

## Experts, Semantic and Epistemic

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the tendency to defer in matters semantic is rationalized by our reliance on the say-so of others for much of what we know about the world. The result, I contend, is a new and distinctly *epistemic* source of support for the doctrine of attitude anti-individualism.

### 1.

Sally is not a scientist. She depends on others for what she knows about electrons and ion chambers, platinum and heliobacters. They tell her such things as that electrons have spin, that ion chambers detect ionizing radiation, that the melting point of platinum is over 1700°C, and that the ecological niche of heliobacters (a bacteria that can cause digestive illnesses, including gastritis and peptic ulcer disease) is the lower intestine.

That all of us depend for much of what we know on the testimony of others is not news. Many recent epistemologists have used this sort of dependence to argue for claims regarding the social nature of knowledge. Thus Wellbourne (1986) and Kutsch (2002) have appealed to the phenomenon of testimony to argue that there are cases in which the subject of knowledge is not a single individual, but rather a community; Burge

(1993) and Faulkner (2000) use testimony cases to argue that the warrants enjoyed by one's testimonial beliefs are 'extended' (Burge's term) or 'social' (Faulkner's term) in that they outstrip one's reasons for trusting one's source and the reliability of one's own cognitive processing; and Schmitt (1994) and (2006) has used testimony cases to argue that one's reasons for believing as one does, when one believes through testimony, extend to include the reasons one's source had (even as these reasons are inaccessible to one oneself). It is a familiar (if not entirely uncontroversial) point that testimonial knowledge is importantly social in some sense or other.

The aim of this paper is not to advance a thesis of this sort. Rather, my aim is to show that the social nature of testimonial knowledge extends beyond epistemology proper. In particular, it will be my contention that the fact that we pick up much of what we know about the world from the say-so of others rationalizes a particular social practice regarding *language use* – namely, the practice whereby a speaker typically defers to experts to explicate the meanings of her own words and the application conditions of her own concepts. This practice of *semantic deference* (as it is known) is often used to motivate the doctrine of anti-individualism about language and thought (see e.g. Burge 1979). Consequently, if my argument is sound, it would show that the conditions on knowledge communication provide a heretofore underexplored source of motivation for anti-individualist views in the philosophy of mind and language.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.

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<sup>1</sup> I say 'underexplored'. The point I am developing here has been suggested in Burge (1999: 243), where he writes that one's own concepts are acquired through "having comprehended thoughts (one's own) *that were shaped and expressed through the words of others*" (italics mine). However, Burge does not develop this point at any length.

As my argument will turn on the role experts play in the acquisition of testimonial knowledge, it will be helpful to have a clear characterization of the notions involved. To a first approximation, I will count *H*'s knowledge that *p* as a case of testimonial knowledge when it is acquired through, and depends for its status as knowledge on, *H*'s comprehension and acceptance of a piece of testimony that *p*.<sup>2</sup> It should be clear that most testimonial knowledge is acquired from people who are not themselves experts on the topic at hand – at least not if ‘expert’ is to retain its standard meaning. Illustrations are easy to come by. I did not go to last night’s baseball game, but come to know through your testimony that the Yankees won. This does not make you an expert on baseball, or on the Yankees, or even on last night’s game. To be sure, I regard your testimony as authoritative, trustworthy, and so forth; the point is rather that authoritative and trustworthy testimony is not the exclusive property of experts. You don’t have to excel in the theory and practice of baseball to be in a position to report knowledgeably on the outcome of last night’s game.

What, then, is the role – or, more accurately, the roles – experts play in testimonial knowledge? One such role was presented above: there are cases in which one’s testimonial knowledge depends on one’s having received testimony from someone who is an expert on the topic at hand. I will call such experts *knowledge domain experts*: these are people who have what we might call ‘expertise’ in the relevant domain.<sup>3</sup> Let ‘expertise’ designate the state of having specialized background knowledge (or at least justified belief) in a given domain, where the knowledge in question is organized in a

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Acceptance’ here involves the endorsement of a content *on the basis of* an endorsement of the testimony. See Chapter 1 of Goldberg 2007 for further details.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the utility of this notion depends on treating domains as extensive. Otherwise, one who reports knowledgeably about the outcome of last night’s Yankees’ game would count as a knowledge domain expert on the restricted domain of the victor of last night’s Yankees’ game.

manner that allows for easy access and use in appropriate circumstances. One role experts play in testimony cases, then, is when they testify as knowledge domain experts, on some topic that falls within their expertise. My claim above, to the effect that most testimony cases do not involve experts, is simply the claim that most cases of testimony involve reports of conditions that can be discerned without need of any specialized (well-organized) background knowledge – e.g., that the Yankees won last night.

But the role of experts in testimony cases goes beyond the cases in which they testify on matters within their expertise. They also play an important – if potential and implicit, and rarely manifested – role in ordinary cases of testimony by non-experts. And it is this role that I want to dwell on in the remainder of this paper. My claims here will be two. One is that our *epistemic* reliance on our peers, in ordinary testimony cases in which the testifiers themselves are not experts, rationalizes our *semantic* deference to experts in our community. The other is that in particular cases the semantic experts (if I can call them that) are none other than the relevant knowledge domain experts. If I am correct about this, then the phenomenon of knowledge communication through speech appears to provide a new, heretofore underexplored source of support for anti-individualist views about mind and language.

