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Skeptical Invariantism, Considered

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# Motivating Infallibilist Invariantism

Is there a good argument for skeptical invariantism?

Skimming through the last few decades of literature on knowledge leaves the distinct impression that the following are data that must be explained by any theory of knowledge, and being the simplest available explanation makes infallibilism look like the obvious choice.

1. Knowledge attributions can be used to assure others that a proposition is true[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. Knowledge is closed under known entailment
3. Knowledge cannot be gained through merely probabilistic inference
4. Knowledge is incompatible with luckily true belief[[2]](#footnote-2)
5. Concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory[[3]](#footnote-3)
6. Knowing that p entails that it is impossible that not-p
7. It is very often appropriate to attribute knowledge[[4]](#footnote-4)

The hypothesis that knowledge is infallible *so easily* explains (1)-(6). By “knowledge is infallible”, I mean that S knowing that p is the very same state as S believing that p with infallible justification. So, knowledge requires (*is*) belief with infallible justification.[[5]](#footnote-5) And by “infallible”, I mean *not fallible*: for S’s justification for p to be infallible just means that S’s justification is sufficient for the truth of p (on the definition I prefer).[[6]](#footnote-6) I will call this view *infallibilist invariantism*, for the sake of distinguishing it from alternative versions of skeptical invariantism. I will now more explicitly connect this kind of infallibilism with skepticism and invariantism.

If knowledge is infallible, that explains (1) because if I tell you that I know that p, I have thereby attested that p is not possibly false. It explains (2) because if someone has justification that is sufficient for the truth of a belief, then there is no other true proposition that is entailed by the former for which the person does not have (or cannot very easily acquire) infallible justification. It explains (3) because mere probability leaves open some possibility of error, and so precludes establishing a proposition’s truth. And so on. Just looking at (1)-(6), infallibilism at least initially looks like the simple and obvious choice for an explanatorily virtuous theory of knowledge.

And then comes (7). Fallibilists think that failing to satisfactorily account for (7) is decisive against a theory of knowledge in a way that denying any of the others is not (cf. Dretske 1970; Nozick 1981; Roush 2012). For instance, in her recent monograph, Brown argues for fallibilism and thus explicitly against (2) closure, (3) that knowledge cannot be gained through merely probabilistic inference, and (5) the universal falsity of concessive knowledge attributions.

Defending an account that favors (7) over all of (1)-(6) would make little sense if infallibilism had a plausible non-skeptical version, which many philosophers may otherwise favor (Dutant 2015). But when we entertain a concept of knowledge that actually applies to subjects in our world, that concept can only be called “infallible” by ignoring or disqualifying a significant number of ways that our beliefs may be false (Dutant 2016; Lewis 1996; Stoutenburg 2019; Williamson 2000). Do we really want to say with disjunctivists and safety-infallibilists that I can have infallible*—not possibly false—*knowledge that I have hands, if the experience of seeing my hands is a fundamentally different experience from the *indistinguishably similar* experience I would have if I were deceived? That when I am not deceived, the ‘possibility’ that I am now being deceived is no possibility at all? It is with good reason that philosophers think infallibilism implies skepticism.

For similar reasons, I think the only version of infallibilism worthy of the name is invariantist. That a subject is not thinking about a particular possibility, or that the stakes of false belief are low, or that an attributor and subject do not share contexts of assessment, are irrelevant to whether some justification is sufficient for the truth a proposition. Now it should be clear why infallibilism implies both skepticism and invariantism, and it is this kind of skeptical invariantism that is under discussion.

In this paper I consider the prospects for a skeptical version of infallibilism. For the reasons given above, I think skeptical invariantism has a lot going for it. However, a satisfactory theory of knowledge must account for all of our desiderata, including (7) that our ordinary knowledge attributions are appropriate. This last part will not be easy for the infallibilist invariantist. Indeed, I will argue that it is much more difficult than those sympathetic to skepticism have acknowledged, as there are serious problems with regarding *paradigmatic*, *typical* knowledge attributions as loose talk, exaggerations, or otherwise practical uses of language. So, I do not think the pragmatic story that skeptical invariantism needs is one that works without a supplemental error theory of the sort left aside by purely pragmatic accounts of knowledge attributions (Butchvarov 1970; Davis 2007; Kyriacou n.d.; Schaffer 2004; Stoutenburg 2016). In its place, I will offer a compromise pragmatic and error view that I think delivers everything that skeptics can reasonably hope to get.

# Methodological Concerns for Two Non-Skeptical Views

Before considering how skeptical invariantism can account for the appropriateness of knowledge attributions, I want to briefly argue that the two most popular competitors to skeptical invariantism—epistemic contextualism and strict moderate invariantism—have a serious methodological problem, one that generalizes to any non-skeptical theory of knowledge attributions. The problem is that if either of those theories is true, we are not justified in believing that they are true.[[7]](#footnote-7)

When we think about a concept of philosophical interest, like what knowledge *is* aside from what we happen to know, we rely on what we find intuitive, our language-use dispositions, and knowledge of meanings to locate the thing that we want to examine. But how is this possible? The traditional philosophical method of considering our responses to thought experiments and hypothetical scenarios more generally can work only if we are competent speakers with concept-use dispositions that are sensitive (if fallible) to facts about the concepts that we wish to examine (Stoutenburg 2016). For example, because philosophers are competent users of the concept *knowledge*, when Gettier’s counterexamples to the fallible justified-true-belief analysis were proposed, (almost) everyone recognized that their own concept of knowledge is not the justified-true-belief concept. If philosophers had not recognized the mismatch between that account and their own concept of knowledge, then it would be a mystery as to why learning of Gettier’s examples prompted any kind of revision.

