

Semantic Blindness and Error Theorizing for the Ambiguity Theory of ‘Knows’

Mark Satta

(This is an unpublished draft of an article forthcoming in *Analysis*. The article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anx115>.)

Abstract: The ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ is the view that ‘knows’ and its cognates have more than one propositional sense – i.e. more than one sense that can properly be used in ‘knows that’ etc. constructions. Given that most of us are ‘intuitive invariantists’ – i.e. most of us initially have the intuition that ‘knows’ is univocal – defenders of the ambiguity theory need to offer an explanation for the semantic blindness present if ‘knows’ is in fact ambiguous. This paper is an attempt to offer such an explanation. Section 1 contains a general argument for the ubiquity of semantic blindness for ambiguity; the upshot being that semantic blindness for the ambiguity of ‘knows’ is unsurprising as a result. Section 2 offers more specific arguments for why ‘knows’ is the type of ambiguous word we’re very unlikely to quickly recognize is ambiguous.

The ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ (hereafter ‘the ambiguity theory’), is the view that ‘knows’ and its cognates¹ have more than one propositional sense—i.e. more than one sense that can properly be used in ‘knows that’ etc. constructions, such that which sense of ‘knows’ is used in a knowledge ascription determines, in part, the semantic content (and, thus, the truth-conditions) of that knowledge ascription.

The ambiguity theory has received relatively little attention in recent years, especially compared to prominent views about the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions, like epistemic contextualism. However, a handful of philosophers have defended positions that fall within the ambiguity theory family of views.² Elsewhere I’ve discussed some of the merits of the ambiguity theory.³ In this paper I seek to go on the defensive and address a *prime facie* weakness of the

¹ From here on out ‘and its cognates’ will typically be omitted, but should be understood as implied where appropriate.

² See e.g. Norman Malcolm (1952), Fred Feldman (1986), Matthias Steup (2005), and Baron Reed (2013).

³ In Satta (2017a), I offer linguistic arguments for an ambiguity theory of ‘knows’ using standard tests for ambiguity such as those found in Cruse (1982) and Sennet (2011). In Satta (2017b), I argue that the ambiguity theory has advantages over epistemic contextualism and make clear how the ambiguity theory differs from epistemic contextualism.

ambiguity theory—namely, that, as Patrick Rysiew notes, we are ‘intuitive invariantists’ about ‘knows’.⁴

Most of us don’t have the gut reaction that ‘knows’ is ambiguous when we first start considering the matter. Rather, to most, ‘knows’ initially seems to be univocal.⁵ It seems natural to think that if the ambiguity theory is right, that this is not how ‘knows’ would seem, but that ‘knows’ would instead seem ambiguous. Thus, the fact that most of us have the initial intuition that ‘knows’ is univocal combined with the fact that such an intuition is not what we might be expected to have on the ambiguity theory, together count against the ambiguity theory—unless defeating conditions can be provided.

In what follows I aim to offer such defeating conditions, in the form of an error theory, to discount this presumption against the ambiguity theory. I conclude that the initial appearance of invariantism about ‘knows’ is less of a problem than it initially seems, and that intuitive invariantism about ‘knows’ is an insufficient reason to gloss over the ambiguity theory. Thus, just as contextualists like Cohen and DeRose have offered an error theory to try to explain our ‘semantic blindness’ of the context-sensitivity of ‘knows’,⁶ so I’ll provide an error theory to try to explain our semantic blindness of the ambiguity of ‘knows.’ This defence occurs in two primary parts. First, I aim to show that we are intuitive invariantists about a lot of other words which clearly are ambiguous. Second, I aim to show that the nature of the ambiguity of ‘knows’ has several features which makes it the ideal sort of ambiguous word that we’d be apt to fail to realize is ambiguous.

⁴ Rysiew (2011).

⁵ In this paper, I assume no harm comes from using ‘know’, ‘knows’, and their cognates interchangeably, when those words are being merely mentioned and not used.

⁶ See, for example, Cohen (1999, 2010) and DeRose (2006, 2009).