### 3.

My thesis is that our semantic deference to experts is itself rationalized by our epistemic reliance on the say-so of other (expert or non-expert) speakers. The basic motivation behind this thesis can be captured in two ideas. First, there is a cost associated with one's entry into the practice that enables one to acquire a good deal of

substantive and specific pieces of knowledge through accepting the say-so of one's peers. I will be arguing below that the cost is that one is 'answerable to' the linguistic norms that make such knowledge transmission practically feasible. Second, these norms themselves are provided by the relevant knowledge domain experts. If these two ideas are correct, then we should see our reliance on our peers for much of what we know about the world, and our reliance on (some subset of) our peers for explicating the meanings of our terms and the application conditions of concepts, as two sides of a single coin. In what follows I develop this line of argument.

Consider the conditions on acquiring testimonial knowledge – the sort of knowledge that is acquired through, and depends for its status as knowledge on, one's recognition that one has been told that *p*. To acquire knowledge of this sort, one must be competent in recovering the content of the testimony-constituting speech acts one observes: one can't acquire testimonial knowledge that *p*, unless one is reliable in comprehending the testimony one has observed. If testimonial knowledge is (as I said above) knowledge that depends for its status as knowledge on the hearer's comprehension and acceptance of the testimony, why must the comprehension be reliable (in a sense to be identified below)? The point can be made in terms of the epistemological truism that, in order to be knowledge, a belief must be non-accidentally related to the truth of what is believed. Imagine a subject, *S*, who forms the belief that *p* through a process of comprehension in which the proposition that *p* is recovered through a *lucky guess* as to the content of the observed testimony. Then even if *p* is true and the testimony *S* observed (to the effect that *p*) was reliable, *S*'s coming to believe that *p* in this way makes it accidental that her testimonial belief is true. After all, *S* could easily

have formed the belief she did, in the way she did (guessing as to the content in question), under conditions in which the belief is false. It is for this reason that believing what one *guesses to be* what another said is generally an unreliable, insensitive, and unsafe way to form beliefs. So if *S* is to acquire the testimonial knowledge that *p*, it must be the case that she has a reliable way to recover the propositional content of the testimony, in something like the following sense: she would apprehend a piece of testimony as having the content *p*, only if it did in fact have the content *p*.<sup>4</sup>

The foregoing considerations support the idea that reliable comprehension is a necessary condition on the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. However, one might object that this necessity claim is the result of an overly-narrow characterization of testimonial knowledge itself. The objection is as follows. If we regard testimonial knowledge as a matter of a hearer's coming to know the (truth of the) *very proposition attested to*, then *of course* the hearer has to recover the propositional content of the source testimony if she is to acquire testimonial knowledge. But (the objection continues) this is only because we have conceived of testimonial knowledge in an overly-restrictive fashion. For suppose that we do not assume that testimonial knowledge is a matter of a hearer's coming to know *the very proposition attested to*. In that case we can say that, so long as the content *S* takes the testimony to have had is likely to be true given the testimony *S* observed, then this apprehension can underwrite the acquisition of testimonial knowledge – whether or not the content she apprehended is the same as the content her interlocutor attested to.

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<sup>4</sup> The epistemology of comprehension seems to me a curious lacuna in the epistemology of testimony literature: it is clearly relevant to a complete account of the epistemology of testimony, yet few people have attended to it. Two noteworthy exceptions are Jack (1994) and Fricker (2002). (I have also devoted a good deal of attention to this matter in my Goldberg 2004.)

But it is not as if my characterization of testimonial knowledge – as knowledge that  $p$  acquired through, and depending for its status as knowledge on, the hearer’s comprehension and acceptance of a piece of testimony that  $p$  – is arbitrary (or otherwise question-begging). First, this characterization, or something like it, is widely assumed by those working on testimony.<sup>5</sup> Second, this characterization emerges from any position which holds the following combination of views, each of which is independently plausible: testimonial knowledge involves testimonial belief; testimonial belief is belief formed through the comprehension and acceptance of a piece of testimony; and accepting a piece of testimony involves (among other things) accepting the attested proposition. In addition, my characterization of testimonial knowledge emerges from two other related features of such knowledge. One is that, in forming a belief through accepting another’s say-so, a hearer  $H$  is being guided in belief-fixation by how her interlocutor has (linguistically) represented things to be:  $H$  believes that things are so because  $H$ ’s interlocutor *told her* that things are so. But this gloss makes sense only if what  $H$  believes is what her interlocutor told her to be so. Relatedly, in forming a belief through accepting another’s say-so,  $H$  is relying on her source to have (reliably) gotten things right. But  $H$ ’s reliance on this score requires that she has recovered how her source has “gotten” things in the first place – and this involves, at a minimum, recovering the content presented-as-true in the testimony. And so we see that my characterization of testimonial knowledge, and with it the thesis that reliable comprehension is a necessary condition on testimonial knowledge, are well-motivated.

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<sup>5</sup> See Fricker 1987 and 2006. Admittedly, theorists who work on testimony are rarely as explicit as Fricker in making this assumption. But it is noteworthy that the vast majority of discussions of ‘the epistemology of testimony’ focus exclusively on content-preserving cases, where the content of the testimony is precisely the content of the knowledge the hearer acquires through accepting the testimony.

