Draft. Please cite the published version in International Journal for the Study of Skepticism, doi: [10.1163/22105700-bja10024](https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=STOCKA-2&proxyId=&u=https%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1163%2F22105700-bja10024)

Concessive Knowledge Attributions Cannot Be Explained Pragmatically

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ABSTRACT: “I know that p but it is possible that not-p” sounds contradictory. Some philosophers, notably David Lewis, have taken this as evidence that knowledge requires infallibility. Others have attempted to undermine that inference by arguing that there is a plausible pragmatic explanation of why such sentences sound odd, and thus do not undermine fallibilism. I argue that the proffered pragmatic explanations fail, and thus it is reasonable to conclude that concessive knowledge attributions are genuine contradictions.

Keywords: concessive knowledge attributions; semantics of knowledge attributions; pragmatics of knowledge attributions; infallibilism

\* \* \*

Here is an argument that knowledge requires the elimination of every possibility of error.

(P1) Overt expressions that one knows that a proposition is true while conceding that it may be false strike us as contradictory.

(P2) If (P1), then (by our standards) to know that a proposition is true, one must be able to eliminate the possibility that the proposition is false.

(C) Therefore, (by our standards) to know that a proposition is true, one must be able to eliminate the possibility that the proposition is false.

The argument is clearly valid. One might challenge the argument by arguing that one of its premises is false. In this paper I defend both premises. A standard way of objecting to (P2) is to offer a pragmatic explanation of why concessive knowledge attributions (as in (P1)) sound false if they are often true, so I focus attention on that kind of defense of (P2). Pragmatic explanations of why concessive knowledge attributions sound false have been defended by Rysiew (2001), later developed in Dougherty and Rysiew (2009), and offered by Brown (2018). These philosophers argue that knowledge is fallible and that psychological and conversational factors explain why we often mistakenly think concessive knowledge attributions sound false even though they are often true. I will argue that these pragmatic accounts fail to explain the infelicity of concessive knowledge attributions, and thus a semantic solution is the most plausible explanation.

First, let us examine (P1). David Lewis said,

[I]t seems as if knowledge must be by definition infallible. If you claim that S knows that p, and yet you grant that S cannot eliminate a certain possibility in which not-p, it certainly seems as if you have granted that S does not after all know that p. To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just *sounds* contradictory (1996, p. 549).

Lewis goes on to present a view that attempts to incorporate the idea that knowing requires impossibility of error: specifically, he devises a set of rules that determine what does and does not count as possible *within a context*. He goes on to say,

I may properly ignore some uneliminated possibilities; I may not properly ignore others. Our definition of knowledge requires a *sotto voce* proviso. S knows that p iff S’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-p—Psst!—except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring (554).

That Lewis found himself led to adopt this awkward position shows how forcefully the intuition that knowledge is infallible pulls on even a staunch anti-skeptic.

Sentences of the form that motivated Lewis toward a kind of infallibilist view of knowledge –“S knows that p but there is some q that is incompatible with p that S cannot eliminate”– are now known as concessive knowledge attributions.[[1]](#footnote-2) In the unlikely event that a reader does not hear the contradictory sound when saying or thinking of a concessive knowledge attribution, try one of these example concessive knowledge attributions:

(1) I know that the bank will be open on my way home from work tonight, but it might close before I get there.

(2) You know the bank will be open on your way home from work tonight, but it might close before you get there.

(3) I know my car is parked in the library lot, but someone might have stolen it already.

(4) You know your car is parked in the library lot, but someone might have stolen it already.

(5) Steve knows that he is looking at a zebra, but he cannot be sure it is not a disguised mule.[[2]](#footnote-3)

These utterances all sound contradictory, just as Lewis claimed. Premise (P1) is plausible. [[3]](#footnote-4)

Now to (P2). There are two straightforward ways of explaining why concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory. Either they are contradictory, or they are not (and some further facts explain why they sound contradictory.) Determining which explanation of the phenomenon is correct is more difficult. Initial plausibility falls to the explanation that concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory because they are, just as Lewis claimed. Initial plausibility goes that way because the explanation is obviously simpler.[[4]](#footnote-5) But simplicity aside, the fact that concessive knowledge attributions *sound* contradictory does not entail that they *are* contradictory. So, we need to consider different hypotheses about *why* these sentences sound contradictory.

