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### Really Knowing: A Collocational Argument for an Infallibilist Sense of 'Know'

ABSTRACT: Collocations are recurrent combinations of words where one lexical item occurs near another lexical item with a frequency far greater than chance. Collocations can be used to study meaning. I argue that the collocational phrase 'really know,' in conjunction with some reasonable interpretive conclusions, provides us with evidence that the verb 'know' has an infallibilist sense. I make my case, first, by arguing that 'really' when part of the phrase 'really know' is best understood as synonymous with 'truly.' I then argue that there are two plausible interpretations of the function that 'really' plays in the phrase 'really know.' On the first interpretation, 'really' helps distinguish claims about genuine infallibilist knowing from loose talk about 'knowing.' On the second interpretation, 'really' is often used to disambiguate an infallibilist sense of 'know' from a fallibilist sense of 'know.' On either interpretation, there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.'

A collocation is, roughly, a recurrent combination of words where one lexical item occurs near another lexical item with a frequency far greater than chance.[1] Examples of collocations include 'commit crime,' 'follow your lead,' 'strong coffee,' and 'flock of sheep.'[2] Lexicographers and linguists use collocation as a method for studying word meaning and for identifying distinct senses of a word. The verb 'know' and the modifier 'really' are collocates (i.e., lexical items collocated with one another). In this paper, I argue that the collocation of 'really' and 'know,' in conjunction with some reasonable interpretive conclusions, provides evidence for the position that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.'

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I examine the verb 'forge' as an example of how collocation can be used to study meaning. Second, I present some relevant linguistic data on the

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[1] This definition is based off the one given by B. T. Sue Atkins and Michael Rundell (2008). The definition of collocation can be nuanced in various ways such that it excludes things like random reoccurrences and idioms. For a more detailed discussion of ways the term 'collocation' has been used, see Geart van der Meer 1998. As van der Meer points out it has "become clear by now that the concept of collocation means various things to various people, which is not really surprising, since discussions of the concept usually involve criteria that do not logically imply each other." In this paper, 'collocation' will be restricted to the meaning provided above.

[2] These examples come from van der Meer 1998.

collocation of 'really' and 'know' (and cognate terms).[3] Third, I assess three theories about how 'really' should be understood when it modifies 'know.' Based on this assessment, I conclude that the best reading of 'really' as part of the phrase 'really know' is as synonymous with 'truly.' Fourth, I examine some implications of 'really' being synonymous with 'truly' in the phrase 'really know.' I identify two kinds of claims about accuracy that English speakers make when saying that they 'really know that P' or 'truly know that P.' Finally, I ask whether these conclusions about the nature of 'really' as a modifier of 'know' provide evidence for the position that 'know' has an infallible sense. I conclude that they do. More specifically, I conclude that there are two plausible interpretations of the linguistic data about 'really know.' On the first interpretation, the infallibilist sense of 'know' is the only genuine sense of 'know' and fallibilist uses of 'know' are merely loose talk. On the second interpretation, 'know' is ambiguous and has both an infallibilist and a fallibilist sense. On either interpretation, there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.' If I'm right about all of this, my arguments provide evidence that views on which there is only one a fallibilist concept of knowledge and not an infallibilist one are out of step with how we use our words (at least in English).

**'To Forge'**

Modern lexicography often involves the study of linguistic corpora. A linguistic corpus is "a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research."[4] One way in which linguists use linguistic corpora is to identify aspects of word meaning, including distinct senses of words, by examining collocations.[5] To show one way in which this can be done,

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[3] Going forward, mention of the cognates forms of 'know' ('knows', 'knowing', 'knew', etc.) will typically be omitted, but generally what I say about 'know' applies to the cognates of 'know' as well.
[4] Sinclair 2005, 16.
[5] See, for example, Atkins and Rundell 2008, 302; Liu and Espino 2012, 199; Sinclair 2004.

consider an example using the verb 'forge.' In disambiguating 'forge,' lexicographers B. T. Sue Atkins and Michael Rundell note that common collocates of the verb 'forge' include "alliances, banknotes, bonds, friendships, links, metalwork, painting, partnerships, passport, relationship, signature, sword, ties, unity."[6]

Using these collocates, we can identify three distinct senses of 'forge.' First, there is 'forge' in the sense of making metal objects through the application of heat ('metalwork,' 'sword'). Second, there is 'forge' in the sense of establishing an enduring relationship or interpersonal connection ('alliances,' 'friendships,' 'partnerships,' 'relationship,' 'ties,' 'unity'). Third, there is the sense of 'forge' as mimicking handwriting or documents with criminal intent ('banknotes,' 'passport,' 'signature').[7] Collocates help us identify senses of a word by providing information about the common contexts of a word's use. This is in keeping with linguist J. R. Firth's influential notion that we "know a word by the company it keeps."[8] In the case of 'forge,' we don't need collocation to recognize the distinct meanings because they are obvious to most competent English speakers. But when lexical ambiguity exists between closely related senses of a word, which is the case for 'know' if it is ambiguous, then collocation has the potential to be much more useful. This does not mean that a word is ambiguous merely because it has collocates. Not all collocates point towards ambiguity. Rather, it means that collocates have the potential to help identify ambiguity when it is present. With this in mind, let's turn to corpus linguistics for some relevant information about 'know' and its collocates.

**'Know' and its Collocates**

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[6] Atkins and Rundell 2008, 302.

