A LINGUISTIC GROUNDING FOR A POLYSEMY THEORY OF 'KNOWS'

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Abstract: In his book *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Jason Stanley offers an argument for the conclusion that it is quite unlikely that an ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be "linguistically grounded." His argument rests on two important assumptions: 1) that linguistic grounding of ambiguity requires evidence of the purported different senses of a word being represented by different words in other languages (i.e. represented by more than one word within other languages) and 2) that such evidence is lacking in the case of 'knows'. In this paper, I challenge the conclusion that there isn't a linguistic grounding for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' by making cases against both of Stanley's major assumptions. I will do this by making a case for a *prime facie* linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' without appealing to word use in other languages. Given that a polysemy theory of 'knows' is a type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' (as will be explained shortly), if I succeed in linguistically grounding a polysemy theory of 'knows', then I have shown that at least one type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded.

In his book *Knowledge and Practical Interests* Jason Stanley offers an argument for the conclusion that it is quite unlikely that an ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be "linguistically grounded."[1] His argument rests on two important assumptions: 1) that linguistic grounding of ambiguity requires evidence of the purported different senses of a word being represented by different words in other languages (i.e. represented by more than one word within other languages) and 2) that such evidence is lacking in the case of 'knows'. In this paper, I challenge the conclusion that there isn't a linguistic grounding for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' by making cases against both of Stanley's major assumptions. I do this by making a case for a *prima facie* linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' without appealing to word use in other languages. Given that a polysemy theory of 'knows' is a type of ambiguity theory of

[1] Stanley (2005), 81.

'knows' (as will be explained shortly), if I succeed in linguistically grounding a polysemy theory of 'knows', then I have shown that at least one type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded.

This paper has four sections. The first section presents and explains the relevant terminology needed for the rest of the paper. The second section provides a more detailed examination of Stanley's argument for the claim that an ambiguity theory quite likely cannot be linguistically grounded, along with my rationale for why it is important to respond to this argument. The third section directly challenges Stanley's second major assumption, that there isn't evidence of the different meanings of 'knows' being represented by more than one word in other languages. In this section I rely on the work of Descartes, as an example from the history of philosophy where the single English word 'knowledge' seem to function as the appropriate translation for more than one word in another language. The fourth section more indirectly challenges Stanley's argument by suggesting an alternative means by which a polysemy theory of 'knows' could be grounded. This amounts to a challenge of Stanley's first claim—that linguistic grounding requires evidence of multi-word representation in other languages. The basis for this latter challenge is an examination of commonly used English verbs, of which the word 'knows' is one.

1 Ambiguity, Polysemy, and Context-Sensitivity[2]

[2] These terms, along with much of the other relevant linguistic terminology in this paper, are not used in precisely the same away across disciplines (or even within disciplines). I've done my best to make clear what I mean here by the relevant terms and to adopt meanings that align with popular usages in relevant communities employing these terms.

As Adam Sennet notes, 'ambiguity' is itself ambiguous.[3] In this paper I am concerned specifically with *lexical ambiguity*; i.e. the phenomenon of a single word[4] having more than one sense or meaning.[5] Thus, when the term 'ambiguity' is used in this paper, the reader should take this to refer to lexical ambiguity. In keeping with standard usage, I treat 'ambiguity' as an umbrella term that encompasses any way in which a word has more than one sense. Thus, as I am using the term, both homonymy and polysemy count as types of ambiguity.[6]

It is widely recognized that the line between homonymy and polysemy is blurry,[7] but for our purposes so long as there is a clear conceptual distinction between homonymy and polysemy and paradigmatic cases of both, the fact that it is often difficult to determine whether a particular ambiguous word is homonymous or polysemous is unproblematic. Homonymy is the phenomenon of one word having two or more meanings that are unrelated, etymologically or otherwise. Words like 'bank' and 'bear' are examples of the former and are called homonyms.[8] Polysemy refers to the phenomenon of one word having two or more *closely related* meanings,

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[3] Sennet (2011).