1. The Ubiquity of Intuitive Invarianism about Ambiguous Words

As I am using the term ‘ambiguity’, its use is restricted to instances of a single word having more than one sense (i.e. lexical ambiguity).⁷ Lexical ambiguity can be broken into two types: (1) homonymy, which occurs when the different senses of a word are not closely related in meaning (e.g. words like ‘bank’ or ‘bear’) and (2) polysemy, which occurs when the different senses of a word are closely related, often with a shared etymological root (e.g. words like ‘arch’ or ‘crane’). Any plausible version of the ambiguity theory will consider ‘knows’ to be a polyseme, and in moving ahead we will be concerned mostly with the nature of polysemes. Thus, more accurately, the first part of my error theory for the ambiguity of ‘knows’ is showing that we often fail to notice polysemy, and that as a result we shouldn’t be surprised that we often fail to notice the polysemy of ‘knows’ too.

To begin, take the polyseme ‘newspaper’ and the following conversation.

A: ‘Be careful if you go outside. I read in the newspaper this morning that a lion escaped from the zoo last night.’
 B: ‘No need to worry. The newspaper just printed a retraction on their website.’
 A: ‘Really? Why?’
 B: ‘It turns out the article in the newspaper was just the result of a prank pulled by an intern.’
 A: ‘Wow, I bet the newspaper didn’t waste any time before firing that intern!’

The first and third uses of the term ‘newspaper’ refer to the physical, paper-and-ink object which a paper boy might throw at your door. The second and fourth uses refer to the organization whose function it is to manage, write the content for, and print the physical paper. Given their conversation, it seems likely that A and B each understand both senses of ‘newspaper’ and are able to fluidly change usage between senses. But what would A and B say if asked whether ‘newspaper’ is ambiguous, or asked if they had changed back and forth between different senses of ‘newspaper’ during their conversation? ‘Newspaper’ is ambiguous, and A and B did change

⁷ The term ‘sense’ here is interchangeable with the term ‘meaning’ as used technically in a roughly Fregean way (*Sinn*).

back and forth between the senses of ‘newspaper’ during the conversation. However, it seems plausible that A and B will get the answers to these questions right only if they first reflect on the conversation and how they had used the term ‘newspaper’. My contention is that ‘knows’ works like that—we have the ability to use and switch between the term’s senses fluidly in conversation, but, without reflection, we are usually unaware of doing any sense selection or sense switching when using the term in conversation.

Of course, more needs to be said in developing this line of reasoning. For example, why does it seem likely that A and B, if they reflected on the matter, would come to the conclusion that there is more than one sense of ‘newspaper’, while many, even after having carefully reflecting on the matter, do not conclude that ‘know’ as used in ordinary English has more than one sense? At least part of the answer might rest with the fact that ‘newspaper’ in both senses functions as a concrete noun and there is an ease with which the distinct things picked out by nouns can be shown to be separate. This is not as easy with most other parts of speech.

Let’s turn to verbs, starting with the verb ‘make’. Initially, if asked whether the word ‘make’ is ambiguous, I suspect many would say that it is not. ‘Make’ is not like ‘bank’ and ‘bank’—we can straightforwardly say either you made it or you didn’t make it. But if one takes the time to reflect on the nature of ‘make’ one will see that this isn’t so. If I say, for example ‘you made the train’ there are several things I could sensibly be saying in English, even when the referents of ‘you’ and ‘the train’ are fixed. I could be stating that you *arrived at* the train successfully before it departed, or I could be stating that you were the one who *crafted or constructed* the train by putting the pieces together. Similarly, if I say ‘she made history’ I could be claiming that her actions will *keep her remembered* or I could be claiming that while she may not be remembered herself, she was one who *shaped* how the record of facts will be remembered

and conveyed. The Webster-Merriman dictionary, for example, has twenty-five listings for the word ‘make’.⁸