This observation implies a constraint on which philosophical theories can be justifiably believed.

Constraint: I can justifiably believe my own judgment about a hypothetical scenario only if I have no reason to believe that I am likely to be mistaken in my thought and judgment about the hypothetical scenario*.*

Consider: If I have reason to believe that I am pathetically innumerate, and we attempt to split a restaurant bill and calculate an appropriate tip, I am at least typically not justified in believing the results of my probably unreliable calculation.

Now I will apply this modest constraint. The most popular accounts of knowledge attributions are probably epistemic contextualism and strict moderate invariantism, so I will focus on them. Cohen’s Airport Case (1999) can be used to introduce both.

Airport Case: Two passengers, Mary and John, are at the airport wondering whether the flight they plan to board has a layover in Chicago. They observe another passenger, Smith, look at his own itinerary and claim to himself that he knows the flight stops in Chicago. Mary and John have an important meeting in Chicago. Mary says to John, “How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.” Mary and John conclude that Smith does not know there is a layover in Chicago and decide to answer their own doubts by checking with a gate attendant for more information about the flight.

Smith says, (1) “I know that the flight stops in Chicago”. Mary says, (2) “Smith does not know that the flight stops in Chicago.”

Contextualism says (1) and (2) are both true. On the surface, (1) and (2) contradict one another. Contextualism resolves this by claiming that “S knows that p” expresses different contents in different contexts of use. So, (1) and (2) are not genuine contradictions. They appear to be—which explains why Mary (according to contextualism, *falsely*) believes that standards applicable in hercontext support a knowledge-denial that contradicts (1).

It is strange that Mary would think this if contextualism were true. If it really were true that our knowledge-attributing utterances pick up some of their content from the context in which we speak or think, and we were unaware of this fact, then we speakers would typically be unaware of the contents of our knowledge-attributions (cf. Abath 2012).[[8]](#footnote-8) But this violates the constraint given above. The usual methodology has it that we consider judgments about hypothetical scenarios and try to sort them into a systematic theory. But if contextualism is true, we rely upon damaged instruments: like Mary, we should not be confident about what our judgments *are*, let alone that those judgments (whatever they are) are true. So, if contextualism is true, the error theory it requires to explain why we think non-contradictory knowledge attributions are contradictory also implies that we should not believe contextualism is true.

Strict moderate invariantism says (1) is true and (2) is false, and it may be even more obviously self-undermining than contextualism is, as I have argued elsewhere (2017). As Smith and Mary have equally good evidence, it is assumed that Mary knows the flight stops in Chicago, but falsely denies it for some reason. Mary’s knowledge-denial seems correct, so strict moderate invariantism must explain it. The standard explanation, given by Rysiew (2001), holds that “S knows that p” expresses that S truly and justifiably believes that p and S can eliminate all *likely* not-p possibilities; “S knows that p” conveys that S can eliminate all *salient* not-p possibilities (which may or may not be relevant). Applied to the airport case, after the raising of the misprint possibility, Mary says (2) because she does not want to convey that Smith *can* eliminate the misprint possibility. For whatever reason, on this account Mary asserts the falsehood (2) instead of a relevant truth (“Smith knows the flight stops in Chicago” or “the misprint possibility is irrelevant to whether Smith knows the flight stops in Chicago”), in order to avoid implicating an irrelevant falsehood (“Smith can eliminate the misprint possibility”).

The cause of the confusion in the exchange should not be overlooked: it is that Mary is unaware that the misprint possibility is irrelevant to Smith’s knowledge and her own, and consequently unaware of the truth-values of ordinary knowledge attributions in ordinary contexts. I assume that philosophers are ‘ordinary’ speakers, too. We access truths about what counts as knowledge only indirectly, through considered judgments about hypothetical scenarios. So, there is a serious methodological problem with claiming, as strict moderate invariantism must, that we are fundamentally confused about what is and is not relevant to knowledge, and also that we can use our thoughts about what is and is not relevant to knowledge to discover that strict moderate invariantism is true.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One might worry that a similar argument works against skeptical invariantism. After all, we often sincerely assert that we know that something is true, but skepticism implies that such claims are false. While any skeptical view surely must meet that demand, it is important to recognize that the arguments I just gave point to a general methodological worry that uniquely affects the theories of knowledge attributions highlighted above. Those theories appear to undermine whatever support they receive from our ordinary knowledge-attributing practices by calling into question the reliability of the intuitions that govern those same practices. The primary way that skeptical invariantists have attempted to explain the appropriateness of our knowledge thought and talk is by offering a *pragmatic* account of false knowledge attributions, which by design attempt to preserve semantic competence at the expense of making ordinary knowledge attributions come out true. If our willingness to say and think “S knows that p” is similar to our willingness to exaggerate or speak loosely, for example, then it would be a mistake to think that skeptical invariantism is methodologically questionable in the ways highlighted above.

# Skeptical Invariantism and Knowledge-Talk: Error and Pragmatic Solutions

However, I will now argue that *pure* error or pragmatic explanations of our tendency to make false knowledge attributions faces serious problems.[[10]](#footnote-10) A pure error account explains why we fail to recognize that our knowledge attributions are false, but does nothing to account for how our reliance on “knowledge” can be appropriate. Purely pragmatic accounts imply that speakers do not sincerely attribute knowledge, which is plainly false. In this section, I evaluate a few accounts of knowledge attributions that are compatible with or explicitly motivated by skeptical concerns. In the end, I think the skeptical invariantist is forced to accept a compromise between a pragmatic account and an error theory. I propose a compromise view that fits well with an independently plausible conception of how we arrive at a descriptive theory of a habitual practice. We skeptical invariantists must accept less than what we hoped for, but we will have all that we need.