An alternative view is that there is an explanation for why concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory that is compatible with such claims being true. The explanation is that there is something *pragmatically* defective about uttering concessive knowledge attributions: while concessive knowledge attributions are often true, conversational norms that govern our practice of knowledge attribution give rise to a kind of infelicity that makes *uttering* a concessive knowledge attribution seem (falsely) as though the content of one’s utterance is necessarily false.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Such a pragmatic solution to this problem has been proposed (Rysiew 2001, Dougherty and Rysiew 2009, 2011).[[6]](#footnote-7) They argue that although concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory, they are not actually contradictory. Dougherty and Rysiew’s proposed solution is this. In normal circumstances, saying, “It is possible that p,” conveys to one’s audience that one does not know that p. That is because, in normal circumstances, if we are wondering whether or not p is true and we ask someone whether or not p is true, the subject should answer as follows: if S knows that p, S should say, “p”; if S knows that not-p, S should say, “not-p.” As a rule of conversation, we expect speakers to answer questions with as much information as possible without going overboard with detail (Grice 1975).[[7]](#footnote-8) Because that maxim is true, if our speaker answers our question about p with “It is possible that p,” we will infer that the speaker does not know that p and the speaker does not know that not-p: for, if the speaker did know one of those things, we would be reasonable in thinking that the speaker would have said as much. So, what is strange about “S knows that p but it is possible for S that not-p” is that the second conjunct *pragmatically implicates* that the first conjunct is false, although the second conjunct does not *logically entail* that the first conjunct is false.

The pragmatic account initially appears compelling. Dougherty and Rysiew are right about how an anti-knowledge implicature could arise. If I say, “I don’t like Zeke,” my audience will at first understand me as having expressed that I *dis*like Zeke. But I did not say exactly that: I merely claimed not to *like* Zeke. (Perhaps I am ambivalent about Zeke.)[[8]](#footnote-9) In normal contexts *I dislike Zeke* is what speakers intend for their audience to hear from “I don’t like Zeke,” and in general our communicative intentions are successful, because our hearers understand them. That explains why “I don’t like Zeke” would be understood, in a normal conversation, as *I dislike Zeke*. It also explains why “It is possible that not-p” would be heard as *I do not know that p*: because, in normal contexts, *I do not know that p* is what a speaker would typically try to convey with “It is possible that p”. For, again, if I am playing by the normal rules of conversation and I know that p, I ought to ‘assert the stronger’[[9]](#footnote-10) and say “p” when asked about p, just as Dougherty and Rysiew argue.

So, the pragmatic explanation successfully explains why we would *initially*, *uncritically* hear the second conjunct in a concessive knowledge attribution as contradicting the first. But, concessive knowledge attributions *continue* to sound contradictory even after the pragmatic explanation is offered, contrary to the normal pattern for implicature. It only takes a little emphasis to convince my audience that I did not literally *say* I dislike Zeke. It takes little effort to see the difference between the semantic content of the utterance and the implicature, even if the hearer missed it initially. Through this sort of clarifying procedure (“I didn’t really *say* that p, I only *said* that q…” etc.) we distinguish, in actual cases, what is said from what is implicated.

However, concessive knowledge attributions *continue* to sound contradictory even after a speaker attempts to cancel the implicature.[[10]](#footnote-11) Consider how a clarifying speech would be heard after making a concessive knowledge attribution. After saying, “I know that p, but I might be wrong as to whether p”, I say: “I didn’t *say* I don’t know that p: I just *said* that I might be wrong about p. In fact, I do know that p.” The grating sound gets worse, not better.

Consider some examples from earlier, with implicature-cancelling clauses added:

(1)\* “I know that the bank will be open on my way home from work tonight, but it might close before I get there. *And I really do know that the bank will be open*.”

(3)\* “I know my car is parked in the library lot, but someone might have stolen it already. *And I really do know that it is still parked in the library lot*.”

(5)\* “Steve knows that he is looking at a zebra, but he cannot be sure it is not a disguised mule. *In fact, Steve knows that it is a zebra*.”

In each case, the attempt to cancel the implicature *intensifies* the contradictory character of the concessive knowledge attribution. The demand for an explanation of the contradictory character of concessive knowledge attributions has not been satisfied but strengthened, as the post-cancellation sentences (1)\*-(5)\* are all themselves concessive knowledge attributions that sound even more clearly contradictory than those they are intended to correct.

