

Fancy loose talk about knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a version of sceptical invariantism about knowledge on which the acceptability of knowledge-attributing sentences varies with the context of assessment.

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Introduction

Do we ever know anything? According to a view proposed by Unger (1971, 1975), the answer is: hardly ever. The standards for the satisfaction of *x* know that *p* are so high that they are unlikely to be met by pairs of ordinary epistemic agents and propositions. Still, we often say that people know things, and so on this view, we often say false things. This is loose talk: sentences it is acceptable to utter, even though what they say is not true. Loose talk's acceptability varies with context. So, do we ever know anything? Hardly ever. Is it ever acceptable to say that we know things? Yes, in lots of contexts, it is.

Call this kind of view *skeptical invariantism*. The main goal of this paper is to suggest a revision – or perhaps it might be regarded as a precisification – of the skeptical invariantist's approach to loose talk: the acceptability of loose talk varies, I will argue, with the context of assessment, and not just with the context of use.

The paper has three parts. The first deals with preliminaries and clarifications about skeptical invariantism, its contextualist rivals, and loose talk.

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Part 2 argues that loose talk is assessment sensitive. The final part considers and responds to some objections.

1. Preliminaries and clarifications

1.1. *Skeptical invariantism*

Skeptical invariantism comes in different flavours. Unger (1971) argued that *x knows that p* entailed *x is certain that p*, that *is certain that* was an absolute term,¹ and that absolute terms were hardly ever satisfied, from all of which it follows that *x knows that p* is hardly ever satisfied either. There are other flavours. *x knows that p* might entail *x is completely justified in believing that p*, or *x has ruled out all possibilities on which not-p*. A different variation holds that *knows that* is absolute in its own right, with a benefit of this approach being that it does not require us to defend an entailment link to a further expression (such as *certain*) while still allowing us to model *knows that* on absolute expressions like, for example, *flat*, *smooth*, *straight*, *full*, *empty*, *invisible*, *silent*, *free*, *broke*, and *certain*.² A concern about that view is that it makes it hard to explain why *knows*

¹In Unger's terminology (also used in Kennedy and McNally (2005)) absolute terms are expressions which apply just in case some property which comes in degrees (such as bumpiness or curviness) is possessed to no degree at all. *Flat* (not at all curved and not at all bumpy) and *straight* (not at all crooked and not at all curved) are examples. Unger argued that *x is certain that p* held just in case *x* was doubtful that *p* to no degree at all. The details are relegated to this footnote because I will not reply on Unger's formulation here.

²Kennedy and McNally (2005) survey work on gradable expressions. For the present topic the salient points are: (i) that gradability is not restricted to adjectives, but is a property of 'nouns, verbs, adverbs, and prepositions as well.' (347) (ii) that gradable expressions are associated with a scale (a set of degrees, an ordering relation on those degrees and a 'dimension', for example, cost, height, etc.) (350–351) (iii) that there is much variation among gradable expressions, for example, the ordering of the degrees may vary, by e.g. having minimal but no maximal element, maximal but no minimal element, or having neither (352) and that one of the dimensions of variation is in whether or not the standard of comparison is determined by context.

... An expectation of this type of analysis is that all predicates headed by (unmodified) gradable adjectives should give rise to the sort of vagueness observed with *tall* and *expensive*. This is not the case, however: there are many adjectives that are demonstrably gradable but whose standards of comparison are not context-dependent in this way. (Kennedy and McNally 2005, 355, my emphasis).

Their examples are *awake*, *visible*, *open*, and *bent*, which each require some non-context sensitive minimum degree to be surpassed, and *full*, *flat*, *closed* and *straight* which require a non-context-sensitive maximal degree on the scale in question to be met. 'Following Unger 1975,' they add, 'we refer to adjectives like those in 29 [*open*, *bent*] and 30 [*straight*, *flat*] as ABSOLUTE adjectives and "ordinary" gradable adjectives with context-dependent standards as RELATIVE adjectives.' (Kennedy and McNally 2005, 356), also (Kennedy 2011). Schaffer (2004) noted – though defending sceptical invariantism himself – that 'It is generally thought (even by those who dismiss contextualism as little help against skepticism, such as Sosa (2000), Hilary Kornblith (2000), and Richard Feldman (2001)) that the contextualist has the better semantic hypothesis.' I take it that the points above show that at least some linguists think quite the opposite and stress the contrast between the relative expressions which are context sensitive, and the absolute ones, which are not.