## Entailment Error Theory

Unger (1971, 1975) argued that we falsely believe that we know some things because our falseunqualified knowledge claims entail truequalified knowledge claims (1975, p. 51-52). Since “S knows that p” entails “S is close enough to knowing that p for the purposes at hand”, we fail to notice that our knowledge claims are false because they entail true claims about being close enough to knowing. In Unger's words,

[S]uppose that…you falsely believe you *know* that there are elephants. As before, there is a true thing which is entailed by what you falsely believe, and which we should notice. The true thing here, which you presumably do not believe, is this: That you are in an intellectual (or ‘epistemic’) position with respect to the matter of whether there are elephants which is such that, for practical purposes, it makes no difference whether you *know* there are elephants or whether you are in that intellectual position with respect to the matter that you actually are in (1975, p. 52).

What counts as ‘close enough to knowing for the purposes at hand’ varies with context. Since the standard for being close enough to knowing for practical purposes is usually low enough to be satisfied, we do not notice that “S knows that p” is strictly speaking false.

A virtue of Unger’s account over some alternative skeptical invariantist views is that it accepts that speakers usually *do* intend for their knowledge attributions to be taken truly and literally. However, it faces two significant shortcomings. The first concerns the semantics of knowledge attributions that lead to skeptical invariantism. Traditionally, *radical* knowledge skeptics have argued that we lack knowledge because our epistemic justification is insufficient for knowledge. If such a skeptic claims that “S knows that p” expresses something like *S’s belief that p is not possibly false given the way that S formed it* and insists that the only legitimate basis for belief consists in awareness of the intrinsic character of one’s occurrent mental states, as a Cartesian internalist would, then it is doubtful that we are close enough to knowing *anything* for *any* purposes. So, it is *false* that “S is close enough to knowing that p for practical purposes.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The second objection is that the view does not even attempt to provide an account of how our knowledge attributing behavior could be appropriate: it only explains why we do not recognize that we lack knowledge. An account of appropriateness needs to show that, given a skeptical semantics for knowledge attributions, there is a pragmatic account of how our knowledge talk is ‘okay’. The Error Theory does not even attempt this.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## The Loose Talk Theory

Davis (2007, 2015) argues that for many ordinary purposes we are content to utter *approximate* truths without regard for whether or not what we say is literally true, and knowledge attributions are an example of this pragmatic phenomenon. An example from Davis:

A. When the scoop comes up empty in the coffee jar, I yell to my wife, “The coffee is all gone.” B. When my son comes down for breakfast a few minutes later, he announces that he needs a few coffee grounds for his science project, and then asks, “Is the coffee really all gone?” I say with no embarrassment, “No, there may be enough for you.”

What I say in A contradicts what I say in B. But what I mean in A is that the coffee is close enough to being all gone for the purpose at hand—making coffee. That is, the coffee is close enough to being all gone to count as all gone for the indicated purpose. This is not what the sentence I use means. But by saying that the coffee is all gone, I convey the less precise thought indicated. By ignoring irrelevant detail, I make my point more effectively. When my conversational purposes change in context B, I use the term more strictly. (Davis 2007, pp. 406-407)

The picture Davis gives us is this: A speaker utters U *loosely* when A intends to communicate that P, A believes that the content of U is *close to* the content of P, A recognizes that A’s audience will understand P by A’s uttering of U, and A does not accept the semantic content of U.[[13]](#footnote-13) On this view, speakers are not committed to the truth of their knowledge claims, only to some relevant proposition in the semantic neighborhood.

It is instructive to compare Davis’s remarks about loose use with what he says about *sloppy* use. One uses a term sloppily if it is used “strictly without taking proper care to verify that the term does strictly apply” (p. 410). It would be sloppy use if Davis had answered his son’s question with “yes, the coffee is all gone” without bothering to check that the coffee is indeed gone. So, sloppy use is speech with a *disregard* for truth. Given that loose use and sloppy use are distinct, we can conclude that a speaker uses U loosely only if the speaker *is aware that* U is false but *is not committed* to U’s truth (otherwise the speaker would just be guessing or lying).

Paradigm knowledge attributions are ones that the speaker believes are true, however. We *typically* use knowledge attributions literally, intending to communicate (among other things) that so-and-so *knows* such-and-such. Accounts of knowledge attributions must accept that speakers usually are committed to the truth of their knowledge attributions, even if their communicative purposes are not focused precisely on epistemic concerns.[[14]](#footnote-14)

When it comes to skepticism about privileged domains of belief, like our knowledge of arithmetic equalities, how things phenomenally appear, and so forth, entertaining skeptical possibilities and denying knowledge strikes us as a *discovery*, not something that we have been assuming all along (Dinges 2016, Hawthorne 2004, p. 164-165). As Dinges argues, if speakers were typically speaking loosely with their attributions of knowledge, we would expect speakers to reply to challenges to their knowledge attributions with “You know what I meant!” or similar, to communicate that the speaker did not intend to be committed to the literal truth of the utterance (2016, pp. 2588-2592).

As we will see, this problem affects other pragmatic accounts of knowledge attributions. Unless we are convinced that speakers typically make knowledge attributions while believing that they are saying something false and not committed to the truth of their utterance anyway, then a purely pragmatic account of the appropriateness of our knowledge attributions cannot help skeptical invariantists reconcile skepticism with our knowledge-attributing practices.