As a result, while the Dougherty-Rysiew pragmatic explanation suffices to explain how an implicature of “I don’t know that p” could be generated from “It is possible that not-p,” it fails as an explanation of why concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory. That is because it cannot account for the contradictory sound of a concessive knowledge attribution uttered in the context of a corrective explanation as to why a previous concessive knowledge attribution was not contradictory. It cannot do all of that in a way consistent with how implicature normally works, and more specifically with how cancellation normally works. So, the pragmatic account defended by Dougherty and Rysiew is false or special pleading.

An alternative pragmatic account is defended by Brown (2018).[[11]](#footnote-12) Brown suggests that knowledge attributions serve as a heuristic for signaling that, for practical purposes, very unlikely possibilities of error can be ignored (pp. 179-181).[[12]](#footnote-13) When a speaker attributes knowledge, then, the speaker thereby urges hearers to discount certain error possibilities for practical purposes. As a result, if one attributes knowledge that p to S, and then one adds that some not-p possibility remains a live possibility, what is implicated by “S knows that p” is that very unlikely possibilities relevant to p can be ignored, while what is stated in the concessive clause makes salient a possibility that is relevant to p. Brown notes that this account is compatible with concessive knowledge attributions being either infelicitous (the normal case) or felicitous. A concessive knowledge attribution will be infelicitous and true when a subject’s epistemic position is good enough to count for knowledge, so that a knowledge attribution signals that a range of error-possibilities may be ignored, but practical matters make the mentioned chance of not-p practically relevant (p. 180).[[13]](#footnote-14) Of more interest here is that the account implies that *felicitous* concessive knowledge attributions are possible when a subject’s epistemic position is good enough to rely upon for normal practical purposes and when the possibilities of error mentioned in a knowledge attribution are *not* ones that are likely to interfere with normal practical purposes: “When the possibility of error is really remote, it may well be possible to felicitously combine an acknowledgement of that error possibility and yet claim to know” (181).

Brown offers the following examples. Two theatergoers, Alice and Belinda, are waiting for a third, Charlie, to arrive. Alice claims to know that Charlie will be on time, and Belinda replies that Charlie may have been kidnapped or abducted by extraterrestrials: “[Belinda] might raise the possibility that Charlie has been kidnapped, or that aliens have landed and abducted Charlie in their spaceship” (181). Alice may then go on to claim to know that Charlie will be on time while acknowledging that she is unable to rule out those possibilities. Brown’s account of how concessive knowledge attributions can be felicitous implies that knowledge attributions with possibility-clauses like “…but he may have been abducted by aliens” or “…but he may have been kidnapped” are genuinely *concessive*. But I will argue that it is not clear that knowledge attributions with possibility-clauses like those really are examples of concessive knowledge attributions, because it is not clear that the mentioned ‘possibilities’ are being treated as genuine possibilities.[[14]](#footnote-15) Because it is not clear that genuine possibilities are expressed by the possibility-clauses in these examples of supposed concessive knowledge attributions, there is no reason to abandon the simpler account defended above, according to which concessive knowledge attributions are contradictory. I will describe some plausible criteria for concessive knowledge attributions before returning to Brown’s examples.[[15]](#footnote-16)

To show that there can be felicitous concessive knowledge attributions, it is not enough to quote an utterance that may sound acceptable to an uncritical hearer while having the standard grammatical structure of a concessive knowledge attribution: “S knows that p but maybe q (where it is clear that q undermines S’s knowing that p)”. The following are plausible requirements for an utterance to be a concessive knowledge attribution, as will be made clear shortly. A concessive knowledge attribution must be

1. a knowledge attribution, that
2. includes a possibility-clause that is asserted as expressing a genuine possibility the truth of which would undermine the knowledge attribution, and
3. continues to satisfy (i) and (ii) when hearers pay careful attention to the utterance (including by thinking clearly about the meaning of the utterance, raising doubts about its cogency, and so on).[[16]](#footnote-17)

To see that Brown’s examples do not meet this standard, particularly (ii), let us contrast the two mentioned possibilities in the possibility-clause used in her example, making explicit their role in allegedly concessive knowledge attributions. (6), below, is the closest utterance derivable from Brown’s example that fits the structure of a concessive knowledge attribution.