[7] 'Links' and 'bonds', themselves ambiguous words, can apply to more than one sense. With 'links', chain links connect to sense one, and business connections (think LinkedIn) connect back to sense two. 'Bonds' applies to all three senses as metal bonds, interpersonal bonds, and bonds as a type of bank note.

[8] Firth 1957, 11 (quoted in Liu and Espino 2012, 200).

'Know' is a very common word. It is the fifty-ninth most used word in the English language, and the eighth most used English verb.[9] Sketch Engine, an English language corpus management system, contains 15,031,940 instances of the lexeme 'know'.[10] Within Sketch Engine, the lexeme 'know' represents roughly 817 of every 1 million words included in the database. Common collocates of 'know' include 'well,' 'all,' 'not,' 'never,' 'also,' 'formerly,' 'commonly,' 'about,' 'now,' 'even,' 'really,' and 'widely.'[11] This set of collocates may be useful in identifying an uncontroversial bifurcation in the meaning of 'know' between 'knowing' in the sense of being acquainted *with* something on the one hand and 'knowing' in the sense of having a warranted true belief *that* something—i.e., having propositional knowledge—on the other.[12] The collocates of 'know' also help indicate a third relatively uncontroversial sense of 'know' as identifying the name by which someone or something is recognized (e.g., 'Ibn Rushd is also known as Averroes'). Collocational phrases like 'commonly known as' and 'formerly known as' are disproportionately used with 'know' in this sense (e.g., 'Cherilyn Sarkisian is commonly known simply as Cher'). That there are these distinct senses of the word 'know' is not particularly controversial.

The more controversial claim I will defend is that the collocate 'really' provides evidence that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know'—i.e., a sense of 'know' that requires infallible justification.[13] In

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[9] These rankings were retrieved on July 16, 2018 from the Oxford English Dictionary's "What Can the Oxford English Corpus Tell Us About the English Language?" [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/explore/what-can-corpus-tell-us-about-language/]. Recorded as a permalink at [https://perma.cc/VN6T-GQZL?type=image]. In 2014, Jennifer Nagel concluded—based on the frequency of the lexeme 'know' in the Corpus of Contemporary American English—that 'know' was the seventh most common English verb. For additional discussion about various ways to determine the frequency of the verb 'know' in English, see Hansen, Porter, and Francis (2019).

[10] A lexeme is a linguistic unit comprised of the various wordforms represented under a single dictionary headword. In the case of the lexeme 'know' this includes 'know' and its cognates such as 'knows', 'knowing', 'knew', etc.

[11] Sketch Engine data was collected in 2018. Data from other corpora was collected between 2020-2022.

[12] Some philosophers make the additional distinction between knowing that and things like knowing what, knowing where, knowing when, etc. This latter category is often referred to as "knowledge-wh." See, e.g., Brogaard 2009. For purposes of this paper, I will follow in the tradition of James Higginbotham 1996 and others and treat knowing-that and knowledge-wh together as part of the same mode of knowing, except for knowing-how. This category of knowing-that, plus knowing-wh, minus knowing-how is what I mean by propositional knowing.

[13] In this paper, I remain neutral about various interpretations of what constitutes infallible justification, although I treat requiring epistemic certainty for knowledge as sufficient to count as requiring infallibilist justification for knowledge.

order to do this, we need to have some more information about the collocational relationship between 'really' and 'know.' Sketch Engine contains 70,908 instances of collocation between the word 'really' and the lexeme 'know.' Thus, the collocation of 'really' and 'know' represents roughly 1 out of every 200 usages of the lexeme 'know' in the corpus. Similar ratios exist in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). In COCA, there are 2,762,834 instances of the lexeme 'know,' and 12,626 cases where the lexeme is modified with the word 'really' directly in front. Thus, in COCA the lexeme 'know' is modified by 'really' directly before it roughly 1 out of every 219 times. The ratio in the BNC is 1 out of every 253, with 176,998 instances of the lexeme 'know' and 699 direct modifications by 'really.'[14]

The remainder of this paper assesses various theories about what the collocation between 'really' and 'know' can tell us about the meaning of the lexeme 'know' and the phrase 'really know.' Before examining those theories, it is worth noting one additional empirical observation about 'know' and 'really know' claims gleaned from English language corpuses. This observation is that corpus analysis suggests that English speakers are far more reticent to ascribe 'really knowing' as compared to 'knowing' and far quicker to deny 'really knowing' compared to 'knowing.'

In a recent study, Mark Satta, Lacey J. Davidson, and Augustus Wachbrit assessed a random sample of 300 sentences from the BNC for which 150 sentences contained 'know' unmodified by 'really' and another 150 contained the phrase 'really know.' They found that after excluding discourse markers (i.e., filler phrases and idioms), 42% of the sentences in the sample with 'know' unmodified by 'really' were knowledge ascriptions (of the general form 'S knows that P') and 34% were knowledge denials (of the general form 'S doesn't know that P'). In contrast, they found that only 9% of the sentences in the 'really know' sample were knowledge ascriptions while 73% were knowledge denials.[15]

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[14] Davies 2020 and 2004. Data was collected on January 2, 2021 using search tools for COCA and BNC available at https://www.english-corpora.org/.
[15] Satta, Davidson, and Wachbrit 2021.

