony.

²⁰ This sort of thinking receives broad encouragement also from within Burge’s project: Burge argues (1979: 124-128) that even in these wayward cases, our understanding of the words of others remains firmly focused on the object-level rather than ascend to the meta-linguistic level.

So, in a sense, there are normative factors in play: but the norms are not the free-standing norms of language. Rather, they emerge simply and naturally from our need for language to serve the ends of testimony.²¹

References:

Adler, Jonathan. 1996. "Transmitting Knowledge." *Nous* 30(1): 99-111.

Begby, Endre. 2013. "Semantic Minimalism and the 'Miracle of Communication'." *Philosophical Studies* 165(3): 957-973.

Bezuidenhout, Anne. 1998. "Is Verbal Communication a Purely Preservative Process?" *Philosophical Review* 107(2): 261-288.

Bilgrami, Akeel. 1992. *Belief and Meaning: The Unity and Locality of Mental Content*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Bilgrami, Akeel 1993. "Norms and Meaning." In R. Stoecker, ed., *Reflecting Davidson*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Boghossian, Paul A. 1989. "The Rule-Following Considerations." *Mind* 98(392): 507-549.

Borg, Emma. 2004. *Minimal Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burge, Tyler. 1979. "Individualism and the Mental." Reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

²¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the *Normativity of Meaning: Sellarsian Perspectives* conference in Prague May 2011 and at the University of Victoria in March 2012. Many thanks to audiences at both occasions, and, in particular, to Margaret Cameron, Klaus Jahn, Michael Raven, and Audrey Yap for discussion.

- Burge, Tyler. 1993. "Content Preservation." *Philosophical Review* 102(4): 457-488.
- Burge, Tyler. 1999. "Comprehension and Interpretation." In L.E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing.
- Burge, Tyler. 2013. "Postscript to 'Content Preservation'." In *Cognition through Understanding: Philosophical Essays, Volume 3*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cappelen, Herman, and Ernest Lepore. 2005. *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Clark, Herbert. 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clement, Fabrice. 2010. "To Trust or not to Trust? Children's Social Epistemology." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1(4): 531-549.
- Coady, C.A.J. 1992. *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 1973. "Radical Interpretation." Reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. "Communication and Convention." Reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Davidson, Donald. 1986. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." Reprinted in *Truth, Language, and History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Davidson, Donald. 1994. "The Social Aspect of Language." Reprinted in *Truth, Language, and History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Davidson, Donald. 1999. "Reply to Burge." In L.E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.

- Dummett, Michael. 1978. "The Social Character of Meaning." In *Truth and Other Enigmas*.
London: Duckworth.
- Ebbs, Gary. 2001. *Rule-Following and Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fricker, Elizabeth. 1987. "The Epistemology of Testimony." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 61: 57-83.
- Fricker, Elizabeth. 1994. "Against Gullibility." In B. K. Matilal and A. Chakrabarti, eds.,
Knowing from Words. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Glüer, Kathrin, and Åsa Maria Wikforss. 2009. "Against Content Normativity." *Mind* 118(469):
31-70.
- Goldberg, Sanford. 2007. *Anti-Individualism: Mind and Language, Knowledge and Justification*.
Cambridge University Press.
- Goldberg, Sanford. 2008. "Testimonial Knowledge in Early Childhood, Revisited." *Philosophy
and Phenomenological Research* 76(1): 1-36.
- Grice, H.P. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hattiangadi, Anandi. 2006. "Is Meaning Normative?" *Mind & Language* 21(2): 220-240.
- Hattiangadi, Anandi. 2007. *Oughts and Thoughts: Rule-following and the Normativity of
Content*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kenyon, Tim. 2013. "The Informational Richness of Testimonial Contexts." *Philosophical
Quarterly* 63(250): 58-80.
- Kripke, Saul. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Kusch, Martin. 2006. *A Sceptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein*.
Chesham: Acumen Publishing.
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2006. "Learning from Words." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*
73(1): 77-101.
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2008. *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*. Oxford
University Press.
- Quine, W.v.O. 1951. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." Reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'." Reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality:*
Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press.
- Rysiew, Patrick. 2007. "Beyond Words: Communication, Truthfulness, and Understanding."
Episteme 4(3): 285-304.
- Stevenson, Leslie. 1993. "Why Believe What People Say?" *Synthese* 94(3): 429-451.
- Wiggins, David. 1997. "Languages as Social Objects." *Philosophy* 72(282): 499-524.
- Wikforss, Åsa Maria. 2001. "Semantic Normativity." *Philosophical Studies* 102(2): 203-226.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe.
Oxford: Blackwell.