[4] There is some disagreement as to what kind of entity is (or entities are) the proper bearer(s) of ambiguity. In this paper, I've assumed that words can properly be described as ambiguous (without making any kind of claim limiting the proper application of the term 'ambiguity' to words only). I've also assumed that there are no significant methodological difficulties in discussing different conjugations of 'to know' (e.g. 'know', 'knows') in one treatment). Thus, when merely mentioning (as opposed to using) such terms, I treat them interchangeable.

[5] While acknowledging that both the terms 'sense' and 'meaning' are also ambiguous, throughout this paper they will both be used to refer to roughly the Fregean *Sinn* and will be used interchangeably.

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

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

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

which typically share an etymological history. Words like ‘crane’ and ‘arch’ are examples of this and are called polysemes.

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

> Context sensitivity is (potential) variability in content due purely to changes in the context of utterance without a change in the convention of word usage. Thus, ‘I am hungry’ varies in content speaker to speaker because ‘I’ is context sensitive and shifts reference depending on who utters it. ‘I’, however, is not massively ambiguous. ‘Bank’ is ambiguous, not (at least, not obviously) context sensitive. Of course, knowledge of context may well help disambiguate an ambiguous utterance. Nonetheless, ambiguity is not characterized by interaction with (extra- linguistic) context but is a property of the meanings of the terms.[9]

Sennet’s examples clearly show that a word can be ambiguous without being context-sensitive and that a word can be context-sensitive without being ambiguous. Even if one were to make the case that ‘bank’ is context-sensitive, this wouldn’t be *because* it was ambiguous and vice versa with ‘I’. This is, in part, because ambiguity is the non-context-bound property of a word having more than one meaning, any of which can be the meaning used in *any* context where the appropriate syntax is present,[10] while context-sensitivity is the property of content variation *resulting from* a change in context.

Given the description I gave of ambiguity earlier as “any way in which a word has more than one sense,” and depending on one’s views about what it means for a word to have more than one sense, context-sensitivity could wind up counting as a type of ambiguity. Which answer one gives to this question doesn’t really matter for our purposes so long as two things are noted.

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[9] Sennet (2011).

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

First, this would make context-sensitivity a type of ambiguity, not the other way around. Second, context-sensitivity would still be distinct from both polysemy and homonymy.

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

One might also be interested in making a distinction between ambiguous words that are equivocal because they have two and only two senses and multivocal words—i.e. words that have more than two senses. For our purposes, the only point worth noting about two-sense equivocality and multivocality is that both are compatible with polysemy. By this I mean that a polyseme can be either two-sense equivocal or multivocal. My own leanings are towards a multivocal polysemy theory of 'knows', but I am not arguing for that here. Rather, I am merely arguing that there exists good linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' (i.e., the view that 'knows' and its cognates[11] are polysemes).

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

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

> There really is not much to be said for a version of contextualism according to which 'know' is ambiguous. To ground an ambiguity claim linguistically, one would need to show that there are languages in which the different meanings are represented by

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

> different words. But such a claim is unlikely to be substantiated in the cases of interest to the contextualist. It is quite unlikely that there are languages in which the word for 'know' in the epistemology classroom is different from the word for 'know' outside the epistemology classroom."[12]

A number of noteworthy claims are made in this paragraph. First, there is Stanley's claim that there is not much to be said *for a version of contextualism* according to which 'know' is ambiguous. Using a standard understanding of (epistemic) contextualism as the view that the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials vary according to the context in which they are uttered for distinctively epistemic reasons,[13] I would agree with Stanley that there isn't much to be said for such a view. This is because, as indicated in the previous section, I take it to be a mistake to see an ambiguity theory of 'knows' as a type of contextualism. Thus, on my view, one should reject the claim that there is *a type of contextualism* on which an ambiguity concerning 'know' is posited because such a view is not a type of contextualism at all. But clearly this is not what Stanley sees as the problem with an ambiguity theory. Thus, I will put aside this taxonomic concern and focus on what Stanley takes the problem with an ambiguity theory of 'knows' to be.