They found something similar using sentences from COCA. In a second study, Satta, Davidson, and Wachbrit assessed a random sample of 240 sentences with 'what' followed by 'know' (or a cognate form) that was unmodified by 'really' and another 180 sentences with 'know' (or a cognate form) directed preceded by 'really' and directly followed by 'what.' In this second study, they found that—after excluding discourse markers—23% of sentences in the unmodified 'know what' condition were knowledge ascriptions and 36% were knowledge denials. In contrast, they found that only 6% of sentences in the 'really know what' condition were knowledge ascriptions and that 73% were knowledge denials.[16] These studies suggest that English speakers are much quicker to deny 'really knowing' than 'knowing.'

**Three Interpretations of 'Really' in 'Really Know'**

In order to effectively investigate what, if anything, we can learn about the meaning of 'know' from the collocational phrase 'really know,' we need to have some sense of how the modifier 'really' functions in the phrase 'really know.' Linguistic study of 'really' has revealed that the meanings and functions of 'really' are highly versatile and vary across contexts.[17] There is no single general function of 'really.' Thus, I examine three accounts of the meaning of 'really' specifically as used in the phrase 'really know.'

Jason Stanley has considered two possibilities for interpreting 'really' in the phrase 'really knows.' The first possibility is that 'really' indicates gradability. The second is that 'really' is a hedge word.[18] To begin, let's consider both.

Examples of 'really' indicating gradability include 'That is really flat' (meaning roughly that 'That is very flat') and 'She is really tall' (meaning roughly that 'She is very tall'). Stanley rejects this

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[16] Satta, Davidson, and Wachbrit 2021.
[17] Liu and Espino 2012, 199, 207; cf. Quirk et al. 1985.
[18] Stanley 2005, 36-37.

interpretation of the word 'really' in 'really knows' on the ground that "negations of degree-modifier uses of 'really' can be conjoined with assertions of the unmodified forms without inconsistency."[19] Thus, for example, according to Stanley one can naturally say:

(1) "John is tall but not really tall."

and,

(2) "Michigan is flat but not really flat."

but the following sentence is odd:

(3) "John knows that the bank is open but doesn't really know that the bank is open."

I agree with Stanley that interpreting 'really' as a degree-modifier in cases of 'really knows' is mistaken. I also agree that (3) is an odd sentence that counts against the view that 'really' typically functions as a degree-modifier in the phrase 'really know.'

There is another reason to conclude that 'really' does not typically function to indicate gradability in instances of 'really knows.' Typically, when 'really' functions as a degree-modifier, 'really' can be switched with 'very' with little or no loss of meaning—e.g., switching 'really clean' to 'very clean,' 'really drunk' to 'very drunk,' and 'really happy' to 'very happy.' However, one cannot comfortably exchange the claim that 'John really knows the bank is going to be open tomorrow' (which is a perfectly natural thing to say) with 'John very knows the bank is going to be open tomorrow' (which is a perfectly odd thing to say). Thus, 'really' likely isn't typically functioning to indicate gradability in the phrase 'really know.'[20]

That said, there are cases where it seems plausible that 'really' functions as a degree-modifier yet cannot comfortably be switched out with 'very.' For example, 'I really care about you' cannot be

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[19] Stanley 2005, 37.

[20] Even if the modifier 'really' in the phrase 'really know' doesn't function to indicate gradability, it could still be the case that knowledge is in fact something that comes in degrees (either via S's level of justification for P or via the level of S's confidence that P). For a defense of the view that 'know' is gradable, see Hetherington 2011. For a discussion of how 'know' could still be gradable even though the modifier 'very' cannot be used to modify it, see Russell 2022, 790-92.

smoothly altered to 'I very care about you' and 'I really loathe you' cannot be smoothly altered to 'I very loathe you.' However, in these instances where 'very' cannot be substituted 'very much' can, and 'I very much care about you' and 'I very much loathe you' seem more felicitous than 'John very much knows that the bank will be open.' This is made even clearer with the constructions 'I care about you very much,' 'I loathe you very much,' and 'John knows that the bank will be open very much.''

Both Stanley's negation-and-assertion criticism and my 'very' substitution criticism provide reason to think it is unlikely that the typical function of 'really' in instances of 'really know' is to indicate gradability. However, there is a third reason that is more straightforward—namely, competent speakers of English can simply tell that 'really' is not functioning to indicate gradability in a sentence like 'John really knows the bank is going to be open tomorrow.' When I entertain the possibility that 'really' functions to indicate gradability in most sentences employing the phrase 'really know,' it just intuitively seems mistaken. As users of language, we should trust ourselves enough to take as evidence interpretations of our language that seem clearly wrong at first blush, while still keeping in mind that sometimes there may be compelling reasons for us to acknowledge that even our strong initial impressions are misguided.

After rejecting the degree-modifying interpretation of 'really,' Stanley offers his interpretation of 'really' as a hedge. By a hedge, Stanley means "some expression the linguistic function of which is to comment on the appropriateness of asserting the embedded sentence (as in uses of metalinguistic negation such as 'John isn't happy, he's ecstatic')."[21] Stanley describes how 'really' works as a hedge in the case of 'really knows' as follows.

> "The occurrence of 'really' in knowledge ascriptions appears to be a hedge in this sense—in so using 'really', one concedes the infelicity of asserting that one knows the proposition in question. Note that this is consistent with it being perfectly true throughout that one knows that proposition."[22]

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[21] Stanley 2005, 37, footnote 3.
[22] Stanley 2005, 37, footnote 3.