Commonly used verbs, like ‘have’, ‘make’, and ‘want’ play a structural role in the English language whereby they need to be able to cover a wide variety of situations in which certain specifics of the action are not as important as more coarse-grained features. To take the example of ‘make’ again, when the specifics of how one crafted an item are important one might say ‘I carved this statue, I weaved this basket, and I baked this cake.’ However, if one is interested only in conveying that she is the artist for all the objects one might say ‘I made this statue, this basket, and this cake.’ The verbs we use very frequently like ‘make’ are often used so frequently precisely because of their flexibility. ‘Know’ is the eighth most commonly used English verb.⁹ It seems sensible that ‘know’ would have the same type of flexibility as other common, more coarse-grained verbs. This is not to say that ‘know’ cannot be used as a technical term to pick out a particular epistemic relation of import, like some philosophers have done with the term ‘understand’.¹⁰ But such a technical use does not negate other uses outside the technical context.

‘Newspaper’ and ‘make’ provide us with examples of a more general trend noted by linguists—namely that ambiguity is ubiquitous and that our savvy negotiations with subtly ambiguous terms allow us to fail to notice what we’re doing. Yael Ravin and Claudia Leacock note this point, writing that,

‘We are so adept at using contextual cues that we select the appropriate sense of words effortlessly and unconsciously. The sheer number of senses listed by some sources as being available comes as a surprise: Out of approximately 60,000 entries in

⁸ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make>

⁹ Retrieved from Oxford Dictionaries website on August 21, 2014 from: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/the-oec-facts-about-the-language>

¹⁰ For example, Zagzebski (2001).

Webster's Seventh Dictionary, 21,488, or almost 40 per cent, have two or more senses, according to Byrd (et al.) (1987). Moreover, the most commonly used words tend to be the most polysemous. The verb *run*, for example, has 29 senses in Webster's, further divided into nearly 125 sub-senses.'¹¹

Thus, while initially the fact that most of us are intuitive invariantists seems to count in favor of invariantism, this presumption in favor of invariantism is significantly undercut by the fact that we are also intuitive invariantists about many other ambiguous words.

But this undercutting effect is not complete, for in the case of words like 'newspaper', 'make', and 'run', while we may initially be intuitive invariantists, if given enough time to reflect, most of us are willing to acknowledge that these terms are polysemous. But it isn't so with the case of 'knows.' Many people resist accepting that 'knows' is polysemous even after reflection. Thus, a full explanation for the alleged semantic blindness that comes with the ambiguity theory will also provide reasons for this extra resistance that 'knows' is ambiguous over and above the normal sort of inattentiveness we experience to the ambiguity of many other words. In the next section, I offer three suggestions as to why our intuitions about the invariantist nature of 'knows' might be particularly obstinate, even if the ambiguity theory is correct. I invoke these explanations to further diminish the potential undercutting effect of intuitive invariantism against the ambiguity theory.

2. An Ambiguity-of-'Knows'-Specific Error Theory

Here I offer three additional reasons why our invariantism about 'knows' might be particularly obstinate even if the ambiguity theory is true. The first deals with the transient and developmental nature of polysemy and the multi-functionality of 'knows'. The second deals with

¹¹ Ravin and Leacock (2000, 1).

the nature of multivocal words and sense recognition across a linguistic community. The third deals with the history of philosophy as an academic discipline. The intended upshot of these arguments is to show that because 'knows' is the type of word that, even if ambiguous, we should expect to be intuitive invariantists about, it doesn't count much against the ambiguity theory that we are intuitive invariantists.

The first point deals with the nature of polysemy itself in relation to the many uses with which the word 'know' functions. Polysemy is neither a necessary nor eternal property of a word. Rather it is something that develops, often slowly and subtly, over time. Similarly, it is something that can disappear slowly over time. Take the word 'want'. Its primary meaning in twenty-first century English is desire, as in 'I want (i.e. desire) a new car'. There is also its more archaic meaning as lack or need, which in contemporary discourse typically only shows up in select constructions such as 'She wants (i.e. lacks) for nothing' or 'He is in want (i.e. need)'. The usage of 'want' in this latter way remains common enough such that this and the former sense of 'want' together constitute a case of ambiguity for 'want'. But there may come a point where the usage of 'want' in the archaic sense of 'lacks' becomes so marginalized and uncommon that the word ceases to be ambiguous between those senses. Such a process would likely be slow (perhaps it has already begun) and there would no doubt be a lengthy period where it is unclear whether 'want' remains ambiguous.