that is not modifiable with adverbs of degree like *very*; one can say ‘Hannah is very certain that Sarah is working’ but not ‘Hannah very knows that Hannah is working.’³ To my mind the best flavour of skeptical invariantism handles this by drawing on a distinction from Lasersohn (1999), between true gradable expressions like *round* and *straight* and the superficially similar *spherical* and *linear*. Lasersohn notes that the former admit of modification with adverbs of degree while the later do not, and suggests that this is because *round* is a true scalar adjective – whose semantics matches objects with degrees on a scale – whereas *spherical* simply denotes a set of objects (the ones meeting the exacting conditions required to be spherical.) Then if the semantics of *very* make direct reference to scales, it makes sense that it would be able to modify true scalar expressions like *round* and *straight* but not spherical and linear. The skeptical invariantist can maintain then, that *knows that* is to a true scalar expression as *is certain that* as *linear* is to *straight*; its extension is a set of pairs of agents and propositions, rather than a set of triples of agents, propositions, and degrees on a scale (as it would be if it were a true scalar expression), and yet the set of agents and propositions in its extension is the set whose agents are (say) justified in believing the propositions they are paired with to the maximal degree.

Call expressions whose satisfaction requires the limit on some scale to be achieved *demanding expressions* (then both *flat* and *linear* are demanding, though only the former admits of modification with *very*.⁴) What the different flavours of Skeptical Invariantism agree about is that *knows that* is demanding, though they vary on the details of the semantics.

Some demanding expressions are frequently satisfied.⁵ But *knows that*’s demandingness helps explain the rareness of its satisfaction. To see this, note that if an agent possesses the maximum degree of justification for a proposition, then there is no proposition that they – or anyone else – is more justified in believing. For nearly all propositions, there is a proposition that the agent is more justified in believing – perhaps that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that it rained or didn’t rain yesterday. Moreover, it is nearly always the case that there is someone else who is, was, or will be, more

³This point was used to argue against Unger’s view in chapter 2 of (Stanley 2005). See also (Dretske 1981, 363)

⁴Lasersohn’s view thus offers a way to explain how *knows that* can be demanding though it is not modifiable with *very*. It is demanding because it is only satisfied if the limit on some scale is achieved. But it is not scalar because reference to that scale is not a part of its semantic content: it simply denotes the set of pairs that meet that condition, rather than a function from pairs to the degree of a scale.

⁵*x is free* is satisfied by things whose prices have the minimum degree on the scale of monetary expensiveness; still, many things are free.

justified in believing a proposition. Where this is the case, the original agent's degree of justification is not maximal, and so the conditions for knowledge are not satisfied.⁶ Knowledge is rare. Most knowledge attributions are false.

Henceforth I will use *skeptical invariantism* to refer to any of the views on which most knowledge ascriptions are false because *knows that* is demanding, a characterisation that covers Unger (1975) and Schaffer (2004).⁷ Despite the name, there is some context-sensitivity involved in skeptical invariantism. The view needs to be supplemented with a story about loose talk, the felicity of which varies with context. The view is thus invariantist about truth-conditional content, but not invariantist *tout court*. Often invariantists (myself included) have thought that we could describe the view as being invariantist about the semantics, but not about the pragmatics.⁸ However, this way of carving things up has recently become controversial.⁹ Carter (2019) argues that loose talk is a semantic phenomenon, just not a truth-conditional semantic one. This means that invariantists need to be cautious about committing to a view on which loose talk is pragmatic. Here I remain agnostic on this; resolving it would require more detail than we otherwise need regarding the mechanism by which loose talk enables non-literal propositions to be communicated and the best way to draw the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. What is crucial for present purposes is that knowledge ascriptions are mostly false, and so, since they are frequently felicitous, we must say that felicity is not a function of truth-conditional meaning alone. But it does not immediately follow that loose talk is pragmatic since it could be an additional semantic phenomenon instead.

1.2. Contextualism and relativism

Contextualism is a popular rival to skeptical invariantism. It says that the meaning of *x knows that p* varies with context, permitting many utterances to express truths in contexts in which skeptical invariantism says they are false-but-felicitous.¹⁰ Contextualism also comes in many

⁶This is essentially the argument from (Unger 1975, 210–213).

⁷Schaffer (2004) notes although this was Unger's view in the 1970s, his views evolved away from it over time: 'By 1984 Unger reached the "meta-skeptical" conclusion that skepticism and contextualism are equally acceptable. By 1986 Unger turned contextualist.' (139, n1)

⁸For example (Davis 2015, 403)

⁹For example Carter (2019); Lasersohn (1999); and Kindermann (2019) as well as by Alexander Dinges (2021).

