Irksome assertions[*]

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Abstract: The Knowledge Account of Assertion (KAA) says that knowledge is the norm of assertion: you may assert a proposition only if you know that it's true. The primary support for KAA is an explanatory inference from a broad range of linguistic data. The more data that KAA well explains, the stronger the case for it, and the more difficult it is for the competition to keep pace. In this paper we critically assess a purported new linguistic datum, which, it has been argued, KAA well explains. We argue that KAA does not well explain it.

1. Introduction

The Knowledge Account of Assertion (KAA) says that knowledge is the norm of assertion: you may assert a proposition only if you know that it's true. The primary support for KAA is an explanatory inference from a broad range of linguistic data.

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One data point is the knowledge version of Moore's Paradox. Assertions such as 'I went to cinema last night, although I don't know that I went' are logically consistent but nevertheless "absurd," they "clash" in a way reminiscent of contradictions (Moore 1942, 1962; compare Sorensen 1988 and DeRose 2009). KAA explains this nicely (Unger 1975, Williamson 2000: ch. 11, DeRose 2009: 96–98, esp. n. 19). By asserting that you went to the cinema, you represent yourself as having the authority to make that assertion: that is, you represent yourself as knowing that you went to the cinema. But in the same breath you deny that you know that you went to the cinema. So you explicitly contradict the way you just represented yourself, which explains the clash.

A second data point comes from natural ways of challenging assertions (Williamson 2000, Turri 2011). When you assert P, even if P has nothing to do with you or what you know, normally it is appropriate to ask you, "How do you know?" KAA handily explains the normal propriety of this question: we're asking you whether you have the authority to make the assertion, and thus whether you're accurately representing yourself. A more aggressive challenge than 'How do you know?' is 'Do you know that?', and more aggressive yet is 'You don't know that!'. KAA explains the range of aggressiveness: 'How do you know?' implicitly questions your authority to make the assertion, 'Do you know that?' explicitly questions your authority, and 'You don't know that!' explicitly rejects your authority.

A third data point comes from natural ways of prompting assertion (Turri 2010). A good way to prompt assertion is to ask a ques-

tion. We might ask you, "What time does the meeting start?" But without loss we could have instead asked you, "Do you know what time the meeting starts?" The two prompts are practically interchangeable, in that competent and cooperative speakers would normally respond exactly the same way to each. If they know, they'll say, for example, "Four o'clock"; and if they don't know, they'll say, "Sorry, I don't know." KAA explains why the two prompts are interchangeable. By asking 'Do you know what time the meeting starts?', we ask you whether you're positioned to assert what time the meeting starts; and by asking you that, we thereby indirectly request you to assert what time the meeting starts. Just as asking 'Can you pass the salt?' is a way of indirectly requesting that you pass the salt, asking 'Do you know what time the meeting starts?' is a way of indirectly requesting you to assert what time the meeting starts.

This paper critically assesses a purported new linguistic data point, which, it has been argued, KAA can also well explain. By this point in the debate over assertion's norms, the stakes are high for KAA's opponents. For each new data point that KAA well explains, it becomes that much more difficult for the competition to keep pace. And though the competitors can explain much, or maybe even all, of the data in one way or another, in order to keep pace with KAA, they must explain the data in as elegant and unified a way as KAA does. Each new data point added to the mix makes this increasingly difficult to do.[1]

[1] Competing accounts of assertion include the Truth Account, which says truth is the norm of assertion (Weiner 2005), the Belief Account, which says belief is the norm of assertion (Bach 2008), and the Reasonable Belief

2. 'Knows' in an awkward position

Following up on an observation of Michael Slote's (1979, 2010), Matthew Benton (2011; see also Blaauw 2012) contends that a further linguistic data point favoring KAA is the fact that 'I know' doesn't naturally take a parenthetical position in assertions such as:

K1. It is, I know, raining.

K2. It is raining, I know.

Such assertions, it is said, strike us as intuitively odd. This contrasts with phrases such as 'I believe', which naturally take parenthetical position in assertions such as:

K3. It is, I believe, raining.

K4. It is raining, I believe.

Such assertions strike us acceptable. Again following Slote, Benton distinguishes between assertions where the relevant phrase appears in the prefaced position — as in, "I believe that it's raining" — which are often used to *ascribe* a mental state to oneself, and assertions where it occurs in the parenthetical position, which are often used to *express* a mental state without necessarily ascribing it. 'I believe' appears felicitously in both positions, whereas 'I know' doesn't appear felicitously in parenthetical position.[2] Why is this such an awkward position for 'knows'?

Account, which says that reasonable belief is the norm of assertion (Kvanvig 2009; relatedly, Douven 2006, Lackey 2007, McKinnon 2012), and the Certainty Account, which says that certainty is the norm of assertion (Stanley 2008).

[2] At least, it does not do so as easily as 'I believe' does. More on this below.

3. *A knowledgeable explanation*

Benton argues that KAA can well explain both the oddity of (1) and (2) and the acceptability of (3) and (4). Benton accepts the view, common among KAA's proponents, that when you assert *p*, you thereby represent yourself as satisfying the norm of assertion (compare Unger 1975, Williamson 2000, DeRose 2002); and he accepts the version of KAA which says that you may assert *p* only if your assertion expresses your knowledge that *p* (compare Turri 2011). So, on Benton's view, by asserting that it is raining, you thereby represent yourself as expressing your knowledge that it is raining. The parenthetical use of 'I know', Benton proposes, strikes us as intuitively odd because "English doesn't need parenthetical uses of the form exhibited by 'It is, I know, raining' . . . because the flat-out 'It is raining' already serves to express one's knowledge that it is raining" (Benton 2011). In a word, the occurrences of 'I know' in (1) and (2) are expressively redundant. In light of this, call them *expressively redundant clauses* (ERCs; pronounced like 'irks'), and call assertions containing an ERC *irksome assertions*. By contrast, the parentheticals in (3) and (4) sound natural in part because they are not redundant. They serve as a way of hedging an assertion, thereby allowing us to avoid representing ourselves as knowing the claim in question.