Conversely, as our understanding of the world (and the world itself) continues to change, so does our language. These changes often result in new cases of ambiguity, and of polysemy. Take the word 'web', which in the internet age gained a new sense as used in the phrase 'world wide web'. The clear connection between the word's original sense, as used in the phrase 'the spider's web', and this new sense make 'web' a good case of a polyseme. The internet gave us a

new linguistic purpose of sorts via a development in the needs and interests of English speakers. And it was our past usage of the term ‘web’ as referring to the structures created by spiders, along with salient features we wanted to capture about the nature of the networks forming the internet, that led to our adoption of the new sense of ‘web’. In the case of ‘web’ it was clear that the word was gaining a new meaning, and it happened in a relatively quick and concrete fashion. But subtler changes in the needs of speakers lead to subtler implementations of ambiguity.

My claim is that something like this has likely happened in the case of ‘knows’ too. As has been shown by the difficulties in reaching consensus in the Edward Craig-inspired project of trying to determine *the* reason why it’s valuable to speakers to pick out certain individuals as knowers, there likely isn’t one such purpose or reason.¹² Rather, it seems far more likely that there are a set of related epistemic reasons as to why such labels are valuable.¹³ Distinctions among those purposes likely have developed over time. Thus, it’s plausible to suppose that the polysemy of ‘knows’ is something that has been developing subtly and slowly over time in accordance with evolving human needs for more nuanced epistemic language. If the development at this point is either somewhat recent or incomplete (or both), this could help mask the ambiguous nature of ‘knows’ and make it harder to detect even upon reflection. Thus, the developmental history of the ambiguity of ‘knows’ may be a factor that helps explain semantic blindness.

This leads to a second factor that might explain our resistance to the ambiguity of ‘knows’—namely, that not all senses of a term need to be understood by all the competent speakers of a language (particularly in the case of polysemy) in order for that word to count as

¹² Craig (1990).

¹³ Thus, those like Rysiew (2012) have advocated sensibly from moving about asking what *the role* is to what *the roles* are.

ambiguous. Think about the words ‘want’ and ‘web’ once more. In the case of ‘want’ just about every current competent speaker of English understands that ‘want’ has a sense similar in meaning to desire. However, there is no doubt that a smaller percentage of current competent speakers of English recognize the sense of ‘want’ as deficiency or lack. But that doesn’t change the fact that ‘want’ is ambiguous. Similarly, in the case of ‘web’—particularly if we think about the situation in the 1980s for example—a significantly smaller portion of the population was familiar with the newer sense of ‘web’ than were familiar with the original sense of ‘web’. But at some point enough speakers recognized this new sense of ‘web’ that the word gained this new meaning as a proper part of English full stop. That such circumstances could arise in the case of subtly polysemous words like ‘knows’ is likely.

I’ll take my own experiences as instructive here. Prior to starting my formal study of philosophy, it struck me as obvious that *truly* knowing something required infallible evidence. I was comfortable using the word in other settings, but I likely would have appealed to some sort of loose use explanation to justify those usages.¹⁴ In fact, this view of knowledge seemed so clear to me that a great deal of epistemological questions seemed to have obvious answers. I only came to see what the real problems were once I accepted that many other people didn’t understand the term ‘know’ to refer to a state of true belief with perfect warrant or infallible justification. (It took me a number of tries before I could see why the obvious answer to the Gettier problem wasn’t that the justification level in the scenarios Gettier gave was too weak to count as knowing, for example). I’ve since come to see that many English speakers use the word ‘know’ in ways I didn’t recognize initially, and I’ve now accustomed myself to using and accepting these senses too. Similarly, it’s not uncommon for a certain percentage of my