Consider now what is involved in the relevant sort of ‘reliable comprehension process’. Above I said that a comprehension process would be reliable only if it conforms to the following specification: the process would represent a piece of observed testimony as having had the content  $p$ , only if the testimony did have the content  $p$ . Now I do not want to go into details regarding what this requirement comes to.<sup>6</sup> But whatever it comes to, this requirement must be regularly satisfied by actual hearers. If this requirement is not regularly satisfied by actual hearers, then testimonial knowledge is a much less prevalent phenomenon than we would pretheoretically take it to be. The trouble is that our pretheoretic views regarding the scope of testimonial knowledge are not negotiable: they are surrendered at the cost of inviting a substantive form of skepticism. This is owed to the widely-acknowledged role testimonial knowledge plays in the fabric of our knowledge more generally. Given this role, a failure to see the reliable comprehension condition as regularly satisfied will raise the risk of an unacceptable sort of skepticism.<sup>7</sup>

I now want to use the claim, that the reliable comprehension condition is regularly satisfied, to argue against a popular view about the nature of linguistic understanding. I will call the targeted view the ‘doctrine of complete grasp’:

CG In order to understand a speech act, one must completely grasp each of the concepts that compose the content of the speech act.

The notion of complete grasp can be understood as follows. For any concept  $C$ ,  $C$ ’s application conditions can be given in a statement of the form, ‘Necessarily,  $C$  applies to

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<sup>6</sup> See Goldberg 2004 and Chapter 2 of Goldberg 2007 for a discussion.

<sup>7</sup> One might suppose that, in order to avoid this skeptical result, it suffices to show that testimony is a source of knowledge, *period* – whether or not that knowledge is *testimonial* knowledge, and so whether or not it is acquired through reliable comprehension. But elsewhere I have argued at length that, so long as one does not appeal to considerations of comprehension, showing what needs to be shown will present a virtually insurmountable task. Chapter 2 of Goldberg 2007 for details.

an object *o* if and only if ...'. A subject *S* completely grasps *C* at a given time *t* just in case at *t* *S* can recognize via reflection alone<sup>8</sup> some correct and informative completion of this statement-form.<sup>9</sup> Now (CG) or something like it is a doctrine that has been the object of a good deal of familiar criticism by Tyler Burge.<sup>10</sup> Burge's case against (CG) turns on considerations pertaining to the semantics of attitude-ascriptions.<sup>11</sup> My case, however, is different. I want to argue against (CG) by appeal to considerations pertaining to the nature of the testimonial exchange. I submit that, together with some plausible subsidiary assumptions (to be enumerated and defended below), (CG) is incompatible with the claim that the reliable comprehension condition is regularly met. If so, we have the makings of a *reductio* argument against (CG) – and one whose main premises concern *epistemic* considerations (regarding the conditions on testimonial knowledge).

In outline form, the argument is as follows. Suppose (1) that the doctrine of complete grasp is true; (2) that we speak a public language;<sup>12</sup> and (3) that, at least when it comes to the concepts that our public language assigns to the lexicon, complete grasp (in the sense of (CG)) is not a common phenomenon. Given (1)-(3), it will not be a common phenomenon that we satisfy the reliable comprehension condition, and so will not be a

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<sup>8</sup> The modality in 'can recognize via reflection alone' is meant to be reminiscent of the modal condition on *apriority*. Thus we speak of a proposition as *a priori* knowable to a subject *S* just in case there is a method *M*, presently available to *S*, which is such that, if *S* comes to know that *p* through *M*, then *S* knows *a priori* that *p*. Similarly, we can say that *S* can recognize via reflection alone that *p*, where *p* is some correct and informative proposition of the form 'Necessarily, *C* applies if and only if ...', just in case there is a reflective method *M*, presently available to *S*, which is such that, if *S* comes to know that *p* through *M*, then *S* knows through reflection alone that *p*.

<sup>9</sup> A completion has to be *informative*, or else producing something like 'Necessarily, DOG applies to an object if and only if the object is a dog' would count as manifesting a complete grasp of the concept DOG. More on this below.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Burge 1979 and 1986.

<sup>11</sup> It would be more correct to say that Burge's case against (CG) is often *taken* (by others) to depend on the semantics of attitude-ascriptions. Burge himself has denied that his case is to be understood in this way; and I have defended Burge on this score (see Goldberg 2002). But in any case Burge has not offered a testimony-based case against (CG), which is what I am attempting here.

<sup>12</sup> Below I will argue that this assumption is denied at the cost of jeopardizing reliable comprehension.

common phenomenon that we count as acquiring testimonial knowledge. But I already noted the skeptical consequences that await anyone who undermines our pretheoretic views regarding the extent of our testimonial knowledge. It would thus seem that anyone who wants to avoid skepticism has a motive to reject the combination of (1)-(3). My claim will be that it is (1) that ought to go.