Stanley does not elaborate, so one is left to fill in the details as to what exactly he means. I take it that he has in mind something like this. Let's say I ask you "Do you really know the bank is open tomorrow?" after having hypothesized about various reasons why it might be closed. Even though you might know that the bank is open tomorrow (and might know or justifiedly believe that you know it), you think it may be linguistically infelicitous to reply that you know given the skeptical hypotheses I've made salient. As a result, you add the hedge and say "I guess I don't really know the bank will be open" in a manner that remains consistent with your earlier assertion that you know the bank is open tomorrow. If the "embedded" claim is that I don't know that the bank will be open tomorrow, the modifier 'really' signals something to the receiver of the message about the felicity of this claim.

Perhaps Stanley's hedge theory of 'really know' works when put to the task of explaining why you respond the way that you do to my challenge that you don't 'really know' even if you retain a correct belief that you know. But the hedge theory doesn't explain the instance of 'really know' in my initial question to you—i.e., it doesn't explain what I'm doing when I ask you whether you 'really know' the bank is open to begin with. The use of 'really know' in my question doesn't seem like a concession about the infelicity of you knowing, nor does it seem to say anything about an embedded sentence within my claim. It is more plausibly a direct way for me to challenge your assertion that you know the bank will be open tomorrow. Furthermore, claims such as 'Nobody really knows what they're talking about' or 'He doesn't really know all that' seem more like direct denials of knowledge than mere concessions of the infelicity of claiming knowledge. Thus, it seems that the hedge theory of 'really know' doesn't work either.

There is a third way to understand the function of 'really' in instances of 'really know' that I consider more plausible. On this third way, 'really' typically functions as a modifier roughly

synonymous with 'truly.' Examples of 'really' functioning in this way are exemplified by the following

sentences.[23]

>> a1) Stephanie really loves her dogs.
>> a2) Stephanie truly loves her dogs.
>>
>> b1) Bob really believes Monét.
>> b2) Bob truly believes Monét.
>>
>> c1) Pandora really knows that the library is open.
>> c2) Pandora truly knows that the library is open.

As indicated by these examples, 'really know' does well on a substitution test of 'truly' for 'really.' Little

to no meaning is lost when 'truly' is substituted for 'really' in any context where 'really know' would

sensibly be used. Furthermore, other epistemic verbs like 'understand,' 'comprehend,' and 'think' lend

themselves to being modified by 'really' and 'truly' interchangeably too. This provides additional

reason to think that English's most prevalent epistemic verb would function similarly.

Another class of verbs that lend themselves to interchangeable modifications by 'really' and

'truly' are long-term emotion states like love, hate, caring for, despising, loathing, etc. We now have a

fuller explanation for our 'very much' verbs from earlier. The explanation is that these verbs also fall

into the category of being modified like 'truly' when modified by 'really.' The fact that the substitution

conditions for 'really knows' match substitution conditions for phrases like 'really loves' and 'really

hates' further bolsters the 'really' as 'truly' interpretation. If the 'really' as like 'truly' suggestion is right,

we have made progress in interpreting what 'really' means in 'really knows' locutions, because we now

have identified another word, 'truly,' that works in an analogous way.

The interpretation of 'really knows' as 'truly knows' is further bolstered by the fact that we can

make sense of both the questions asked and the answers given in skeptical scenarios implementing

the phrase 'really knows.' If I intend to challenge your position about whether you *truly* know that the

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[23] For more information on the relationship between 'really' and 'truly,' see Liu and Espino 2012.

bank is going to be open tomorrow, it makes sense for me to ask "do you *really* know the bank will be open tomorrow?" Similarly, you can sensibly respond with either "yes, I really do know" or "no, I suppose I don't really know" as a way of conveying whether you believe that you do or do not truly know. Thus, understanding 'really' when part of the phrase 'really know' as interchangeable with 'truly' avoids the problems we encountered in treating 'really' as indicating gradability or as a hedge.

The discovery that 'really' functions synonymously with 'truly' in the phrase 'really know' marks progress, but our inquiry isn't over. If 'really' is synonymous with 'truly' when used to modify 'know,' we need to better understand what functions 'truly' typically plays when modifying verbs like 'know.' In the next section, I examine two functions 'truly' can play when modifying verbs like 'know.'

**Factual Accuracy versus Conceptual Accuracy**

When we modify x with 'truly,' part of what we indicate is that it is *accurate* to say that the thing modified is x. The same is true for 'really' in contexts where 'really' is interchangeable with 'truly.' Accuracy in this context comes in two types: factual accuracy and conceptual accuracy.[24] These two types of accuracy can be distinguished with examples.

*Factual accuracy:* A parent and their child attend a play. In the play, a loveable character dies a dramatic death. If the parent notices that their child appears especially distressed by this, they might say something like: "Don't worry. They're not really/truly dead. They're just pretending!" Here the parent takes for granted that the child has at least a somewhat accurate understanding of the word 'dead' and the concept death. The parent employs that presupposition when correcting the child's factually inaccurate understanding of the present state of affairs. It is because the parent believes that the child's mistake is rooted in a factual misunderstanding about the way the world is—not a mistake about the concept of death—that the parent counts as correcting a factual inaccuracy with their

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[24] Roderick Chisholm makes a similar distinction in Chisholm 1951.

statement. If the child comes to realize that the actor is fine and will get up later, the child is then applying the concept dead in a way that is factually accurate to the situation.