## The Exaggeration Theory

Some of what we say that we know is plausibly a kind of exaggeration. Take knowledge claims about the distant future—“We know that the population of Earth will be 11 billion by 2100”—or knowledge attributions made for exhortation—“I know that you’ll ace the test!” Butchvarov (1970) argued that knowledge attributions are exaggerations:

[T]he word *know* (and related expressions) falls into a class of words that quite naturally lend themselves to habitual yet perfectly justifiable *exaggerated* uses. One subgroup of such words consists of words whose very utterance is likely to have considerable *practical import*. Another subgroup consists of words referring to *standards*. *Know* belongs to both. (Butchvarov 1970, p. 54)

He adds that speakers make hyperbolic knowledge attributions for practical purposes, even while aware that literally knowing something is rare:

[P]eople very often claim to know when they do not, although they are not ignorant of the meaning of *know* or of the circumstances in which they use the word. By using the word, even though illegitimately, one can encourage important actions, gain respect and admiration, cause attitudes one regards as desirable, and… To deplore and attempt to eliminate such exaggerated uses of *know* would be a practical mistake. To regard these uses as paradigms of a *sense* of *know* would be an intellectual mistake. (Butchvarov 1970, p. 55)

Later, Schaffer (2004) supplemented the Exaggeration account with Grice’s theory of conversational implicature (Grice 1975).[[15]](#footnote-15) In Schaffer’s telling, knowledge attributions express that a subject meets a very high epistemic standard that is typically unmet. Hearers, accepting this same standard, hear a knowledge attribution as straightforwardly false. Expecting that the speaker intends to comply with the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, including Quality (“Try to make your contribution one that is true”), infer that the speaker intends to comply with the Cooperative Principle with what the speaker means. Hearers thus infer that the speaker intends to communicate something else: perhaps that the subject is close enough to knowing for the present purposes.

But knowledge attributions usually do not strike us as deliberate overstatements, unlike *uncontroversial* examples of hyperbole. I say “it took me forever to get here” as I walk in late to the meeting, very obviously exaggerating with “forever”. “The swimming pool is a mile long” behaves similarly.[[16]](#footnote-16) When we hear an utterance used hyperbolically it *sounds* false because it sounds like an overstatement.

Contrast that with ordinary knowledge attributions: a new faculty member needs help logging into the department’s scanner, and I say, “Come with me, I know the code.” A friend asks what time the tee-ball game starts, and after a reflective pause, I say, “Oh, I know: 6:30.” It is extremely hard to accept the idea that hearers would take these straightforward knowledge claims as deliberate *overstatements* and thus as sparking a search for a true implicature. But without hearers taking knowledge attributions as straightforward overstatements, no search for an implicature begins.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Schaffer anticipated this objection and replied that expressions that are *usually* used hyperbolically often do not strike us as hyperbolic (2004, fn. 3). But that reply gets the argumentative burden exactly backward. A principled account would begin with an understanding of hyperbole and argue that knowledge attributions are an instance of the kind. Instead, Schaffer’s reply shows that knowledge attributions are *not* like *uncontroversial* examples of hyperbole at all.

## The Disguised Conditionals Theory

Everett (2006) proposed that our ordinary knowledge attributions are disguised conditional claims. We utter sentences like “I know that p”, but the semantic content of the utterance (and the speaker’s intention behind uttering it) is a disguised conditional of the form, “I know that if I am not undetectably deceived, then p”.

Undoubtedly, we do sometimes offer conditional statements as *revisions* of our claims to know:

The Airport Case, Conditional Version 1:

Smith: I know that the flight stops in Chicago.  
Mary: How do you know that the flight stops in Chicago? The itinerary could contain a misprint.  
Smith: I just meant that I know that if there is no misprint or other strange error, then the flight stops in Chicago.

But the Conditionalist goes further than this. It is not *just* that we sometimes back off from straightforward knowledge attributions and offer a conditional knowledge attribution in retreat. The claim is that straightforward, unqualified knowledge attributions semantically express disguised conditional propositions. The Conditionalist claims that “S knows that p” is *equivalent* to “S knows that (if S is not undetectably deceived, then p)”.

If we *never* assert that we have unconditional knowledge, then many skeptical worries are irrelevant to ordinary (conditional!) knowledge. If I claim to know that ‘if p then q’ and an interlocutor objects that perhaps not-p because not-q, those concerns have no bearing on my claimed *conditional* knowledge of ‘if p then q’. Skeptical concerns are bracketed as ‘undetectable’ possibilities that do not threaten ordinary (conditional) knowledge. One might claim this ability to bypass skepticism as a feature of the view.

There is a significant associated cost, however. In the Smith-Mary exchange above, it is hard to accept that Smith really asserted the conditional claim when he made his first utterance. It is more plausible that when challenges are made to our knowledge attributions and we cannot rebut the challenge, we hedge by offering a conditional *replacement* for our original claim. But if that is right, then speakers are not making conditional claims in the first place. If the theory were true, exchanges like the following would be perfectly acceptable:

The Airport Case, Conditional Version 2:

Smith: I know that the flight stops in Chicago.  
Mary: How do you know that the flight stops in Chicago? The itinerary could contain a misprint.  
Smith: *Like I said the first time*,I know that if there is no misprint or other strange error, then the flight stops in Chicago.