Before we can discuss (1)-(3) we need to be clear about what a public language is. Let a language  $L$  be an assignment of meanings to each of the elements in a specified lexicon (the vocabulary of  $L$ ). The ‘meanings’  $L$  assigns to its expressions may not be identical to the expressions’ semantic values on occasions of use: we have to allow for indexicals and other semantically context-sensitive expressions. But for our purposes we can ignore this complication and suppose that the meaning of an expression is its semantic value. We can suppose further that, for the expressions of interest here, the meaning of an expression  $e$  will be the concept(s) that  $L$  assigns to  $e$ .<sup>13</sup>  $L$  is a *public* language, then, when there is a community of speakers whose utterances are correctly regarded as utterances (as we say) ‘of  $L$ ’.

As illustrated in Lewis (1981), it is a complicated matter to determine the conditions for regarding speakers as producing utterances ‘of’ some common language. Happily, we need not address this matter to make the point I wish to make in defense of (2), the claim that speakers speak public languages. For the point to be made in defense of the hypothesis of public languages is simply this: if people do not speak public languages, then the process of comprehension would appear to involve a massive coordination problem – one that would make it very unlikely that the reliable

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<sup>13</sup> Concept(s): there may be more than one. (I have in mind cases of polysymy, not cases of lexical ambiguity; the latter could be handled by regarding a single expression-form as corresponding to two distinct lexical items.) I will ignore the complications arising from such phenomena.

comprehension condition is regularly satisfied. Since I have defended this claim elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> here I will be brief.

In standard cases, comprehension proceeds in a homophonic fashion: when the hearer *H* articulates what she takes speaker *S* to have said, *H* re-uses the very same word-forms she takes *S* to have used.<sup>15</sup> (Context-sensitivity requires some adjustments on *H*'s behalf; but I will ignore these in what follows.) Now, whether or not *H* and *S* speak a common, public language, *H*'s homophonic comprehension is a reliable way to comprehend *S*'s speech act only if the relevant portion of the semantics for *H*'s and *S*'s respective idiolects is identical, assigning the same concepts to the same word-forms. (It is only in that case that *H*'s re-use of the same word-forms will ensure that *H*'s comprehension of *S*'s statement, as manifested in *H*'s re-use of the same word-forms, does in fact correctly represent the content of *S*'s statement.<sup>16</sup>) Moreover, the point is perfectly general, along two different dimensions: the semantics for the relevant portion of a speaker's and hearer's respective idiolects would have to be identical for *any* utterance by *any* speaker that the hearer could reliably comprehend in this homophonic way. Thus it would appear that the standard sort of comprehension process is a reliable one only if the semantics of virtually all speakers in a given language community is identical (assigning the same concepts to the same word-forms). Such an overlap would appear to be sufficient to regard the members of a speech community as speaking a

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<sup>14</sup> See Goldberg 2002 and 2007.

<sup>15</sup> This point is emphasized by Burge (1999).

<sup>16</sup> I speak here of "representing the content" of the source's statement. To avoid misunderstanding, I repeat here something I said above: I am *not* assuming that the phenomenology of testimonial belief-fixation must pass through a state of mind in which the hearer explicitly represents the speaker as having said such-and-such. The only condition I am insisting upon here is one of content-preservation. In particular, hearer *H*'s re-use of the same sentence-form *S* used – whether as manifesting her (*H*'s) understanding of *S*'s testimony-constituting speech act, or as expressing the belief that she (*H*) acquired through accepting that testimony – must "say the same thing" (strictly speaking) as *S*'s use of that sentence-form in her testimony-constituting speech act.

common language. What is more, it is arguable that the hypothesis of a common language is necessary to explain how this state of more-or-less total coordination between the semantics of the idiolects among all members of a speech community is attained in the first place.

Admittedly, the need for a public language (or public standards for individuals' idiolects) would dissipate if it could be shown how reliable comprehension could be attained in the absence of hearers' reliance on homophonic comprehension. One might think to approach this sort of project by appeal to Davidson's suggestions about radical interpretation. The radical interpreter, after all, makes no prior assumptions about the meanings of others' expressions, even when the other speaker appears to be speaking the same language as the radical interpreter herself. But even Davidson himself came to think that ordinary cases of comprehension do not involve the sort of interpretative excess he described under the method of radical interpretation.<sup>17</sup> What is more, there are good reasons in support of the view Davidson came to hold. The coordination problem that would have to be solved by a single individual, if that individual is to remain open to the acquisition of knowledge expressed by speakers in her community, would be too great for any single individual to solve. Not only would the hearer have to keep track of as many different idiolects as there were speakers (potential sources of knowledge) in her community; what is more, she would have to keep track of changes within a single idiolect over time. The difficulty of this problem seems to be much, much greater than the difficulty of comprehending one's colinguals in ordinary contexts of knowledge

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<sup>17</sup> See Davidson (1999). Admittedly, it is unclear whether Davidson ever really intended radical interpretation to be a model of everyday comprehension. Although there are suggestions in some early papers that he did so (see e.g. Davidson 1973/1984: 125), in his (1999) he denies ever having had such an intent.

communication. This suggests that radical interpretation is not the right model for comprehension in ordinary, everyday cases.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, it would seem that only the postulation of a public language will vindicate the reliability of the ordinary process of comprehension, and so claim (2) would appear secure. With (2) defended, the task of defending claim (3) – asserting the rarity of complete grasp – becomes correspondingly easier. (3) appears contentious only against the backdrop of a theory on which a speaker’s concepts are individuated in terms of (some subset of) the speaker’s own beliefs and/or her inferential practices with the corresponding word. But if a speaker’s concepts just are the public language concepts, (3) appears downright obvious. For it would appear patent that each speaker is such that, for many of the public language concepts in her repertoire, she cannot fully explicate these concepts or articulate the concepts’ application conditions; and for most of these she may not even recognize when she has been presented with such an explication. To be sure, any speaker can offer and accept ‘trivial’ explications, of the sort expressed by the following:

(T1) The concept DOG applies to all and only dogs.