(6) I know that Charlie will be on time, but it is possible that [Brown’s words:] ‘Charlie has been kidnapped, or that aliens have landed and abducted Charlie in their spaceship’.

Let us unpack (6) because the two mentioned ‘possibilities’ require separate treatment:

(6.1) I know that Charlie will be on time, but it is possible that Charlie has been kidnapped.

(6.2) I know that Charlie will be on time, but it is possible that Charlie has been abducted by aliens.

(6.1) and (6.2) now clearly fit the grammatical structure of concessive knowledge attributions. But it is hard to know if those examples express possibilities taken to be genuine by the speaker.[[17]](#footnote-18) Who would kidnap Charlie? Is anyone ever abducted by aliens? Let us try to make clearer how the possibility-clauses could be intended to express genuine possibilities. For each case, I make clear what a speaker might have in mind if the speaker intends for the possibility-clause to express a possibility.

(6.1)\* I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have been kidnapped by his bookie. (Assumption: Charlie may be a gambler, but we lack evidence either way.)

(6.2)\* I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have been abducted by aliens. (Assumption: there may be aliens that abduct humans from time to time.)

With the example unpacked more carefully, it seems clear that the possibility-clause in (6.1)\* expresses a genuine possibility, but it is unclear whether the possibility-clause in (6.2)\* does. Regarding (6.1)\*, because we do not know anything about Charlie’s possible gambling habit, or to whom he may owe money, it really is possible that Charlie, late to arrive, might not make it because he has been kidnapped. So, (6.1)\* is a genuine concessive knowledge attribution. Regarding (6.2)\*, it is unclear that the speaker regards the abduction possibility as genuine, and thus it is unclear if (6.2)\* is a concessive knowledge attribution. If the possibility-clause is not a genuine assertion about an event that the speaker takes to be possible, then (6.2)\* is not a concessive knowledge attribution, because it does not concedeanything: it simply uses words as though they express a ‘possibility’ that is not taken to be a possibility at all.

Looking just at the possibility-clauses, is (6.2)\* like or unlike the following?

(7) I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have been crushed by a very heavy object that was simultaneously both perfectly cubical and perfectly spherical.

(8) I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have been distracted by his successful proof that 1=0.

(9) I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have been thrown from a bridge by the legendary Bigfoot.

(10) I know that Charlie will be on time, but he may have become a victim of spontaneous human combustion.

In each of (7)-(10), the possibility-clause does not express a genuine possibility, but all three fit the grammatical structure of a concessive knowledge attribution.[[18]](#footnote-19) So, the mere fact that (6.2)\* contains a possibility-clause does not establish that the possibility-clause in (6.2)\* mentions a genuine possibility. However, it is also not clear that it does *not* express a genuine possibility, but the burden here lies with Brown to show that speakers uttering apparent concessive knowledge attributions with possibility-clauses that mention what are (at least) *extremely* improbable states of affairs sincerely and reflectively regard those clauses as expressing genuine possibilities and are not casually treating impossibilities as though they are genuine possibilities. Would you mean it if *you* said Charlie might be late because he could have burst into flames for no reason?

We thus have two categories of apparent concessive knowledge attributions: that is, of utterances that fit the grammatical structure of concessive knowledge attributions. In the first category belong those utterances that juxtapose a knowledge attribution with a *genuine* possibility that appears to undermine the knowledge attribution in question. All of the examples of (1)-(5) earlier in the paper fall into this category, and (6.1)\* certainly seems to as well. These examples are definitely concessive knowledge attributions, and they all sound contradictory, including (6.1)\*: if we think that Charlie really *might* have placed a secret bet, lost on it, and failed to pay up on time—if we are taking this idea *seriously*, seriously enough that we think he *actually might* have been kidnapped by the bookie that he failed to pay—then we plainly cannot think consistently with the acknowledgement of that possibility that we *know* Charlie will make it to the show on time.

In the second category belong utterances that have the same grammatical structure, but differ from the first category in that the possibility-clause is not taken to be a genuine possibility, at least beyond an initial, uncritical hearing. These utterances resemble concessive knowledge attributions, but they are not, because they do not actually concede that there is a possibility of error that is incompatible with the initial knowledge attribution in question. (7)-(10) are all this way, and (6.2)\* at least appears to be. In either case, we have found no clear example of a felicitous concessive knowledge attribution, even though we found utterances that take such a form.