If the Disguised Conditionals Theory is true, Smith *should* sound like he is repeating himself. Instead, it sounds like he does not want to acknowledge that Mary undermined his knowledge claim.[[18]](#footnote-18), [[19]](#footnote-19)

# Combining Pragmatics and Error Theory

Each account just considered failed either by not explaining the appropriateness of knowledge attributions, by denying that speakers assert knowledge claims, or by implying that speakers take skepticism for granted as obviously true.

I propose a new skeptical invariantist account of knowledge attributions that avoids these failures. The view incorporates some insights from the positions just criticized. There is something important about the idea that speakers often make false claims about what they know without realizing it, as the Error Theory suggests. There is also an important truth in the suggestion that the appropriateness of much knowledge-talk involves an important pragmatic element. The view I propose accommodates both. Call it Pragmatic Error Skepticism.

*Pragmatic Error Skepticism* claims that “S knows that p” (invariantly) expresses that S has infallible justification for believing that p; that ordinary speakers implicitly accept this standard and that it implies some form of knowledge skepticism; and that “S knows that p” is regularly and appropriately used because it communicates a proposition that is practically relevant.

In the rest of this section, I will show that pragmatic error skepticism avoids the problems of other accounts while plausibly explaining the appropriateness of our knowledge-attributing behavior.

## Appropriateness in Ordinary Contexts

A desideratum for any theory of knowledge, including skeptical invariantism, is to show that ordinary knowledge attributions are at least usually appropriate. Pragmatic Error Skepticism claims that speakers implicitly accept that “S knows that p” expresses demanding standards that are rarely met, and that speakers nevertheless use “S knows that p” for ordinary, practical purposes. Showing how this works is possible using Grice’s maxims in a straightforward way.

Distinguishing Relevant Alternatives: Landon and Jill are looking at a map of the wildlife sanctuary, searching for the zebras. Thanks to a convoluted map key, visitors looking for the zebra exhibit often wind up at the tiger exhibit, and vice versa. Jill thinks they should go right—but she is not sure—and Landon thinks they should go left—but he is not sure, either. Fred overhears their conversation and says, “I know where the zebras are. They are [pointing] that way, to the right.”

Fred’s knowledge attribution semantically expresses that he meets an extremely demanding epistemic standard, which at the level of what is said is false and thus violates Quality. (“Try to make your contribution one that is true”).[[20]](#footnote-20) Assuming that Fred intends to satisfy the conversational maxims using implicature rather than with what he said, Landon and Jill infer that Fred means to communicate something that satisfies Quality, which is that he can distinguish the things they are looking for—zebras—from an alternative that is conversationally relevant—the tigers. Furthermore, Jill and Landon infer that by implicating that he can distinguish these alternatives, Fred intends to direct them to the exhibit that they are looking for.[[21]](#footnote-21)

More schematically, in this example, Fred makes an ordinary knowledge attribution, saying “I know where the zebras are.” According to Pragmatic Error Skepticism, Fred’s utterance expresses the proposition *that Fred has infallible justification for believing that the zebras are [demonstrating] that way*. Landon and Jill hear this proposition as false as thus as violation of Quality. Thus, they search for a contextually relevant, true proposition that satisfies all of the maxims, including Quality. They arrive at the proposition that Fred can distinguish the zebras from the tigers, and further infer from this that by expressing himself in this way, Fred is providing directions.

The general pattern here is that when a speaker utters “S knows that p” hearers will take the utterance to violate Quality. Hearers assume that speakers intend to comply with Quality and the other maxims at the level of what is meant, so they infer a true and relevant implicature.[[22]](#footnote-22) This way of speaking allows for knowledge-talk to be very expressive and useful in ordinary contexts. In general, the Pragmatic Error Skeptic can tell a story using implicature to accommodate roles for knowledge attributions that non-skeptical epistemologists have identified. My example had to do with distinguishing relevant alternatives (Dretske 1971, Goldman 1976, Stein 1976), but in principle the same basic pattern could also be used to show that false knowledge attributions can communicate that a subject is a reliable informant on a topic (Craig 1990) or that a proposition can be assumed to be true for the purposes of inquiry (Kappel 2010, Kelp 2011, Rysiew 2012). In each case, hearers *implicitly* take a knowledge claim to be false and search for a relevant and true implicature that has something to do with their salient practical or theoretical interests.

Pragmatic Error Skepticism is not a version of the loose talk view, as I respect the plausible assumption that speakers and hearers typically do not conceive of nor intend their knowledge attributions to be imprecise and therefore false. Rather, knowledge attributions serve as a seemingly accurate way of communicating something of practical relevance. But like the loose talk view and others that rely on pragmatic principles to explain how knowledge attributions work in a way consistent with skepticism, there must be something that accounts for why speakers and hearers implicitly take positive knowledge attributions to be false.

## Implicit Skepticism

That account of appropriateness says that subjects (at least often) implicitly take literal knowledge attributions to be false because they implicitly accept that knowing requires meeting the infallibilist standard. The assumption that speakers implicitly accept skeptical standards is necessary because on a Gricean account, assumptions held by hearers govern which contents are implicated and when.

We must distinguish implicit belief from occurrent belief, dispositional belief, and having a disposition to form a belief (cf. Audi 1994). Speakers do not *occurrently* believe that knowledge is demanding because knowledge claims are not usually disingenuous. If a person claims to know and means it, and you ask: “Do you know whether p?” you will get an affirmative answer. Moreover, few *dispositionally* believe that the standards for knowledge are high because few have considered skeptical arguments and arrived at *any* belief about standards for knowledge. Perhaps few are even *disposed to believe* that knowledge is demanding. It could be that once confronted with skeptical opposition to their ordinary practice of knowledge attribution, speakers realize that many of their beliefs are incompatible with this new information, so they stop thinking about the matter further to reduce cognitive dissonance and thus *never* outright believe skepticism.