(T2) The predicate ‘*x* is a dog’ applies to all and only dogs.

But these are hardly explications, as they do not articulate the application conditions of the concept/predicate, but instead re-employ the very predicate whose application conditions are in question.<sup>19</sup> And once we recognize that, when it comes to public language concepts, it is often the case that subjects are not in a position to produce or

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<sup>18</sup> This line of argument is developed at length in Goldberg 2004.

<sup>19</sup> See Goldberg 2002 and 2006 where I discuss this sort of triviality at length.

recognize an explication of the concepts or their application conditions, we have seen our way to recognizing that complete grasp is rare.

We now have a dialectical case against (1), the doctrine of complete grasp itself. Given the implausible implications that come with any position that conjoins (1)-(3), together with the independent plausibility of both (2) and (3), we ought to reject (1). But at this point it might be wondered what comprehension could consist in, or how comprehension could be as determinate as it is, if the doctrine of complete grasp is false. Since a failure to answer these questions will leave us with an inclination to accept (1) despite the troubles that we would land in for doing so, I want to address them head-on. My claim here is that one can reliably comprehend a statement without possessing complete grasp of the concepts composing its content, as reliable comprehension is merely a matter of reliably representing observed speech as having the content it in fact has.<sup>20</sup> So long as one possesses the relevant concepts – something that falls out of our assumption that speaker and hearer alike speak a public language – one can reliably represent the content of an observed utterance merely by redeploing those very concepts, *whether or not one completely grasps them*.

Of course at this point we are close to a position that is familiar from the literature on attitude anti-individualism. I will return to this in the section following, but before doing so it is worth underscoring how we reached this point. So far our dialectic has assumed nothing more than the following three things: first, that testimonial knowledge is a prevalent phenomenon; second, that the acquisition of such knowledge requires reliable comprehension of the source testimony; and third, that complete grasp of public language

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<sup>20</sup> Once again, this talk of “reliably representing observed speech as having the content it in fact has” should be understood to be neutral on the phenomenology of testimonial belief-fixation; it merely amounts to a requirement on (reliable) content-preservation. See footnote 17.

concepts is a rare phenomenon. My claim is that once these three claims are endorsed, one is forced to accept that the sort of understanding presupposed by the acquisition of testimonial knowledge does not, and indeed cannot (consistent with these claims), require complete grasp. Thus the denial of complete grasp is not a *premise* of my argument; it is a conclusion.

#### 4.

Suppose that the foregoing argument succeeds in showing that the prevalence of testimonial knowledge depends on a sort of understanding that stops short of complete grasp. Even so, the relevant sort of understanding must be such that through it hearers ascribe determinate propositional contents to the speech acts they observe. Otherwise it is left mysterious how it is that hearers acquire *the very piece of knowledge* expressed in the testimony they observed. All of this raises a question: how can the hearer's understanding both be specific enough to underwrite the acquisition of the very piece of knowledge expressed in the speaker's testimony, and yet fall short of a complete grasp of the concepts in the attested content? My claim will be that, in cases of incomplete grasp, the determinacy of the hearer's comprehension of the content of a testimony-constituting speech act is grounded in her semantic deference to the relevant experts.

To bring this out, we can begin with a question: in virtue of what does the hearer count as having comprehended – and so as having come to believe (and in the favorable case, as coming to know) – the very propositional content attested to? This question is especially pressing in cases involving incomplete grasp. This is because, given a hearer's incomplete grasp of the public language concepts composing the attested content, there

will always be other – indeed, many other – hypotheses regarding the content of her comprehension (or what she understood to be said in the testimony). Suppose that *S* tells *H* that arthritic knees are painful (this is the content of the telling), but that *H* does not completely grasp the concept ARTHRITIS or its derivatives. What does *H* take *S* to be saying, when *H*'s comprehension is homophonic? One hypothesis – the standard one – is that *H* takes *S* to be saying that arthritic knees are painful (where *that arthritic knees are painful* is the content *H* takes *S* to be asserting). But there are others. Although *H*'s understanding is homophonic, it might nevertheless be the case that *H*'s understanding of these same word-forms is idiosyncratic: she might take *S* to be saying that thartritic knees are painful (where thartritis is a disease of the joints and ligaments, in the spirit of Burge 1979). Alternatively, *H*'s understanding might be metalinguistic: she might understand *S* to be asserting that the condition known around here as “arthritic knees” is painful. And there are various other interpretative possibilities as well.