Stanley puts forward a necessary condition for the linguistic grounding of an ambiguity claim—namely, one can linguistically ground an ambiguity claim only if one can show that the different meanings are represented by different words in other languages. In making this claim, Stanley likely has a rationale in mind something along the lines of the one Kripke offered in 1977 when he wrote that "we would expect the ambiguity to be disambiguated by separate and unrelated words in some other languages".[14] When one is thinking about homonyms, this line of

[12] Stanley (2006), 81.
[13] See, for example, Cohen (1999, 58), DeRose (1992, 914), (2002, 618), and Rysiew (2011).
[14] Kripke (1977).

thought makes a great deal of sense. It would be highly improbable of any given homonym that its meanings would be semantically encoded by a single word in all or even many other languages.[15]

But the line of thought is less forceful when it comes to polysemes whose senses are closely related. It seems plausible that in some cases whatever forces—cultural, linguistic, evolutionary, etc.—led a univocal English word to eventually become polysemous are forces that have led to similar developments from univocality to polysemy in the equivalent word in other languages. Certainly this is not always the case. There are cases where the different meanings of an English polyseme are semantically encoded by separate words in other languages. And this separate encoding can and does often function as evidence of the polysemous nature of such words. But the converse doesn't hold—i.e. the lack of such separate semantic encoding in other languages for the (seemingly distinct) meanings of a word doesn't show that the term is not polysemous.[16]

Of course, this claim is compatible with Stanley's. There is no logical inconsistency between the claims that 1) the lack of separate semantic encoding in other languages for the meanings of a word doesn't show that a word isn't polysemous and that 2) the only way to *linguistically ground* that a word is ambiguous (including when it is ambiguous in virtue of being polysemous) is to show that there are separate semantic encodings for the meanings of a word in other languages. On such a picture, a lack of such separate semantic encodings entails neither that one obtains a sufficient reason to accept nor a sufficient reason to reject that the term is

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

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

polysemous (although one may have a sufficient reason to reject that the term is homonymous). However, this does entail that when such separate semantic encoding can't be found, there is no hope of linguistically grounding an ambiguity claim, because a necessary component of that grounding is absent.

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

Requiring a 'linguistic grounding' for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' before giving even serious *prima facie* consideration strikes me as mistaken, but I don't argue for that in this paper. Rather, in the next two sections I'll argue that there is an appropriate linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows'. In Section 3, I do this by providing an example from the history of philosophy which provide what I think is a plausible instance of distinct senses of 'knows' being

picked out by more than one word in a foreign language—thus satisfying the criterion Stanley puts forwards. In Section 4, I change tack and argue that there is a plausible linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows' that does not rely on showing that there are languages in which the different meanings of 'knows' are expressed by different words. Because a polysemy theory of 'knows' is a type of ambiguity theory of 'knows', if this argument is right then at least one type of ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded without satisfying the condition that Stanley has claimed is necessary for such a grounding. One way to understand the following two sections is that Section 3 provides a direct challenge to Stanley's claim about whether or not there is separate semantic encoding of the purported distinct senses of 'knows' in others languages and that Section 4 provides an indirect challenge to Stanley's line of reasoning by seeking to undermine the necessary criterion he puts forwards on when an ambiguity theory of 'knows' can be linguistically grounded.

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

For the past decade or so the conversation about the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials has been dominated by three camps—1) the epistemic contextualists (in their various guises), 2) the advocates of pragmatic encroachment (the view that there is a practical stakes or interests component in the analysis of knowledge) including Stanley who is a

leading proponent of the view, and 3) the classical (sometimes called "strict") invariantists who tend to think there is a univocal, traditional meaning of 'knows' in the propositional sense. In the decade before that the conversation was dominated by two camps—the epistemic contextualists and the classical invariantists.

Throughout all this time relatively little attention has been given to the view that 'knows' might be ambiguous.[17] This is, in part, because the ambiguity theory has been assumed by some to be an inferior or rudimentary form of contextualism.[18] Thus, Stanley's choice to comment on an ambiguity theory of 'knows' as a type of contextualism, and only very briefly, reflects the view's current position in the dialectic. Given that the ambiguity theory has received little attention, it makes a great deal of sense for Stanley to give it little attention. But for those of us interested in defending an ambiguity theory of 'knows', it is important that we respond to the scant objections—even those quickly given—that have kept the ambiguity theory from being a serious contender in the discussion about the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions and denials.