*Conceptual accuracy:* A child comes home from school and tells their parent that a classmate died at school today. The concerned parent asks what happened. The child explains that their classmate fell off a swing and laid there before getting back up to play. The parent might explain to their child that what happened to their classmate was not death. If the parent does so, they are seeking to correct an apparent inaccuracy in how the child conceives of death and the circumstances under which it is fitting to apply words like 'death' and 'dead.' The conversation is about the meaning of the term 'dead,' not about the facts of what happened at the playground.

When someone says that 'S really/truly knows that P' or that 'S really/truly doesn't know that P,' they may be making a claim focused on either factual accuracy or conceptual accuracy. Consider the following examples, which provide clarification about the factual accuracy of a knowledge ascription:

(a) 'Bonnie doesn't really [i.e., truly] know what she's talking about. Half the stuff she said isn't even true.'

(b) 'Initially you seemed so unsure of yourself, I doubted whether you believed—much less really [i.e. truly] knew—some of the correct answers you gave.'

(c) 'Clyde doesn't really [i.e., truly] know the answer to this problem. He made a mistake on line 7.'

In (a) the speaker uses 'really know' to state that the purported knower's claims aren't actually *true*. In (b) the speaker uses 'really knows' to show that they doubted whether the purported knower had the relevant *belief*. In (c) the speaker highlights that the purported knower was mistaken about the nature of the *justification* for their belief (and potentially about the belief's truth too). In each example, the 'really know' claim grows out of a factual claim about whether a traditional element for knowledge— truth, belief, or justification—is present. In none of these cases does the 'really know' claim's value

rest on making a conceptual clarification about what it means to know (although they help illuminate

the connection between knowing and truth, belief, and justification).

But 'really know' and 'truly know' can also be used to elucidate how the concept picked out

by 'know' should be understood. Consider these examples:

(d) "I don't just believe that I'll go to heaven when I die. I really [i.e., truly] know it, and because of that I have no doubts whatsoever."

(e) "When I was younger, I thought I really [i.e., truly] knew a lot of things. But as I've gotten older, I've simultaneously gained more justification for my beliefs while also coming to understand that I don't really [i.e., truly] know much at all."

(f) "But at the end of the day what do we really [i.e., truly] know? What if this is all just like the Matrix or an inception or something crazy like that?"

In these cases, the modifier 'really' in the phrase 'really know' appears to do more than simply

comment on the veridicality of a knowledge claim. In these examples, 'really' frames how the concept

picked out by 'knowing' in those sentences ought to be understood. 'Really know' in these sentences

seems to convey a message about the conceptual accuracy of knowledge—namely, that *really* knowing

is something hard to achieve.

Peter Unger has made use of the intuitive way in which *really* knowing seems harder to achieve

than knowing. Unger illustrates the point with an example of a student who is asked when the Battle

of Hastings was fought. Unger writes that "[t]he student fumbles about and, eventually, unconfidently

says what is true: The Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066," and on the basis of this, the examiner

may conclude that the student "knows" when the Battle of Hastings occurred.[25] But then Unger shifts

gears, writing:

 "[I]nstead of looking at something so apparently innocent as 'He knows that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066,' we may encounter the apparently more relevant 'He (really) knows that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066.' Now, we begin to be quite uncertain, I suggest, that the fumbling student knows the thing."[26]

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[25] Unger 1975, 83-84.
[26] Unger 1975, 84.

Unger's intuitions seem to match what corpus analyses of 'know' and 'really know' have shown: as a general matter, we are far more hesitant to claim that 'S really knows that P' than to claim that 'S knows that P.'[27]

## Loose Use and Ambiguous Use

So far, I've argued that (i) 'really' should be understood as synonymous with 'truly' in the phrase 'really know,' and (ii) sometimes the function that 'really' and 'truly' play—including when used in the phrases 'really know' and 'truly know'—is to draw attention to the conceptual accuracy of the thing modified. The questions that remain are the following. First, how should we understand the nature of the conceptual clarification 'really' and 'truly' typically provide when they modify 'know' for conceptual accuracy? Second, what does the nature of this conceptual clarification suggest about the meaning of 'know'?

There seem to be two plausible theories about what kind of conceptual clarification 'really' typically provides in the phrases 'really know.' One of these theories posits that 'really' sometimes modifies 'know' to help distinguish genuine instances of knowing from cases of non-knowing where the term 'know' is applied by way of loose talk. The other theory is that 'know' is lexically ambiguous between at least two senses of propositional knowledge and that 'really' sometimes modifies 'know' to flag that one is using the more demanding and more paradigmatic sense of 'know.' After examining both proposals, I conclude that it is unnecessary to choose between these two theories for the purpose of arguing that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know' because accepting either theory leads to the conclusion that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.'

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[27] As Greg Stoutenburg has noted, Unger seems to treat 'really' synonymously with 'truly' in the chapter from which this example occurs (Stoutenburg 2017a, 454).

*The Loose Use Theory:* The first theory is that 'really' and 'truly' function to indicate that the object, x, that they are modifying is a real or true instance of x in contrast with other instances where we speak of 'x' but what we are speaking of is not strictly speaking a genuine instance of x at all. This is all I mean by a loose use theory.[28] For example, we may speak of 'loving' ice cream or our running shoes or those flowers we passed by earlier, but we may not *really—i.e., truly, genuinely*—love those things in the way that we genuinely love our significant other or our best friend or our magnum opus. On this theory, what we experience towards ice cream, running shoes, or flowers isn't *technically* love at all. It is not conceptually accurate, strictly speaking, to say that we love those things. I'm not endorsing this as the correct position about 'love.' Rather, I offer it as a plausible and, I hope, easy-to-grasp analogue to how 'really know' works on this first theory. (I return to the semantics of 'love' again later.)