¹⁴ For a contemporary (and in my mind quite plausible) defence of a view along these lines see Wayne Davis (2007).

undergraduate students to take it as intuitively obvious that what we mean when we say we know something is that we have an infallible true belief. Still others take it as obvious that we don't mean this, and still others lack a strong view or may even posit that we mean more than one thing.¹⁵

One response to these data would be to say that a certain percentage of individuals are simply wrong about what knowledge is. But it strikes me as harder to make the parallel claim that these significant portions of competent English speakers are simply wrong about what 'knowledge' is or what we mean by 'knows.' Rather, it seems to me more sensible to say that there is more than one sense for such terms, but that all these senses are closely related. However, in the case of many individuals, we can perhaps explain their inability to recognize 'knows' as ambiguous in virtue of their recognizing only one sense of 'knows', despite the availability of other senses. Many English speakers could be in this position and 'knows' could still be ambiguous. Thus, for some, their resistance to the polysemy of 'knows' may be appropriately reflective of how they use and understand the word, yet still not accurately reflect the multiplicity of senses available in the English language.

Even with these explanations on offer, one might wonder why *epistemologists* have been largely recalcitrant to conclude that 'knows' is ambiguous. Given the careful attention paid by epistemologists to the nature of knowledge and the meaning of 'knowledge' it seems unlikely that so many bright and dedicated thinkers about knowledge would fail to notice that 'knows' was ambiguous if it were. I think there is a plausible theory—which works in tandem with the first two reasons I offered for a general resistance to the polysemy of 'knows'—that could explain the resistance of epistemologists to accept the polysemy of 'knows' even if 'knows' is in

¹⁵ DeRose (1999) recounts that he too finds that some students are intuitive invariantists while other students put forward a 'two sense' view of 'knows.'

fact polysemous. This explanation is rooted in the history of analytic philosophy as an academic discipline in the twentieth century. Despite our movement away from conceptual analysis as the dominant method of doing analytic philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century, the general framework of trying to come up with *the* proper analysis for important terms has remained an important function of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This has been accompanied by a general aversion to appealing to ambiguity.¹⁶ Thus, the trajectory of analytic philosophy, as a whole, has guided philosophers away from identifying the polysemous nature of ‘knows’. Add to that the post-Gettier dominance of the quest for identifying the proper analysis of ‘knowledge’ in epistemology, and it becomes easy to see how the lanes down which epistemologists were guided were ones that would cause them to avoid considering that ‘knows’ might be polysemous. And as the lineage of thoughtful and intelligent epistemologists who failed to claim that ‘knows’ was polysemous continued to grow, the more audacious it may have come to seem to claim that these epistemologists missed the mark in a rather fundamental way by failing to notice ‘knows’ polysemous nature. But on this theory it’s not the quality of the epistemologist, but rather accidents of history that make it easier for us now to suggest that ‘knows’ is polysemous. We’ve spent many years unable to reach consensus as to what the proper analysis or meaning of ‘knows’ is, and in more recent years, other forms of non-traditional answers have been posed such as Timothy Williamson’s knowledge-first approach, Jason Stanley and John Hawthorne’s interest-relative invariantism, and Stewart Cohen and Keith DeRose’s contextualism. These developments paved the way for consideration of ambiguity. If ‘knows’ is ambiguous, the philosophers correctly identifying this now need not be any more

¹⁶ For example, Grice’s ‘modified Occam’s razor’ principle that ‘senses are not to be modified beyond necessity’ has often been used as a presumption against positing ambiguity (Grice 1978, 118-9). For a contemporary discussion and challenge of this position see Phillips (2012).

intelligent or hardworking than the ones who came before who mostly failed to do so. Rather, it is an historical accident that we are now in a better position to identify philosophically-important, polysemous terms. Because ideological change is often slow, given analytic philosophy's past, it shouldn't surprise us much that epistemologists would be cautious to accept that 'knows' is ambiguous, even if it is.