3. A Direct Case for the Linguistic Grounding of a Polysemy Theory of 'Knows'

In making my direct case for a polysemy theory of 'knows' it will be useful to keep a couple of things in mind. First, Stanley states that the claim that there are languages in which the different meanings of 'knows' are expressed by different words "is unlikely to be substantiated." But he doesn't provide reasons for why he thinks that. This seems to be armchair speculation on

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

[18] See, for example, DeRose (1999), 191-192 and 194-195.

his part. Thus, our burden of proof is not particularly high in order to establish at least a *prima facie* case that his contention is mistaken—given that there is no counterevidence that needs to be responded to. Thus, providing at least one plausible counterexample is enough to significantly undermine Stanley's claim.

Second, Stanley states that "[i]t is quite unlikely that there are languages in which the word for 'know' in the epistemology classroom is different from the word for 'know' outside the epistemology classroom." This claim has the same problem as the one before—no reason for the claim is provided. But there is a second problem with this claim—namely, that Stanley seems to assume that the senses an advocate for an ambiguity theory of 'knows' would claim exist are an epistemology-classroom sense and a non-epistemology-classroom sense. But this need not be the case (either that the number of relevant senses is two or that they are divided along in- and out-of-the- epistemology-classroom lines).[19] Thus, our search for examples of separate semantic encoding for purportedly distinct senses of 'knows' is other languages is not bound by this restriction that they plausibly be epistemology-classroom and non-epistemology classroom senses.

Surely, there is a great deal of work that could be done in linguistics that would shed additional light on the veracity of Stanley's claims (whether those findings would largely favor or undermine his claims is not known here), but our discussion will be limited to a case from the history of philosophy, which I take to provide a plausible example of separate semantic encoding by two words for distinct senses of 'knows'/'knowledge'. The example is the Latin *cognitio* and

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

scientia, with Descartes' writings functioning as an exemplary presentation of this distinction at work. In recognition of my limits as a philosopher and not a linguist, my treatment of the case will be fairly brief, but I take the considerations put forward to be significant enough to undermine confidence in the claim that there isn't separation of the sense of 'knows' via different words in other languages and to provide a reason to delve more deeply into the issue.

As Lex Newman has noted in Descartes' treatment of the words, Descartes "regularly characterizes defeasible judgments at this level of certainty using terminology (e.g., '*cognitio*' and its cognates) that translates well into the English 'knowledge' (and its cognates)" but "[t]ypically, he reserves the term '*scientia*' for [indefeasible] knowledge".[20] Similarly, Fred Feldman identifies two types of knowledge (and senses of 'knowledge') based on Descartes' distinction. Feldman labels these senses 'practical knowledge' and 'metaphysical knowledge' respectively. One has practical knowledge when their true beliefs are "justified well enough for the ordinary affairs of life".[21] On the other hand, metaphysical knowledge "is knowledge beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt". Metaphysical knowledge is the type of knowledge employed in the "search after truth".[22] This "metaphysical knowledge" in represented in the Latin by Descartes as *scientia* (and its cognates), and this "practical knowledge" by *cognitio* (and its cognates). Feldman provides the following quote from Descartes as an example of the distinction at play.

> "when I said 'I know' I spoke only of the moral mode of knowing, which suffices for the regulation of life, and which I have often insisted is so vastly different from the Metaphysical mode of knowing which is here in question…"[23]

[20] Newman (2014).
[21] Feldman (1986, 34).
[22] Feldman (1986, 35).
[23] Feldman (1986, 35) quoted from the Haldane and Ross translation of Descartes' works (HR II, 278). Cf. with CSM II, 320, which renders a translation referring to "'knowing' in the practical sense" and "metaphysical knowledge." See also the Second Set of Replies for additional instances of *cognitio* and *scientia* as distinct types of knowledge (CSM II, especially 101-106; Cf. HR II, especially 38-44).