When this first position is applied to the case of 'know', we get a "loose use" theory of knowledge where some knowledge ascriptions that turn out to be false—strictly speaking—while other knowledge ascriptions are genuine. This is Unger's explanation of cases like his Battle of Hastings example.[29] This kind of position has also been advocated by several other philosophers in recent years including Wayne Davis, Christos Kyriacou, Nevin Climenhaga, and Greg Stoutenburg.[30] To get a sense for how the position works in practice, consider the following example.

> Bonnie and Clyde are at the bank on a busy Friday afternoon. They are there to inspect
> the bank as part of their preparations to rob it. Suppose they want to rob the bank

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[28] This is a thinner, more ecumenical account of what constitutes loose use compared to what some other defenders and detractors of a loose use account of 'know' have meant by "loose use" or "loose talk." See, e.g., Davis 2007, Stoutenburg 2021. While debates about the (de)merits of various loose use accounts are interesting and important, these differences are not significant for my purposes. This is because the basic functional role that 'really' plays in modifying 'really know' is the same on all these loose use accounts: it flags, in some way, that the speaker is using 'know' strictly rather than loosely. I remain neutral about whether a speaker *intends* to flag this and about whether they believe they are speaking truly. I also remain neutral about what manner, if any, in which the speaker's audience understands or believes that 'really' plays this flagging role' and about whether the audience believes what was said was true.

[29] Unger 1975, Ch. 2.

[30] Davis 2007, Kyriacou 2020, 2021, Climenhaga 2017, 2021, and Stoutenburg 2016. Stoutenburg has more recently rejected what he calls the "loose talk theory" for his "Pragmatic Error Skepticism" (2021). But what he considers the loose talk theory is more specific than the account of loose use I employ here. I take my thin account of loose use to be compatible with his Pragmatic Error Theory.

when it is open but not too busy. They begin discreetly discussing when to rob the bank.

**Clyde:** We should just come back tomorrow. We know the bank will be open. Their hours are posted here on the door.

**Bonnie:** But do we really know that? What if they've changed their hours?

**Clyde:** Okay, I suppose I don't really know the bank will be open tomorrow. Let's do it sometime next week.

On a loose use theory of knowing, where the modifier 'really' in the phrase 'really know' helps separate the genuine instances of knowing from instances of loose use, Clyde's initial knowledge assertion is strictly speaking false and Bonnie's use of 'really know' pushes for conceptual accuracy by prodding Clyde to focus on knowing in its true, higher-stakes form. Clyde's subsequent knowledge denial indicates that he has moved from speaking loosely of knowing to speaking of knowing in the strict sense.

The suggestion here is not that the word 'really' is essential for making true claims about knowledge in the strict sense. Bonnie and Clyde could have had their exchange without putting the modifier 'really' before 'know.' Rather, the claim is that modifiers like 'really' and 'truly' help facilitate clear communication as useful verbal markers that convey to an interlocutor that one is interested in whether something is a genuine instance of knowledge rather than just loose talk. And because these markers are useful, they are often used to convey that one is interested in the actual concept of knowledge, strictly speaking.[31]

A strength of this position is that—unlike the gradability or hedge theories of 'really know'—it provides a cogent explanation both of Bonnie's use of 'really know' in her question and of Clyde's use of 'really know' in his response, as shown by the analysis of their conversation above. Another strength of this position is that it explains the conceptual accuracy role that 'really' and 'truly' play in

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[31] This kind of marker is similar to what Peter Lasersohn (1999) calls a "slack regulator." More specifically, 'really' and 'truly' function similarly to strengthening slack regulators (cf. Russell 2022, 795).

a way that is clearly linked back to the meanings of their root words 'real' and 'true.' By asking Clyde

if he really knows that the bank will be open tomorrow, Bonnie is asking if his claim was about a *real*

instance of knowledge versus just loose talk.

Such a loose use theory seems to generate the conclusion that many of our ordinary everyday

knowledge ascriptions turn out to be false. People can often be prodded into concluding that they

don't *really* know P, even if they are willing to claim that they know P. This is evidenced both by

thought experiments like Unger's Battle of Hastings case and by the corpus data analyses discussed

earlier. Given all this, the loose use theory seems to count in favor of the view that the real meaning

of 'know' is infallibilist.