My view is that speakers *implicitly* believe that knowing is demanding. By that, I mean that speakers have a set of beliefs (B) about what they and others know and when appropriately prompted by challenges to their knowledge attributions speakers recognize that B *entails* that knowing requires meeting very demanding standards that are rarely met, thus the beliefs in B do not amount to knowledge. Speakers implicitly believe that knowing is demanding in the sense that they are logically committed to it and can easily become aware that they are logically committed to it. I do not think it is always *obvious* to speakers that knowledge attributions are usually false. Pragmatic Error Skepticism involves error.

There is precedent for thinking that speakers can regularly and sincerely use an expression that contains a word denoting a standard while being implicitly committed to the falsity of the utterance *because* they implicitly recognize that the standard is extremely demanding. Claims involving geometric properties and specific quantities are like this.

Geometry Class: Geometry class has just started. The teacher poorly draws a four-sided figure on the whiteboard. The ‘lines’ are visibly crooked. Two of the ‘corners’ do not connect. The teacher puts small ‘boxes’ in the ‘corners’ and tick marks on the sides. The teacher asks the class, “What shape is this?” They reply in unison, “A square.” The teacher replies, “Yes, that’s a square.”

The teacher could point out that the figure on the board has *none* of the properties of a rectangle and by doing so get the class to retract their identification of the figure as a square. The class implicitly recognizes that calling the thing on the board a square is a useful falsehood in the context of geometry class, even if they were not actively thinking about the falsity of “that is a square” while agreeing to the utterance. Geometric properties are precisely defined, and speakers know this. Speakers regularly claim that a figure has some geometric property but they implicitly believe that such attributions are usually false because the shape in question does not meet the standard.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Quantity attributions are similar, as in “I will be ready in five minutes” to mean “it won’t be long,” “there were a million cars in front of me” offered as an excuse for being late, “I paid the bill last week” when it may have been eight days ago, and so on. In these cases, speakers are implicitly committed to standards for “five”, “one million”, and “last week”, even though while using such expressions they are *not* thinking about whether the standard is met. However, speakers can recognize the falsity of such utterances, whether or not they entertain occurrent beliefs about the standards in question.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In each of these cases, a speaker who is probably not thinking about the literal truth or falsity of utterances makes or hears an utterance that expresses that a standard is met. The speaker is also able to recognize an easy entailmentfrom the expressed content to some other, obviously false statement about the standard in question. For example, a student in the class understands “That is a square”, applied to the shape on the board, entails “that figure has four (perfectly straight) sides of equal length that meet at ninety-degree angles”, which the student implicitly believes is false. It is usually not necessary to consider the inference and the entailed statement, but that is only because contextually-relevant purposes usually do not call for it.

The same pattern works for knowledge attributions. Speakers are generally quick to recognize that their knowledge claims entail other claims that they cannot know because of what knowing requires:

Skeptical Bank Case: I drive a friend to the bank to initiate a wire transfer, which requires presenting identification in person. I ask, “Do you know what forms of ID the bank will accept?” He replies, “Yeah, I brought my license.” I say, “Are you sure that’s enough?” He says, “I hadn’t thought about it before. I’ll check.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Here a subject recognizes that knowing would enable him to disregard various possibilities, including the possibility that his driver’s license is insufficient as identification for initiating a wire transfer. He further implicitly believes that his belief that his driver’s license is sufficient identification does not meet that standard, and concludes that he does not know after all.

If he did *not* implicitly believe that knowing which forms of identification are permitted involved meeting such a demanding standard, then there would be no way to make sense of his subtle retraction of his (also subtle) claim to know what forms of identification are acceptable, without his acquiring any new information. He would then be giving up his knowledge claim for no reason.

In general, it is often not difficult to prompt speakers to retract or diminish previously-made knowledge claims by raising possibilities of error. The practice only makes sense, though, if speakers implicitly believe that knowing involves meeting a very demanding standard, one what requires them, if they truly know, to be able to eliminate a very wide class of possibilities of error or maintain true belief in distant possible worlds.

## Semantic Ignorance?

It is plainly much harder to get anyone to *explicitly* believe that standards for knowledge are *in general* unmet. The source of the difficulty is *not* that subjects fail to understand the entailment from demanding standards for knowledge to their lack of knowledge in general. The source is that it is very difficult to get subjects to accept the skeptic’s account of what the standards for knowledge are in the first place.

Speakers do not have an explicit belief with the content ‘knowledge is infallible justification’. That may seem like a major concession, but it is not, because philosophical accounts are *discoveries*. We cannot read the correct standard for “knows” off of speaker behavior any more than we can for “object”, “responsible action”, “person”, “morally right”, “rational”, “God”, “virtue”, and so on. So, when the Pragmatic Error Skeptic claims that “S knows that p” expresses that S has infallible justification for believing that p and that subjects implicitly believe this, it is no objection that subjects asked to define “knowledge” do not state the infallibilist answer.

R.M. Hare provides a helpful analogy. He compared the act of trying to analyze a concept that one uses regularly with a group of veteran dancers attempting to formulate the rules that constitute dancing a particular dance.