The important point here is that *H*'s re-use of the very words *S* used, in *H*'s attempt to manifest her (homophonic) understanding of *S*'s testimony, underdetermines which of these hypotheses correctly represents how *H* has understood *S*. Perhaps some of these hypotheses will be ruled out on grounds of overall coherence with *H*'s other speech behavior. But it is easy to imagine cases in which this basis is not rich enough to discriminate among several (or more) different hypotheses. This is easy to see in cases in which the various competing hypotheses ascribe states of comprehension to *H* that differ in fine-grained ways. Yet if the case is one in which *H* acquires the very knowledge *S* aimed to communicate, we must have a way to discriminate one of these hypotheses –

typically the standard one<sup>21</sup> – as correctly capturing how *H* has understood *S*'s speech. My claim is that the needed determinacy here is provided by *H*'s semantic deference regarding 'arthritis': *H* takes *S* to be saying that arthritic knees are painful (where this is the content of *H*'s state of comprehension) in virtue of *H*'s deference to (some subset of speakers in) her linguistic community.

How does semantic deference underwrite this sort of determinacy in comprehension? We just saw that, taken by itself, *H*'s homophonic comprehension of *S*'s testimony does not fix the content of the comprehension *H* has attained. But *H*'s homophonic comprehension, together with *H*'s (perhaps implicit) intention to be 'speaking the same language as' *S*, does fix that content. (At least it does so bracketing issues of generic forms of context-sensitivity, ambiguity, and polysymy; I will continue to disregard these phenomena in what follows.) The need for semantic deference arises once a hearer recognizes *both* that she herself cannot exhaustively articulate the application conditions of the public language terms she is using, *and* that nevertheless these terms (in her own and others' mouths) have determinate application. Given that these terms are terms of a public language, their determinate application is given by the standards of the public language. Because these standards articulate the terms' application conditions to worldly entities and properties, the standards themselves are best articulated by those who are most expert in the nature of the relevant entities and properties themselves – *the relevant knowledge domain experts*.<sup>22</sup> We see, then, that

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<sup>21</sup> 'Typically': we should allow that there are cases in which a hearer's comprehension of a source speech act will be idiosyncratic.

<sup>22</sup> Here I must acknowledge that proper names would appear to constitute an exception to this: in many cases there are no 'experts' regarding the bearer of the name (but consider names for historical figures). At the same time, perhaps it is no surprise that proper names are exceptional: there is some debate regarding whether they should even be included as part of the public language (such as English). In any case I hope

deference to experts figures centrally in the determinacy one achieves in comprehending these terms – at least in cases involving the hearer’s own incomplete grasp.

To be sure, semantic deference is not *sufficient* for determinate comprehension of an incompletely-grasped concept. A semantically deferential subject who thinks that ‘cup’ means the number 6, and who has no non-standard theory that would rationalize the ascription to her of the concept CUP in the face of this idiosyncrasy, is not properly regarded as having the concept CUP (or as comprehending the English word-form ‘cup’). Some minimal competence with the word is needed.<sup>23</sup> What is more, it is arguable that there are cases in which semantic deference is not *necessary* for determinate comprehension either. Presumably there are cases of complete grasp. Or so I can grant; my point is that it is semantic deference by a *minimally* competent speaker that ensures the determinacy in comprehension required by the acquisition of testimonial knowledge.

Still, we might wonder whether semantic deference is the *only* way, in cases involving incomplete grasp, to attain the sort of determinacy in comprehension required by the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. Although I have no knock-down argument to show that it is, the following considerations are suggestive. First, speakers can communicate very specific pieces of knowledge to one another even when their respective understanding of the various expressions differ greatly. (I take this to be patent; were this not so, testimony would hardly be the pervasive source of knowledge that it is.) What is more, comprehension routinely proceeds in an effortless manner. This is true even under conditions in which speaker and hearer know nothing about each

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to return in later work to discuss the use and comprehension of sentences involving proper names in circumstances involving the transmission of knowledge through speech.

<sup>23</sup> Characterizing this sort of minimal competence is a very difficult matter. For some comments on this, see Brown 2000 and Goldberg 2002.

other's speech and interpretative dispositions save what is manifest in their brief conversational exchange. Given the degree of diversity in speakers' and hearers' background beliefs and explicational abilities – a diversity that is compatible with the successful communication of very specific pieces of knowledge – it is a challenge to show how comprehension can be generally reliable. This challenge is met on the assumption that hearers standardly exhibit semantic deference; but it is hard to see how it could be met if this assumption is false. Surely the burden is on those who disagree.

What should be said, then, about a hearer who incompletely grasps the concepts involved in an attested content, but who has no tendency towards semantic deference? Can such a hearer still possess the minimal sort of competence with the concept that would enable her to comprehend the attested content, and so to acquire testimonial knowledge of the attested content? If a hearer with an incomplete grasp of a concept really has no tendency towards semantic deference, then it is hard to see how she might be minimally competent with respect to the concept in question. To be sure, such a subject could employ a metalinguistic concept with precisely the same extension – as when, instead of employing the concept ELECTRON, a subject employs the concept WHATEVER PEOPLE AROUND HERE MEAN BY 'electron'. For many purposes of communication, comprehension that involves a co-extensive metalinguistic concept of this sort will do.<sup>24</sup> But it is hard to see how our subject could count as minimally competent regarding ELECTRON itself. To repeat, the difficulty is that there seems to be no grounds for picking out a single concept, of the various concepts she might be employing, as the concept she is employing. Had she been semantically deferential, we

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<sup>24</sup> Although it is deeply implausible to suppose that such metalinguistic comprehension is the norm: surely the knowledge that we acquire through accepting other's say-so is knowledge of the world, not of others' language.

would have had such grounds: she intends to be using the concept employed by her peers. Lacking semantic deference, and failing to possess a complete grasp of the public language concept associated with the word, a subject would appear to give us no grounds to ascribe that concept, as opposed to others that she might be associating with the word, to her. So it would seem that in any case involving incomplete grasp, determinate comprehension (of the sort that underwrites content-preserving testimonial knowledge) requires at least some disposition to semantic deference.