Another data point in favor of the infallibilist interpretation of 'know' on the loose use theory

is the connection that seems to exist between the way we talk about what we 'really know' and what

we 'know for certain.' Philosophers favoring an infallibilist account of knowledge on which knowledge

requires certainty have noted this connection before. For example, Unger writes that "while we might

feel nothing contradictory, at first, in saying 'He knows that it is raining, but he isn't certain of it,' we

should feel differently about our saying 'He really knows that it is raining, but he isn't certain of it.'"[32]

Similarly, Nevin Climenhaga has argued as follows:

> [I]t is plausible that we would use 'know for certain' – along with related locutions like
> 'really know' or '*know*' (with the appropriate stress) – to make clear that we are *not*
> engaging in loose talk, by reinforcing what is already literally asserted with 'know.'
> These locutions are necessary, not because they differ in their semantic content from
> 'know,' but because "S knows that P" is regularly used to communicate the presence
> of weaker doxastic states: saying instead "S really knows that P" or "S knows for
> certain that P" make clear that we are interested in communicating something *stronger*
> than this – that knowledge *really is* present.[33]

Unger and Climenhaga both make these connections in the service of skeptical infallibilist accounts

of 'knowing.' But the connection between 'knowing for certain' and 'really know' has been

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[32] Unger 1975, 85.
[33] Climenhaga 2017, 192.

acknowledged even by those who think we manage to know many things with certainty. For example, in his oft-cited "A Defence of Common Sense," G. E. Moore identifies a substantial set of claims—such as "There exists at present a living human body, which is my body," "I have had dreams," and "I have had feelings of many different kinds"—which he classified together under the heading (1). Of this set of premises, he writes "But do I really know all the propositions in (1) to be true? Isn't it possible that I merely believe them? Or know them to be highly probable? In answer to this question, I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I do know them, with certainty."[34]

While Moore was comfortable claiming that he 'really knew' many things with certainty, most of us are less optimistic about our abilities to know with certainty. Thus, for most of us it would seem, accepting a loose use theory of 'know' on which strictly knowing requires certainty means accepting that we don't know much and that many of our ordinary knowledge-that claims are instances of loose use and strictly speaking false. For many epistemologists, it is a serious downside of a position if it leads to the conclusion that most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions turn out to be false. Regardless of whether this *should* be considered a serious downside, for the epistemologist who treats such skeptical outcomes as intolerable, there is another plausible theory available.

*The Lexical Ambiguity Theory:* On this second theory, 'really' and 'truly' function to indicate that the object x being modified is a *paradigmatic* or *pure* instance of x, such that the instance of x is of a particular rarified type. This is similar to the way that you might call someone who has proven themself to be an exemplary friend a 'real friend' or a 'true friend.' This doesn't mean that someone whom you wouldn't label as a 'real friend' or 'true friend' in this sense is not your friend in any sense. It just means that they are not of this paradigmatic and particularly strong friend type.

On this position, just as one might identify two senses of 'friend,' so too we can identify two senses of propositional 'knowing.' And just as the modifiers 'real' and 'true' can help us communicate

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[34] Moore 1925/1959.

that we are speaking of 'friend' in a paradigmatic or strong sense, so too the modifiers 'really' and 'truly' can help us communicate that we are speaking of 'knowing' in a paradigmatic or pure sense. On this account, the modifier 'really' provides conceptual clarity by communicating which sense of 'know' the speaker is talking about.

That 'know' might be ambiguous in this way is a position that's been put forward by several epistemologists, among them Norman Malcolm who suggested that there was a "weak" and "strong" sense of knowing.[35] For the sake of argument, let's assume for the moment that Malcolm is correct. We'll use $know_S$ to refer to knowing in the strong sense of the word (e.g., in the sense requiring a greater or maximal degree of justification) and $know_W$ to refer to knowing in the weak sense (e.g., requiring a lesser degree of justification). What I am suggesting is that if these two senses both exist, then what the modifier 'really' is doing is helping communicate that the speaker is referring to $know_S$ when they speak of 'really knowing.' This doesn't mean that whenever 'knowing' is referenced without the modifier 'really' that what the speaker has in mind is $knowledge_W$. What it does mean is that sometimes the modifier 'really' plays a role in the disambiguation process between $know_S$ and $know_W$.

Like the loose use theory, this second view has the strength of being able to makes sense both of questions about whether one 'really knows' and of knowledge denials in response to such questions. We can observe this by returning to Bonnie and Clyde's conversation from earlier.

> **Clyde:** We should just come back tomorrow. We know the bank will be open. Their hours are posted here on the door.
>
> **Bonnie:** But do we really know that? What if they've changed their hours?
>
> **Clyde:** Okay, I suppose I don't really know the bank will be open tomorrow. Let's do it sometime next week.

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[35] Malcolm (1952). Other defenses of ambiguity theories of 'know' include Feldman (1986), Engel (2004), Steup (2005), van Woudenberg (2006), Reed (2013), and Satta (2018a, 2018b, 2020).

On the ambiguity theory, Clyde's initial utterance was likely about knowing$_W$. On the ambiguity theory, the addition of the term 'really' in Bonnie's questions indicates to Clyde that Bonnie is concerned with knowing$_S$. Clyde's subsequent claim that he doesn't 'really know' communicates back to Bonnie that he's denying that he knows in the sense of knowing that was of concern to her, namely, knowing$_S$.

For those who find the idea that we know very little to come at a high theoretical cost, the ambiguity theory has an advantage over the loose use theory in that it does not provide us with a reason to think that the truth of most of our everyday knowledge ascriptions are false, so long as many of our everyday knowledge ascriptions are about knowing$_W$. However, a potential weakness of the ambiguity theory is that one might find it odd that there is a legitimate sense of the word 'know' (know$_W$) to which the modifier 'really' cannot always easily be applied. The loose use theory has an advantage here because it claims that *only* those instances where the modifier 'really' can be added for the purpose of clarifying conceptual accuracy are true instances of knowledge. I think this weakness is marginal and can be overcome if we reflect upon the fact that other words where 'really x' is best interpreted as synonymous with 'truly x' are plausibly also ambiguous. We can observe this by returning to the verb 'love.' When we say we 'really love' something, it is plausible that we are sometimes conveying conceptual accuracy by picking out a paradigmatic or strong sense of 'love' that doesn't negate that 'love' also refers to other kinds of lesser amorous states. On this position, we can properly be said to love mint chocolate chip ice cream and we can properly be said to love a romantic partner, but what it means to 'love' mint chocolate chip ice cream is different than what it means to 'love' a romantic partner.