While the phenomenon we have here is taking two distinct Latin terms and translating them both as ‘knowledge’ in English rather than taking original English usages of ‘knowledge’ and finding that the best way to translate the different usages is with more than one word in another language, I take this to qualify as the general type of evidence Stanley thinks is required to linguistically ground an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’. Additionally, given Descartes importance in the development of western thought, his having made such epistemic distinctions which have not (clearly at least) been captured by distinct epistemic terms would seem to provide additional reason to think that his conceptual distinctions have remained as distinct senses for our single dominating epistemic verb.

4. An Indirect Case for the Linguistic Grounding of a Polysemy Theory of ‘Knows’

Before arguing that a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ can be linguistically grounded without appeal to separate semantic encoding of the senses of ‘knows’ by words in other languages, it seems prudent to ask what it means to ground a claim linguistically. Stanley does not say. On the face of it, it would seem that for a claim to have linguistic grounding is for there to be sufficient linguistic evidence (i.e. evidence about language or language usage) to provide one with a defeasible reason to accept the claim.[24] I see no reason to reject this natural first reading of the claim, and as a result that is what I will understand linguistic grounding to consist in. That being said, should Stanley’s understanding of what it takes to ground a claim linguistically differ substantially from my own understanding, I would need to assess whether or not my indirect case offered in this section for the linguistic grounding of a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ would count

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

as a linguistic grounding in his sense (and if it doesn't, consider how important it is for those defending the ambiguity theory to have a linguistic grounding in Stanley's sense.)

My goal in this section is to argue that regardless of whether or not there are languages in which the different meanings of 'knows' are represented by different words, a polysemy theory of 'knows' enjoys a kind of linguistic grounding. More specifically, I aim to show that this grounding occurs in virtue of the type of word that 'knows' is—namely, a very commonly used English verb. That said, it is important to note that the case that follows (even in conjunction with the case offered in the previous section) is *not* meant to be an all-things-considered case for the view that 'knows' is polysemous. Such a complete case would have to deal in greater depth with the expansive literature on knowledge ascriptions and denials and is not something that can be addressed fully in a single paper. Rather, the goal of this paper (defended in two separate ways—one in this section and the other in the previous section) is to argue against the claim that a component of such a case is in principle lacking—namely, to argue against the view that in principle a polysemy theory of 'knows' lacks a linguistic grounding.

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

This in turn provides us with linguistic grounds for a type of ambiguity theory of 'knows'. The rest of this section will be a defense of the claims made in this paragraph.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'know' is the fifty-ninth most commonly used English word and the eighth most commonly used English verb. The rest of the twenty-five most commonly used English verbs are (in order starting with the most common) 'be', 'have', 'do', 'say', 'get', 'make', 'go', 'take', 'see', 'come', 'think', 'look', 'want', 'give', 'use', 'find', 'tell', 'ask', 'work', 'seem', 'feel', 'try', 'leave' and 'call'.[25] I claim that most, if not all, of these verbs are ambiguous. Many may find this claim uncontroversial and be willing to grant me it without argument. However, it will not be difficult to use some standard tests for ambiguity to provide further evidence that many of these commonly used English verbs are ambiguous, so we'll do so.[26]

Let's start with the "Conjunction Reduction" test.[27] In the Conjunction Reduction test, one takes two sentences in which the possibly ambiguous word is supposedly being used in different senses and combines the two sentences into one while using the ambiguous term only once. One then looks to see if this new complex sentence is a zeugma (i.e. a sentence in which a

[25] "The OEC: Facts About the Language". Retrieved on August 14, 2015 from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/the-oec-facts-about-the-language.

[26] As far as I know, there is no such thing as an ambiguity test that is widely considered to be infallible. It is hard to avoid both false positives and false negatives—especially since such tests are typically intuition driven. Still, the exercise of looking how these verbs fair on a few tests for ambiguity seems valuable in as much as this is a means employed by linguists and in as much as the ways in which works are used in such tests often help elicit clearer intuitions about a word's univocality or ambiguity. For a discussion of many tests of ambiguity that have been put forward see Cruse (1982). One may take the absence of any discussion of Aristotelian criteria or tests for homonymy to be noteworthy. The reason why I have not engaged in such a discussion is because it seems reasonably clear that what Aristotle has in mind in discussing homonymy is significantly distinct from what a contemporary linguist has in mind discussing ambiguity. As a result, such appeals would not be terribly fruitful. For an excellent discussion of Aristotle on homonymy see Christopher Shields (2003).