Recall that fallibilists generally agree that concessive knowledge attributions *usually* sound contradictory. The burden is on fallibilists to carve out an exceptional class of concessive knowledge attributions that are not contradictory, and to explain in a principled way why we take them to be contradictory when they are not, or to demonstrate that, heard and understood in the right way, some concessive knowledge attributions do not sound contradictory. The accounts considered above have failed to do this. Consequently, as Lewis saw, we have found no good argument for rejecting the simple infallibilist explanation of concessive knowledge attributions: *genuine* concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory because they are contradictory.

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1. Concessive knowledge attributions are like abominable conjunctions. An abominable conjunction says a subject knows that a proposition is true but does not know a proposition that is obviously entailed by the allegedly known proposition. Here is an abominable conjunction: “I know that I have hands but I do not know that I am not a handless brain-in-a-vat.” Abominable conjunctions arise from denying the principle that knowledge is closed under known entailment, while concessive knowledge attributions do not—at least not as obviously. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. It would not be the first time a zoo disguised a mule as a zebra: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8297812.stm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Another possibility, advanced by Brown (2018) and considered below, is that a certain kind of concessive knowledge attribution sometimes is felicitous. I consider Brown’s account separately, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Regarding a closely-related issue, Unger (1984) argued that semantic and pragmatic explanations available to epistemic contextualists and invariantists turn out to be structurally identical. If true, that may seem to undermine my claim that the ‘contradictory’ explanation is simpler. But Unger’s claim applies only to a whole view, not a small part of it. It is still true that the simpler explanation of why concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory is that they are contradictory, and that puts the burden of evidence on those who would like to defend an alternative. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A third option is that pursued by Stanley (2005), who argues that concessive knowledge attributions are often false, but they do not express the fallibilist position anyway, so their typical falsity does not undermine fallibilism. His view is not a pragmatic explanation of the apparent contradictoriness of concessive knowledge attributions, so I leave it aside. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Rysiew (2001) sketches the view detailed in the two cited Dougherty and Rysiew papers, one of which was written as a reply to a criticism by Dodd (2010). The basic structure of all the pragmatic proposals is set in Rysiew (2001), with other philosophers altering the details to suit their own views of knowledge and knowledge attributions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. That is Grice’s maxim of quantity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Acknowledgement removed for review. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Cf. DeRose (1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Implicatures are typically cancelable, even if there is some controversy as to the limits of cancelability as a test for whether a content is implicated rather than expressed. Cf. Blome-Tillman (2008), Davis (2007), Hazlett (2009), and Weiner (2006). In any case, fallibilists hoping to offer a pragmatic explanation of the apparent infelicity of concessive knowledge attributions should want their account to be as close to the paradigm as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Brown cites Greco (2013) as defending the heuristic view of knowledge attributions, but the pragmatic account of concessive knowledge attributions built on that foundation is hers. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The proposal put forward by Brown is very similar to that of Fantl and McGrath (2009). The key difference is that Fantl and McGrath claim that which possibilities are implicated to not obtain are those that are significant, where significance is affected by practical stakes. So, the possibilities that are implicated to not obtain on Fantl and McGrath’s account are a subset of those that are implicated to not obtain on Brown’s account. Brown’s qualification of the Fantl-McGrath proposal is intended to avoid their impurism. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. It should be noted that Brown’s claim implies that this principle is false: “If S knows that p, then S’s epistemic position with respect to p is sufficient to act as if p.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. This objection, and the argument that follows, also apply to cases presented in Rysiew (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging more detailed argument in support of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. To press the point: lots of speech that is easily recognized as false passes uncritically as acceptable, even true: hyperbole, loose talk, and metaphor are uncontroversial examples of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Another way of putting this point: it is unclear whether the possibility-clauses are genuine assertions rather than mere (unserious) utterances. This will be evaluated in what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. There are different reasons why the possibility-clauses in (7)-(10) do not express genuine possibilities. (7) and (8) mention logical impossibilities, while (9) and (10) mention logically possible scenarios that typical speakers in typical circumstances presume to know are false. I thank the reviewer for encouraging clarification on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)