One might also think that a weakness of the ambiguity theory is that it violates a presumption, held in some philosophical circles, against positing ambiguity.[36] But such a presumption is out of step with the linguistic data. As Jennifer Rodd notes, "[l]exical ambiguity is ubiquitous" and "[m]ost words

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[36] Ben Phillips surveys some versions of this position, which he seeks to refute, in Phillips 2012.

are ambiguous."[37] And as Yael Ravin and Claudia Lecock note, "the most commonly used words tend

to be the most polysemous."[38] Words are polysemous when their various senses have related meanings

(e.g., 'arch,' 'crane,' 'run'). As expressed earlier, 'know' is a remarkably common English word. Thus,

it fits the pattern of words that are likely to be polysemous. Thus, I don't think the fact that *polysemism*

*about 'know'*—which is what I'll call this view that 'know' has more than one propositional sense—

posits ambiguity counts as a serious mark against it compared to the loose use view.

But for purposes of defending the view that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know,' it is not

necessary to determine whether the loose use theory versus polysemism about 'know' is correct. This

is because on either account, at least one of the senses of 'know' is best interpreted as an infallibilist

sense of 'know.' Earlier, I argued that if we adopt a loose use theory of 'know' on which the phrase

'really know' signals that one is talking about a genuine instance of knowing, one should conclude that

the single genuine sense of 'know' is an infallibilist one. Now, I'll argue that the best way of interpreting

$know_S$ is as an infallibilist sense of 'know.'

Assuming polysemism about 'know,' the best way to understand the function of 'really' in the

phrase 'really know' is that it flags a paradigmatic or ideal kind of knowing. Both philosophical

arguments and empirical data suggest that this paradigmatic kind of knowing is hard to achieve. The

history of philosophy provides strong reason to think that the paradigm case of hard-to-achieve

knowledge is infallibilist knowledge. The evidence for this last premise comes from how

epistemologists and others doing the history of epistemology generally interpret our historical

understanding of what it meant to know in the past. Take, for example, the following claim from

Kevin Meeker and Ted Poston:

> "Before the twentieth century, and even during much of the twentieth century,
> knowledge involved certainty or some such strong modal notion. Roughly speaking,
> to know that p meant that one was justifiably certain that p was true. Along similar

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[37] Rodd 2018, 96.
[38] Ravin and Leacock 2000, 1.

lines, to know that p meant that one had a rationally infallible belief that p. Worries that our beliefs did not meet such a highly exalted standard loomed large historically. But not so much now. For we have learned to live with fallibilism; we are chastened knowers."[39]

Even from their perspective as "chastened knowers," Meeker and Poston recognize that for most of Western philosophy's history infallibilist knowledge was the paradigm. The only reason, it would seem, that this paradigm was replaced in epistemology was a recognition that this "exalted standard" was one that typically could not be met, which in recent years many epistemologists have treated as an intolerable outcome for the epistemic state identified as 'knowledge'.[40]

As another example, Robert Pasnau has argued that "the history of our theorizing about knowledge" has been dominated by "idealized epistemology" which "aspires, first, to describe the epistemic ideal that human beings might hope to achieve and then, second, to chart the various ways in which we commonly fall off from that ideal."[41] Pasnau concludes that for most of epistemology's history that epistemic ideal was infallible certainty.[42] Pasnau discusses that even though many luminaries in the history of epistemology did not think that such infallible certainty was obtainable, it remained the epistemic ideal nonetheless.[43] This account accords well with the theory that the modifier 'really' helps identify a pure and lofty paradigm for knowing, which differs from a more relaxed understanding of knowing. But if the epistemic ideal is infallibilist knowledge, it seems most natural that the paradigmatic, pure sense of 'knowing' often picked out by phrases like 'really know' and 'know for certain' is an infallibilist sense of 'know.' Therefore, this second interpretation of 'really know' is not just any form of polysemism about 'knowledge.' Rather, it is what we might call *infallibilist polysemism*—i.e., the view that 'know' has more than one propositional sense, one of which is

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[39] Meeker and Poston 2010, 223.
[40] For more information about this, see Kyriacou (unpublished m.s.).
[41] Pasnau 2017, 3.
[42] Pasnau 2017, 28-29.
[43] Pasnau 2017, 41.

infallibilist.[44] Thus, whether one accepts a loose use theory of 'really know' or a polysemy theory of 'really know,' one should conclude that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.'

## Conclusion

I've argued that the modifier 'really' in the collocational phrase 'really know' is best understood as synonymous with the word 'truly' and that if we take 'really' as synonymous with 'truly,' there are two plausible interpretations of what 'really' be doing in the phrase 'really know.' First, 'really' might be distinguishing genuine instance of knowledge from loose talk. Second, 'really' might be flagging a paradigmatic sense of 'knowing.' Both interpretations suggest that there is an infallibilist sense of 'know.'[45]

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[44] For another example of this view, see Kyriacou 2017.

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