[27] I am using the name that Sennet (2011) uses for this test. Cruse (1982) also discusses this test calling it "the pun test".

single words applies to two different parts of the sentence in two different senses).[28] An example of a Conjunction Reduction that results in zeugma is the following:

(1) The feathers are light.

(2) The colors are light.

(3) The feathers and colors are light.

The third sentence results in zeugma because 'light' means not heavy in regards to the feathers and not dark in regards to colors.[29]

Such zeugmas can easily be constructed using many of the verbs listed above. Take 'want' as an example.

(4) He wants for nothing.

(5) He wants pie.

(6) He wants for nothing and pie.[30]

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

(7) She is a talented artist.

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

[29] This example comes from Sennet (2011).

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

(8) She is running late.

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

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

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

(10) I made this [reed] basket.

(11) I made that [last second] basket [to win the game].

(12) I made this basket and that basket.

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

(13) He tells me that he has something to hide.

(14) His nervous demeanor tells me that he has something to hide.

(15) He and his nervous demeanor tell me that he has something to hide.

If one were to go through all twenty-five verbs listed above, one would find most lend themselves to forming zeugmas. The ability to create zeugmas using most of the commonly used English verbs is evidence for pervasive ambiguity of commonly used English verbs.

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

(16) We know our neighbors

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

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

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

(19) I know I exist

(20) I know I have hands

(21) I know I exist and have hands.

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

Another test for lexical ambiguity is the Contradiction test. On this test, a word is deemed ambiguous if a sentence uses a word twice and is not contradictory but, due to the form, would constitute a contradiction if the word used twice were univocal.[31] That is to say, on this test if

[31] This test is also put forward in Sennet (2011).

there is a way for the sentence which appears in virtue of its structure alone to be contradictory, to not be contradictory, the word used twice is deemed ambiguous. For example, the sentence:

(22) That bank isn't a bank.

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

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

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

> "Sometimes we use context to figure out with which meaning a word is being used, or which of several words that look or sound alike is being used, or even which language is being spoken. These are *presemantic* uses of context: context helps us to figure out meaning. In the case of indexicals, however, context is used *semantically*. It remains relevant after the language, words and

> meanings are all known; the meaning directs us to certain aspects of context. Both these uses of context differ from a third. In the third type of case we lack the materials we need for the proposition expressed by a statement, even though we have identified the words and their meanings, and have consulted the contextual factors the indexical meanings direct us to. Some of the constituents of the proposition expressed are *unarticulated* and we consult the context to figure out what they are. I call this the 'context-supplementing' use of context. Finally and importantly we use context to interpret the intention with which the utterance was made; what was the speaker trying to do? This is the *pragmatic* use of context."[32]

On this account of structure, the sentence 'He was over there, but not over there' won't pass the contradiction test, because the semantic indexicality of 'there' constitutes part of its structure. This is because, as I understand it, part of the structural nature of indexicals is a certain emptiness that requires a referent for full meaning. Similarly, sentences formed with non-indexical kinds of context-sensitive terms like 'flat' or 'imported' also won't be able to pass the contradiction test because the unarticulated constituent of a context is required in order to determine their meaning via "context supplementing". This is in contrast with ambiguous words like 'bank' whose ambiguity is a non-structural, presemantic feature of language and for which context plays a purely pragmatic role of helping determine what sense the speaker is intending to convey. It is for these reasons that the sentence "That bank isn't a bank" passes the contradiction test and the word 'bank' can be considered ambiguous while "He was over there, but not over there" fails and 'there' is determined to be indexical but not ambiguous. The downside of this narrowing is that it will likely be harder to get a strong intuition as to whether a sentence passes the contradiction test. Still, I think in many cases it is clear enough that the test is worth engaging in regardless.[33]

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[32] Perry (2001, 39-40); emphasis in original.

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

Before turning to sentences using commonly used English verbs, it's worth pausing to address the worry that the sentence 'That bank isn't a bank' probably still sounds somewhat unnatural to many. It is important to note that for a word to be deemed ambiguous on the contradiction test, it need not be that the contradictory sentence sounds natural. There are pragmatic reasons why these sentences often will not sound natural, despite the fact that they do in fact pass the contradiction test. Rather what is required is that there be a reading of the sentence on which the seeming contradictory sentence is not in fact contradictory.