The same point can be reinforced from another direction. As we saw above, anyone who aims to acquire knowledge through accepting how another speaker linguistically represents things to be must capture how her source linguistically represents things to be. Such a task already points in the direction of the hearer's having a deferential intention: the hearer must intend to be using her words as the speaker had (at least if the hearer's comprehension was homophonic). This is already a minimal sort of semantic deference: here one is semantically deferring to *one's source*. The semantic deference of which I spoke in the previous paragraph is the generalization of this minimal sort of semantic deference: the hearer defers, not (or not necessarily) to the particular speaker whose speech she just observed, but rather to those in the best position to explicate the concepts in question. The move to this more generalized sort of semantic deference arises along with the hearer's (perhaps implicit) recognition of the speaker's perspective. Just as the hearer may not know anything about the speech dispositions of the speaker (save what is manifested in the brief conversational exchange), so too the speaker may not know anything about the interpretative dispositions of her audience. Each one needs to rely on a set of standards common to both, and indeed to *any* member

of their shared language community. It is only in this way that two arbitrary members of this community can share knowledge through speech, without knowing anything regarding each others' speech and interpretative dispositions (save what is manifest in their brief communicative exchange). So it would appear that semantic deference is a natural part of any community that aims to share knowledge through speech in situations in which speaker and hearer may have no prior knowledge of one another. A speaker who fails to exhibit any tendency towards semantic deference would thus seem to be one who renders herself incapable of participating in this sort of knowledge acquisition. It might even be argued that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, an arbitrary member of a speech community may be *presumed* to intend to participate in the practice of knowledge exchange through speech, and so may be presumed to defer semantically to the relevant experts.<sup>25</sup> (Such a presumption would be defeasible, but it would be positive-presumptive nevertheless.) Perhaps this is the basis of our crediting children with comprehension, long before they have any clear disposition to semantic deference.

As I have been presenting matters, semantic deference is generic in the sense that hearers typically defer, not to particular individuals taken as experts, but to the relevant experts *whoever they happen to be*. This is appropriate in any situation in which the deferring individual cannot distinguish the experts as such. But presumably there are cases where deference is to particular individuals taken to be experts. And this raises the possibility of cases in which different hearers defer to different experts, where the experts themselves disagree regarding the proper explication of a key term.<sup>26</sup> Must we treat these hearers as comprehending the term (and the utterances involving the term) in different

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<sup>25</sup> What might underwrite such a presumption? I hope to answer this on another occasion.

<sup>26</sup> This is the semantic analogue of the sort of disagreement among experts discussed in Goldman (2001).

ways? This would be an unfortunate conclusion. However, it need not be forced on us.

For one thing, we can distinguish between various deferential dispositions. Thus a hearer might be disposed to defer to a particular individual, but might have the higher-order disposition to surrender this first-order disposition in certain circumstances (the expertise of the so-called expert is called into question; the matter of diversity of expert explications is made manifest to the hearer; and so forth). The ruling disposition – what we might call the *fundamental* deferential disposition, which is the disposition that determines how the hearer is comprehending the term in question – is the disposition that guides the hearer’s reactions to various counterfactual scenarios (were she to be presented with them).<sup>27</sup>

Another way to resist the conclusion that hearers who defer to different experts comprehend the term differently is to recognize that expert explication is itself a part of a process that involves reflective equilibrium on paradigm applications and accepted explications.<sup>28</sup> So far I have been speaking as if it is expert explications, and these alone, that fix the concepts comprehended by a semantically deferential hearer. But this is an oversimplification. Experts can get things wrong. The process by which concept individuation proceeds is one of reflective equilibrium aiming to maximize coherence of existing theory with paradigm applications. If no single concept emerges from such a process, then the case might be one in which no determinate concept is in play; or, alternatively, it may be one in which more than one determinate concept is in play (in which case hearers deferring to different experts may well comprehend the term differently). I suspect that there is no saying in advance which of these descriptions is

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<sup>27</sup> There is a parallel here in the theory of reference, in the matter of reference-determination in cases of ‘divided reference’ (see Wettstein 1984; and Kvat 1989, 1992, and 1994).

<sup>28</sup> I borrow this idea from Burge (1986).

appropriate. The important point is that the mere fact of disagreement in expert explications need not always signal disagreement in how deferring hearers comprehend the term in question.