Suppose that we are sitting at dinner and discussing how a certain dance is danced. Let us suppose that the dance in question is one requiring the participation of a number of people – say one of the Scottish reels. And let us suppose that we have a dispute about what happens at a particular point in the dance; and that, in order to settle it, we decide to dance the dance after dinner and find out. We have to imagine that there is among us a sufficiency of people who know, or say they know, how to dance the dance – in the sense of ‘know’ in which one may know how to do something without being able to *say* how it is done. (Hare 1960, p. 208)

Continuing:

If they know already how the dance is danced, what can they be arguing about? But if they do not know already, how will they know, when they have danced the dance, whether they have danced it correctly? The solution to the paradox lies in distinguishing between knowing how to dance a dance and being able to say how it is danced. Before the enquiry begins, they are able to do the former, but not the latter; after the enquiry is over they can do the latter, and they know that they are right because all along they could do the former. And it is the same with the analysis of concepts. We know how to use a certain expression, but are unable to say how it is used. Then we try to do the latter; and we know we have succeeded when we have found an analysis which is in accordance with our hitherto unformulated knowledge of how to use the word. (216)

Hare makes two important points here. One is that competent users of a term may actively dispute whether some use of a term is correct. The other is that competent users may be unable to provide an account of a concept without trying very hard to do so, and they may fail even then. Speakers, including philosophers, struggle to identify the correct account of “knowledge” and a whole slew of other concepts. So what? That is no objection to the plausibility of a skeptical semantics of knowledge attributions, or any other philosophical account, or any other account of how we do anything.

Perhaps there is a further explanation of why describing the rules of the dance and stating the standards for knowledge (and other concepts) is so difficult. It is plausible that some of our beliefs have propositional contents that are sensorily or kinesthetically encoded.[[26]](#footnote-26) If so, we could say that the dancers *do* have beliefsabout what the steps of the dance are and what counts as “knowing”, but because those beliefs are encoded as sights and sounds and the feelings of movement of specific steps and turns, rather than remembered in language, it is very difficult to focus on the encoded propositional content to the exclusion of the sensory content that encodes it. Likewise, perhaps ordinary speakers using knowledge-talk *do* believe that knowledge requires infallible justification, but because beliefs about that standard are encoded as scenarios of conceding ignorance when error possibilities arise, being reluctant to ascribe knowledge of explicitly probabilistic propositions, and expecting “knowers” to be able to discriminate true belief from false belief, it is difficult to separate the encoded propositional content that includes the infallibilist standard of knowledge from the distinct knowledge-attributing sights and sounds that make up the belief.

# Pragmatic Error Skepticism and Epistemic Contexts

The examples I used to demonstrate how false knowledge attributions can be appropriate work in everyday contexts, where whether someone knows is almost never the focus of inquiry. But what about a context where knowledge *is* the focus, such as in criminal proceedings or a debate? There are two options for Pragmatic Error Skepticism here, and which one the skeptic will accept depends on the extent of the skeptic’s skepticism.

The first option is for less-extreme skeptics who think that although our epistemic justification rarely or never meets the infallibilist standard expressed by a claim to know, we nevertheless enjoy solid justification for many ordinary beliefs. Assuming such a view, speakers and hearers will calculate to a relevant implicature using the maxim of Quality, just as before. They will hear “S knows that p” as false and calculate to an implicature that concerns a more reasonable standard of epistemic justification, short of infallibility.

The second option is for extreme skeptics who think that even our epistemic justification is questionable or non-existent. Assuming that kind of skepticism, there will be no reasonable epistemic standard to which speakers and hearers are held. Instead, the skeptic will claim that our utterances that directly concern whether someone knows must be *replaced* by claims that associate “knowing that p” in a particular context with certain ways of forming beliefs. For example, a witness testifying on the stand, asked directly “Do you know whether p?” (and assuming that everyone takes the point of the inquiry to be whether the witness knows p and not thinking of the overarching point of the proceedings, namely whether some particular person is guilty of some particular crime) will count in this context as knowing that p if the witness had a sensory experience that we would normally call “seeing” some facts that entail p when a wide range of possibilities are ignored.

Using a strategy like this, the skeptic will claim that when the focus is on knowledge, the normal mechanisms that make our knowledge-talk appropriate fail, so knowledge-talk must be replaced by something more accurate. It is a revisionary view, which surely counts against it. But the overall merits of the view, and problems with its alternatives, should also be remembered when making a judgment.[[27]](#footnote-27)

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1. (Cf. Austin 1962; Lawlor 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Cf. Gettier 1963; Pritchard 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Cf. Lewis 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Why not add: knowledge attributions are often true? Because the motivation for such a desideratum presupposes that what appear to be straightforward factual claims are typically true, and that assumption is demonstrably false, as I argue in (Stoutenburg 2016). I would deny (now) even that we seem to know a lot, if that state is distinct from the state of it seeming, in many particular contexts, that a positive knowledge attribution is acceptable. Related concerns appear in section 4.2.

   Separately, my strategy of arriving at a conception of knowledge by way of the functional role played by knowledge attributions is much like Nevin Climenhaga’s in this volume, which he deploys toward a similar conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That one’s belief be *based* on one’s infallible justification is not necessary, at least if B’s being based on J is anything but a necessary relation discernible through introspection. Otherwise, it would be possible to have infallible justification for p while being unable to know if one’s belief is justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This definition is preferable to one defined in terms of entailment, which makes the dubious propositionalist view of evidence inevitable, as entailment holds only between propositions (J. Brown 2018). The truth-sufficiency definition is also preferable to the 1.0 probability definition, which does not explain why known propositions are not *possibly* false and struggles to account for knowledge of necessary truths, all of which are probability 1 on any body of evidence (cf. Stoutenburg 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For any theory that has this property—that if it is true, one is not justified in believing that it is true—it does not follow that the theory is *false*. But it does follow, by definition, that one should not believe whatever arguments are offered to support those theories, because those arguments do not justify believing the theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hofweber (1999) has argued that this kind of unawareness is common, so not an issue for contextualism. But this in the situations he has in mind are ones where, when pressed, we easily recognize that the standards we presuppose are in place, and this does not hold for knowledge attributions.