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

(23) She made the basket but she didn't *make* the basket.

(24) It seems red but it doesn't *seem* red.

(25) Amy called Gerad, but she didn't *call* Gerad.

(26) That's what I said, even though that's not what I *said*.

(27) I use my friends but I don't *use* my friends.

We can see why (23) is not contradictory if we think back to (10)-(12) and assign sinking the shot as the meaning of 'made' and crafting or creating to 'make.' In (24) we can avoid contradiction by taking 'seems' to mean looks visually and 'seem' to mean strike one as. For (25) we can avoid contradiction when 'called' means harkened after and 'call' means a certain type of contact via phone. With (26) contradiction is bypassed by taking the first 'says' in the loose sense to mean what is conveyed and the second 'said' to refer to the actual words uttered and their literal meaning.[34] And (27) can pass the contradiction test if the first instance of 'use'

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

refers to utilizing in a non-abusive sort of manner and the second instance of 'use' refers to a sort of mere-means type of abuse of another, which Kant famously condemned.[35]

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

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

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

verbs that are ambiguous, on this functional explanation of the correlation, the probability that 'know' is ambiguous further increases.

The connection between the functions a verb plays and polysemy can also be used to respond to an objection: namely, that all my argument here has shown is that 'knows' is likely polysemous in some sense or other, but not the more specific claim that 'knows' in the propositional sense—i.e. that 'knows' as used in 'knows that' constructions—is likely polysemous. As noted earlier 'knows' rather uncontroversially is recognized to have more than one sense generally. (Take for example the difference between the propositional and acquaintance senses of 'knows'.) An objector might suggest that recognizing these sorts of sense distinctions is all that we should expect given the general linguistic data of commonly used verbs being ambiguous. However, the force of this line of reasoning is somewhat undercut if we posit that there is a connection between the functions that these verbs are meant to play and their polysemy. It is true that 'knows' serves the function of picking out that which subjects are acquainted with and well as picking out a particular positive epistemic relation subjects can stand in to a proposition. But, in addition, quite plausibly there are multiple functions that this latter type of knowing—i.e. 'knowing that' or propositional knowing—serves. This is evidenced by the variety of theories in place as to what the function of 'knows' is, and to the disagreement about what that function is.[36] In view of the plurality of answers as to what the function or value of knowing is, one can either conclude that all but (at most) one of such answers is mistaken, or one can adopt the view that there are a plurality of functions that propositional knowledge serves.[37] This latter view strikes me as by far the more plausible view. But if there are a plurality of functions that propositional knowledge serves, then it seems reasonable to think that this

[36] See for example Craig (1990), Hawthorne (2004), Kelp (2011), and Rysiew (2012).
[37] This view is adopted in Rysiew (2012).

flexibility of functionality for ‘knows that’ would lend itself to polysemy, even about ‘knows’ understood propositionally.

While the connection between the functions a verb plays and polysemy may help address the objection that my argument doesn’t go so far as to provide a *prima facie* case for distinct propositional senses of ‘knows’, it also gives rise to a different objection—namely, perhaps the varied and flexible usages of ‘knows’ indicate merely that while pragmatically it is appropriate to use ‘knows’ to pick out a variety of different epistemic states, in actuality, semantically, there remains a single fixed sense of ‘knows’ (and analogously that this may be the case with other commonly used English verbs). This is the view taken by classical invariantists about ‘knows’ of different stripes.[38] Elsewhere I have argued at length than a polysemy theory of ‘knows’ has various advantages over classical invariantist accounts of ‘knows’. A full recounting of those considerations can’t be offered here, but given the importance of the invariantist objection, it is worth making two points concerning the matter as it pertains to the argument at hand.