Although the route has been circuitous, we have finally reached the doctrine known as *anti-individualism*. According to one standard formulation, anti-individualism is the thesis that some of a subject's propositional attitudes depend for their individuation on features of the subject's social or physical environment. What we now see is that such a doctrine gets some support from considerations pertaining to the conditions on the testimonial transmission of knowledge. To acquire such knowledge, a hearer must reliably comprehend the source speech act. In cases in which she only incompletely grasps the concepts composing the attested content, her comprehension is reliable only if she exhibits semantic deference; and ultimately such deference succeeds in individuating the concepts figuring in her state of comprehension only as part of a process of reflective equilibrium aiming to maximize the coherence of expert explications and paradigm applications. In such cases, the individuation of the content that the hearer took the speaker to be attesting to – which is identical to the content of the belief that the hearer forms on the basis of her acceptance of that testimony – depends on features of her social and physical environment. Concept individuation depends on the hearer's social environment insofar as she is deferring to experts: there can be cases of two hearers who are intrinsic duplicates but who differ in the content of their comprehension, and hence in the content of their testimony-based belief, owing to the fact that they have deferred to different experts whose explications differ. And concept individuation depends on the hearer's physical environment insofar as she is deferring to experts: concept

individuation is the result of the process of reflective equilibrium aiming to maximize coherence between expert explication and the paradigm applications of a term. There can be cases of two hearers who are intrinsic duplicates but who differ in the content of their comprehension, and hence in the content of their testimony-based belief, owing to the fact that the objects or properties to which the term is paradigmatically applied in the two cases differ in kind in ways that have escaped notice of even the experts themselves.

It would thus seem that what Putnam called the “division of linguistic labor” (Putnam 1975) is itself an essential component of the “epistemic division of labor,” where this includes such phenomena as domain expertise as well as other forms of epistemic authority implicated in standard testimony cases. The picture is this: we find ourselves in need of relying on others for what we *know* about the world; but if we are to acquire knowledge in this way from the host of potential sources that make themselves and their knowledge available to us, we need a reliable way to recover the contents transmitted in speech; and since it is not the case that we all possess equal knowledge of the application conditions of the concepts that constitute the communicated contents, we find ourselves in need of relying on others in our speech community; only in this case, this reliance is manifested in our *semantic* deference to the relevant experts. In this way our epistemic reliance on others gives rise to the need to rely semantically on others as well; and given that the upshot of our epistemic reliance is the possibility of acquiring lots of knowledge ‘on the cheap’, our epistemic reliance *rationalizes* the sort of semantic deference on which the acquisition of such ‘knowledge on the cheap’ depends.

## 5.

The central aim of this paper has been to draw connections between our epistemic reliance on others for what we know about the world, and the sort of semantic deference Putnam and Burge have called to our attention. If my attempt to forge these connections is novel, its novelty lies in my attempt to use *epistemic* premises, asserting the conditions on and prevalence of testimonial knowledge, to argue against a *semantic* thesis asserting the doctrine of complete grasp. But in arguing in this fashion I hope to have cleared the way for a more general point to be made: epistemic considerations of this sort can be used to support anti-individualistic views about the meanings of our words and the contents of our thoughts.

It should be clear that such an argument for anti-individualism is novel. Standardly, anti-individualistic views in the philosophy of mind and language are taken to be supported by considerations such as the semantics of speech- and attitude-reports, the possibility of non-standard theorizing, or the objectivity of perceptual representations. Here, however, I have suggested that such views can be supported by appeal to the conditions on knowledge communication: the claim is that a proper account of the semantic dimension of linguistic communication (pertaining to the hearer's comprehension of the source speech act), together with humdrum facts about the sorts of circumstance under which hearers acquire a communicated piece of knowledge, yield anti-individualistic results regarding linguistic meaning, speech content, and the propositional attitudes.<sup>29</sup> What is more, the present argument reveals that the phenomena often taken to be at the core of the case for attitude anti-individualism – in particular, incomplete grasp and semantic deference – can themselves be traced to the conditions on knowledge communication, and in particular to our *epistemic reliance* on the other

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<sup>29</sup> See Goldberg 2007.

members of our linguistic community.

One might doubt whether the present argument really does depend on epistemological premises, as advertised. After all, the argument turns on claims about comprehension, and comprehension would appear to be more a semantic phenomenon than an epistemological one. But this reaction misses what I regard as the key novelty of the present argument: the notion of comprehension itself, at least as it figures in the present argument, is thoroughly epistemic. For one thing, the sort of comprehension in question is *epistemically reliable* comprehension: comprehension of testimony must be reliable on pain of not supporting the hearer's knowledge-underwriting connection to the fact attested to. For another, the thesis that hearers regularly attain such comprehension is itself supported by our intuitions regarding the prevalence of testimonial knowledge. It is because we take testimonial knowledge to be a pervasive feature of our cognitive lives, that we have no choice but to regard hearers as satisfying all of the conditions on acquiring such knowledge, including the condition on reliable comprehension. The hypothesis that hearers regularly satisfy this condition is thus an inference from a prior epistemic premise asserting the prevalence of testimonial knowledge. Given the pervasiveness of our epistemic reliance on others for what we know of the world, we have little choice but to rely on others semantically as well: the former rationalizes the latter. This point should have the effect of expanding the discussion regarding the motivation for anti-individualism in the philosophy of mind and language, to make room for considerations pertaining to the testimonial transmission of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> I would like to thank XYZ, audiences at PDQ, and an anonymous referee for this journal for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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