   My objection is not that contextualism requires “semantic blindness” (Hawthorne 2004). It does, and that is a problem, but my objection is that the content-unawareness implied by contextualism undermines the basic strategy of arguing for contextualism by traditional philosophical means. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gerken (2017) provides the most comprehensive strict moderate invariantist account, and a large portion of his account concerns how attributors can mistakenly think a possibility is relevant to knowledge when it is not. But one must wonder how, if our judgments are so unreliable, we can possibly trust them when they favor a fallibilist view. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I was too sanguine when I opted for a version of a loose talk account in (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is especially clear in chapters four and five of Unger (1975). Also see Stoutenburg (2017b). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Indeed, showing the opposite was among Unger’s goals in Ignorance: he proposed that it is always wrong to assert *anything*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Davis spells out the details of his loose talk account on pp. 410-412 of his (2007). I said Davis requires that “A believes that the content of U is close to the content of P.” Davis’s examples consistently involve speakers who are fully aware that they speak falsely while intending to communicate something else. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kyriacou (forthcoming) argues that an externalist view of meaning is compatible with speakers being unaware of the content expressed by “knows”. Importantly, in describing how an externalist theory of meaning affects the pragmatics of knowledge attributions, Kyriacou consistently attributes to speakers the intention to assert a claim about what properties are *approximated* by some entity or state of affairs (cf. pp. 11-16). So, I think it is most natural to characterize Kyriacou’s view as a non-standard version of the loose talk theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Butchvarov (1970) was published before Grice’s “Logic and Conversation”, before any of Unger’s work on skepticism, and before philosophers gave serious attention to pragmatics. His contributions to issues surrounding our topic deserve far more recognition than they receive from contemporary epistemologists. Schaffer’s paper does not cite Butchvarov, despite offering basically the same account. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The example is from Hawthorne (2004, p. 120). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is widely assumed in the literature that implicatures are calculated only when the hearer takes a speaker to have flouted a maxim at the level of what is said. For a challenge to this view, see (Dinges 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Conditionalist could claim semantic blindness. See Schiffer (1996). The Disguised Conditionals theory is probably committed to the existence of unarticulated constituents that are contextually determined (Hofweber 1999). If so, then the Disguised Conditionals view is perhaps an unusual version of contextualism. It depends on how “undetectably deceived” is analyzed.

    See Dinges (2016, pp. 2580-2581) for criticism of another version of a Conditionals view. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Another important proposal, but which I lack space to discuss, is proposed in Chung (2017). Chung calls her view “epistemic fictionalism”, which she defines as follows: “[E]xpressions within the relevant region of discourse—namely, knowledge-discourse—are generally used to assert (or otherwise illocute) some propositional content distinct from (and instead of) their semantic contents” (Chung 2017, p. 9). Chung proposes that knowledge talk is metaphorical. This view is also open to the objection that speakers at least typically take themselves to be sincere when they attribute knowledge, which is incompatible with conceiving of knowledge attributions as metaphorical. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I am following the standard interpretation of Grice, which holds that implicatures arise when maxims are violated at the level of what is said (cf. 1975 p. 31). See Dinges (2015) for a critique of the standard interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A similar account can be given in the language of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, Wilson and Sperber 2004). Landon and Jill hear Fred’s utterance and process it in the usual way, by inferring to whatever is most relevant. So, they hear this knowledge claim, in this context, as being about something otherthan what Fred knows. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Unger (1984, p. 9) once hinted at a strategy like this: “By trading on suitable premises concerning the context, and understood by the conversational participants, the speaker gets his hearers to infer from an (obviously) irrelevant falsehood he expressed to a relevant (presumed) truth then attended.” But “irrelevant” and “falsehood” are different concepts. Here, I focus on the idea that the implicitly-recognized falsehood of knowledge attributions is what kicks off the search for an implicature.

    Thanks to Alexander Dinges for helpful comments about Quality and Relevance. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. When I have presented this example to philosophers, some resist it by claiming that it is too obvious that we are here using false descriptions, and that knowledge attributions are more challenging to retract. But when I have drawn such a figure in discussions with undergraduate students and then pointed out that its imperfections mean that the figure is not a square, many students are slow to accept this. The parallel between falsely-attributed geometric properties and falsely-attributed knowledge may be quite close. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For this reason, the ‘impermanence’ of skeptical attitudes is a weak objection to skepticism (Hawthorne 2004, Hume 1739 (2000), I.IV.1). Our interests rarely concern exact truth, so it is unsurprising that we would continue to speak in imprecise ways, even if we take our utterances seriously. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Inspired by DeRose (2002).

    If the answer to the knowledge question had been affirmative, my friend would say “yeah”, “yes”, or something similar. Outside of epistemology examples, people do not signal their ignorance explicitly, saying things like “*I guess I don’t know*, so I will check.” The knowledge-denial is implicit. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The concept empiricism of Prinz (2002) is akin to what I am suggesting here. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I thank David Alexander, Alexander Bow, Garret Caudle, Alexander Dinges, Landon Elkind, and Christos Kyriacou for comments on ancestors of this paper. I also thank Christos Kyriacou and Kevin Wallbridge for inviting me to contribute this paper to the present volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)