This is an elegant explanation of the felt asymmetry between uses of 'I believe' and 'I know' in parenthetical position, and if it succeeds, it would be another point in favor of KAA. However, we will argue in the next section that the explanation does not clearly

succeed, and that further work is needed for KAA to satisfactorily explain the oddness of irksome assertions.

4. An incomplete explanation

If Benton's explanation were correct, then we should expect that an utterance will sound odd if it contains a parenthetical ERC. For Benton's explanation seems to rely on the principle that a parenthetical ERC makes for an odd utterance.

The problem is that we find that many superficially similar English expressions are perfectly felicitous. For example, consider,

K5. It is, I know, a bad day to hold this meeting.

K6. It is a bad day to hold this meeting, I know.

the felicity of which Benton attributes to the parenthetical being "nonredundant" (Benton 2011, n. 2). It is nonredundant because it serves some further purpose. In the case of (5) and (6), he might say that it serves as a concession, as it naturally does in expressions such as

K7. I know, I know — that was a rude thing to say.

Perhaps more worrisome is that in some contexts (1) and (2) themselves are felicitous. For example, suppose that you and I are out playing a round of golf when it starts pouring rain, a fact we are both obviously alert to. I say to you, "Look, it's raining." You could felicitously respond with (2): "It's raining, I know." But again, Benton could respond, here the parenthetical serves to indicate that my initial assertion was otiose because you already knew that it was

raining, in which case the the parenthetical is not redundant. All of this serves to highlight that when Benton claims that (1) and (2) are odd, he has in mind contexts where adding the parenthetical 'I know' does *not* serve a further purpose, either via implicature, the performance of an indirect speech act, or the like.

But other examples are not so easily handled. Consider,

K8. Will it, I'm curious, rain tonight?

K9. Will it rain tonight, I'm curious?[3]

K10. Why, I ask, should we do that?

K11. It will, I say, rain tonight.

K12. She will enter the competition, I claim.

Each of these contains an ERC, but they are all felicitous in a wide range of ordinary contexts. Asking a question naturally expresses curiosity, so it is redundant to add that you are curious; parenthetically adding 'I ask' to a question clearly adds nothing to what you are doing; and adding 'I say' or 'I claim' to a statement or claim likewise adds nothing.[4]

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[3] We are ambivalent about whether this sentence should end with a question mark or a period.

[4] An anonymous referee asks whether Benton might take a cue from Blaauw (2012), who points out that the parenthetical 'I know' can be used to 'reinforce' an unadorned assertion that P by upgrading it to a claim to know that P. Perhaps, the referee suggests, the parenthetical 'I ask' or 'I'm curious' or 'I say' can also 'serve to reinforce the main claim of the sentence in question.' We tend to doubt that this suggestion will work, for two reasons. First, interrogatives don't make claims, so there is no claim for 'I ask' or 'I'm curious' to reinforce. Second, 'I say' typically functions as a *hedge*, not as a reinforcement in Blaauw's sense. (Blaauw 2012: 107 makes essentially the same point about 'I believe'.) We do agree that 'I say' or 'I claim' , 'I ask', etc., can add rhetorical emphasis, but this is not the same as reinforcement in Blaauw's sense. And as we explain in the main text below, there will always be ways to modify the context so that adding a parenthetical is

Consider also this sort of case. Suppose that a servant asks his master, "What do you command?" The master responds,

K13. You will, I command, clean the stables.

It's redundant to add 'I command' to what is manifestly a command in the context, but (13) is perfectly felicitous. Finally, consider also another type of case. Suppose that you and I are watching the weather report to decide whether tomorrow would be a good day to have our picnic. It's common knowledge between us that the only relevant evidence we have is the weather report, which says that there is a 55% chance of rain tomorrow. You ask me, "What's your guess, will it rain tomorrow?" I respond,

K14. It'll rain tomorrow, I guess.

Again, it's clearly redundant to add 'I guess' to what is manifestly a guess in the context, but (14) is perfectly felicitous nonetheless. Thus we have examples of irksome assertions, questions, and commands that strike competent language users as perfectly felicitous.

We acknowledge that for each of (8)–(14), there are contexts where the parenthetical would be nonredundant. There will always be ways to modify the context so that adding the parenthetical serves some further purpose. The important point when evaluating Benton's proposal, however, is that we have no reason to believe that they are felicitous *only* when nonredundant. Further work is required to show that their felicity requires nonredundancy, which would include explaining away the wide range of apparent counterexamples above. Perhaps there is a way to do this, though we are

non-redundant, but this isn't enough for Benton's purposes.

not optimistic. At this point, the burden lies with KAA's proponents to advance the discussion.

5. Conclusion

We conclude that Benton's proposed explanation of the oddity of (1) and (2) is, at least, incomplete. It's not yet clear whether KAA has a good explanation of why 'knows' is awkward in parenthetical position, to the extent that it is awkward. Consequently, it's premature to conclude that the linguistic case for KAA has been enhanced yet further.[5]

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