The error theory I've put forward in order to explain why many are so resistant to the ambiguity of 'knows' can be summarized as follows. The specific form of ambiguity 'knows' embodies is polysemy, in which the different senses of the word are closely related. Due to the ubiquity of polysemy and our subconscious adeptness as users of polysemous terms, we often fail to notice that words are polysemous. Beyond being polysemous *simpliciter*, a number of specific features of the polysemy of 'knows', including that it is a commonly used verb, that its polysemy may still be in its developmental phase, and that not all the senses of 'knows' available to a speaker of English may be recognized by all competent English speakers, each make it more likely that we would fail to notice, or see upon reflection, the ambiguity of 'knows.' Finally, because modern analytic epistemology is part of a philosophical lineage in which identifying polysemy has often been discouraged, there is an additional explanation as to why analytic epistemologists, and philosophers more generally, have been intuitive invariantists. Probably even with this error theory in place, our intuitions about the univocality of 'knows' remain more likely on invariantism than on the ambiguity theory, but I think the factors discussed in this paper serve to significantly lessen the level of support that any intuitive invariantism gives to invariantism over the ambiguity theory.¹⁷

¹⁷ I would like to thank Michael Bergmann, Rod Bertolet, Paul Draper, Baron Reed, and Matthias Steup for helpful discussions regarding these ideas, as well as two anonymous referees from this journal, whose clear and insightful comments improved both the quality of this paper and my thoughts on this topic.

References:

- Cohen, S. 2010. 'Is Knowledge Contextual?: Contextualism Defended' in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (eds.) Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers: 55-62.
- Cohen, St. 1999. 'Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons,' in *Philosophical Perspectives, 13: Epistemology, 1999* (ed.) James E. Tomberlin, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Craig, E. 1990. *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cruse, A. D. 1982. 'On Lexical Ambiguity,' *Nottingham Linguistic Circular* 11, 2: 65-80.
- Davis, W. 2007. 'Knowledge Claims and Context: Loose Use.' *Philosophical Studies*, 132: 395-438.
- DeRose, K. 2009. *The Case for Contextualism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- DeRose, K. 2006. 'Bamboozled by Our Own Words: Semantic Blindness and Some Arguments Against Contextualism.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 2: 316-338.
- DeRose, K. 1999. 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense,' in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (eds.) John Greco and Ernest Sosa, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 187-204.
- Feldman, F. 1986. *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986.
- Grice, H. P. 1978. 'Further Notes on Logic and Conversation' in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9, Pragmatics, Peter Cole (ed.), New York: Academic Press: 113-28.
- Malcolm, N. 1952. 'Knowledge and Belief,' *Mind* 61, 242: 178-89.

- Phillips, B. 2012. 'Modified Occam's Razor.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90, 2: 371-82.
- Ravin, Y. and C. Leacock. 2000. 'Polysemy: An Overview,' in *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Approaches*, Y. Ravin and C. Leacock (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reed, B. 2013. 'Fallibilism, Epistemic Possibility, and Epistemic Agency,' *Philosophical Issues* 23: 40-69.
- Rysiew, P. 2012. 'Epistemic Scorekeeping' in *Knowledge Ascriptions*, Jessica Brown and Mikkel Gerken (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press: 271-93
- Rysiew, P. 2011. 'Epistemic Contextualism,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), (ed.) Edward N. Zalta
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/contextualism-epistemology/>>.
- Satta, M. 2017a. 'A Linguistic Grounding for a Polysemy Theory of "Knows,"' *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).
- Satta, M. 2017b. 'The Ambiguity Theory of "Knows,"' *Acta Analytica* (forthcoming).
- Sennet, A. 2011. 'Ambiguity,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/ambiguity/>>.
- Steup, M. 2005. 'Contextualism and Conceptual Disambiguation,' *Acta Analytica*, 20: 3-15.
- Zagzebski, L. 2001. 'Recovering Understanding' in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty* (ed.) Matthias Steup, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 235-251.