First, if we are to respect the force of traditional tests for ambiguity, the fact that most commonly used English verbs pass such tests ought to provide us with a reason to think that ambiguity, and not mere pragmatic flexibility, is the root of our varied applications of commonly used English verbs like ‘knows’. Second, polysemy is not something that is fixed in stone from time immemorial. Rather words can gain or lose polysemy as senses come into or out of use. Just as ‘want’ may be losing (part of) its polysemy as the use of ‘want’ to mean ‘lack’ continues to fall out of fashion, so too ‘know’ may have come to gain new senses as new uses were consistently applied and recognized by competent English speakers. Thus, the invariantist must tread the delicate line of acknowledging that there are pragmatic uses of ‘know’, which stretch

[38] For examples see Rysiew (2001, 2005, 2007), Brown (2005, 2006) and Davis (2007).

beyond the strict bounds of the word's meaning, without acknowledging that these usages are so frequent and consistent as to allow for the development of new senses. This line is not an impossible one to walk, but I tend to think that if we've hit a point that we need to posit consistent misuse of a word in a new sense, typically, such a use fails to be a misuse any longer.

Before concluding, three types of remarks are worth making. First, throughout this section I've argued that an ambiguity theory of 'knows' has a linguistic grounding due to its status as a commonly used English verb, yet at the outset I said I would be arguing for a polysemy theory of 'knows'. I have chosen to frame the majority of the discussion in this section around ambiguity because I employed linguistic tests that check for ambiguity more generally and not polysemy in particular. However, I wouldn't want to argue that we have good grounds to think most commonly used English verbs are homonymous—for indeed in most cases we can identify an etymological root and other types of relationships between these verbs' various senses. So while I have argued that these verbs are ambiguous, more specifically I claim that they are polysemous.

Second, one might agree that the facts that most commonly used English verbs are polysemous and that 'knows' is a commonly used English verb do provide a defeasible linguistic grounding for a polysemy theory of 'knows', but may protest that this linguistic evidence is too weak a to make it reasonable to conclude that 'knows' is polysemous. But such a protest would be the result of missing the point of this paper. I would remind such a critic that the goal of this particular project wasn't to show that a polysemy theory of 'knows' is the all-things-considered best position to adopt. As stated before, to make a strong all-things-considered case for a polysemy theory of 'knows' requires a great deal of extra philosophical and empirical work. I think this work can be done. However, I am not arguing for that here. Rather, my goal in this

paper is merely to argue that Stanley was mistaken in thinking there was *no linguistic grounding* for the claim that 'knows' is ambiguous. This argument is but a small part of a much bigger case to be made for a polysemy theory of 'know.'

Third, my argument has relied implicitly upon there being no relevant difference between 'knows' and the majority of other commonly used English verbs that should give us reason to think that 'knows' would not share the feature of being ambiguous. If one is able to provide a characteristic that differs between 'knows' and most other commonly used English verbs that plausibly undercuts the likelihood that 'knows' shares polysemy in common with most other commonly used English verbs, that is the type of objection that requires response. One possibility for such a difference is that 'knows' is factive and there is nothing relevantly similar with other commonly used English verbs. The reason one might think this characteristic is relevant is because factivity is non-gradable. For one who thinks that the plausibility of 'knows' being polysemous depends upon 'knows' being gradable, one might argue that the lack of factivity of 'knows' is evidence for the lack of gradability of 'knows', and that this lack of gradabiltiy in turn would suggest a lack of polysemy. As initially plausible as this line of reasoning might seem, I don't think it will succeed. The reason is because factivity is related to truth—that is, only verbs that require truth (as it is commonly assumed is required in the dominant sense of 'see' as well as for 'know') can be factive. And more than that, requiring the truth of the propositions related to is what constitutes factivity. It is because generally we don't think that the truth of a proposition comes in degrees that we think factivity doesn't come in degrees. (And in fact, if one did think the truth-value for propositions came in degrees, one would likely also think that factivity is something that comes in degrees too.) But a plausible account of the polysemy of 'knows' won't depend upon the gradability of the truthfulness of the

proposition known. If it depends on gradability at all, it will be the gradability in the level of justification. And justification, it is typically acknowledged, does come in degrees. Thus, if there is a salient difference between ‘knows’ and the other commonly used English verbs, factivity is likely not it. (Not to mention certain other commonly used English verbs like ‘see’ are also taken to be factive.)

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

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