¹⁰*Loci classici* of the contextualist response to Unger are Lewis (1979, 1996) and (Dretske 1981, 365). Rysiew (2016) summarises more recent developments.

flavours, and two key choice points are, first, whether the meaning of the knowledge-attribution varies with context of use or with context of assessment (the latter variant often called *relativism*) and second, whether the meaning that varies with context is the propositional content (indexical contextualism) or whether the propositional content instead remains constant but determines an intension which returns different truth-values relative to different contexts.¹¹

When it comes to the non-indexical relativism, we might call a proposition that determines such an intension an assessment-sensitive proposition or, as McFarlane sometimes calls them, *fancy* propositions. Here we will be developing the idea that it is the felicity of loose talk that varies with context of assessment, and so we might reclaim the pejorative, calling such loose talk *fancy loose talk*.¹²

1.3. Loose talk

Sentences of the form *x knows that p* are frequently felicitous in everyday speech. An example:

Home office:

Sarah wants to finish her book. She develops plans to work on it exclusively each day, between 2 and 5pm. So every day, after lunch, she retires to her office, opens her computer, and settles down to write. Sometimes Hannah interrupts her with questions or information, but Sarah gently reminds Hannah of her goals and asks her to save interruptions for after 5pm. Hannah tries to be supportive.

One afternoon, around 3pm, Hannah gets some news. She waits until 5pm to tell Sarah about it. 'Why didn't you come and tell me when you got the call?' asks Sarah. Hannah replies 'I knew you were working, so I decided to wait.'

According to the skeptical invariantist, Hannah's utterance of

(1) I knew you were working.

is false. For all Hannah knew, Sarah could have been akratically surfing the internet. But Hannah's use of (1) is felicitous; it is an acceptable thing to say, and there is no reason to think that Hannah fails to understand or follow normal rules for the use of *knows that*.

¹¹(MacFarlane 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2012).

¹²Some philosophers think that contextualism dominates skeptical invariantism, because it can account for the same linguistic data while avoiding making loose talkers and skeptics of us. I address this with other objections in the final section.

Knowledge ascriptions are just one example from a broader category in which speakers use sentences with precise or otherwise demanding truth-conditions which are not met.¹³

- (2) Lena arrived at 9 pm. Circumstances: Lena arrived at 9.02pm. Context: We're interested in finding out who arrived before midnight.
- (3) The fridge is empty. Circumstance: The fridge contains condiments and leftovers of uncertain age. Context: We're planning dinner.

In the contexts and circumstances described, the sentences are false-but-felicitous. Carter (2019) suggests that this is because the utterances communicate a different proposition than the one literally expressed. For example, (2) communicates that Lena arrived *around* 9 pm, and (3) that the fridge is empty *of good dinner options*.

We can explain Hannah's use of (1) in the same way: in the context, it communicates something other than the literal content, perhaps that Hannah had *sufficient reason to believe* that Sarah was working (not to interrupt her). Henceforth – for brevity – I will refer to the proposition literally expressed by an utterance as the *literal proposition* and the proposition communicated by it as the *communicated proposition*.¹⁴

The communicated proposition explains a second feature noted by Carter, namely that the felicity of the utterance makes it inappropriate to criticise in certain ways. It would be inappropriate to criticise (2) on the grounds that Lena arrived at 9.02 pm. Why? Because the speaker did not communicate anything that conflicts with this, only that Lena arrived *around* 9 pm.

Similarly, it would be inappropriate for Sarah to criticise Hannah's utterance on the grounds that Hannah did not know that Sarah was not surfing the internet. Hannah would not have communicated the literal content of the sentence when she utters it in this context, but only that she had sufficient reason to think that Sarah was working.

The examples of the loose talk we have looked at so far are false-but-felicitous. But Carter (2019) notes a striking fact: sentences can be true-and-infelicitous. When planning dinner, it would be true-but-infelicitous to utter:

¹³The next two examples are from Carter (2019) with minor changes.

¹⁴There is a natural way to think about loose talk on which you say one thing but mean a looser thing – see, for example (Stebbing 1939, 100). Within this framework what is said is the literal proposition, and what is meant is the communicated proposition. See also Section 1.3.3. For simplicity I write as if there is a single proposition communicated by a sentence in a context. But on a more realistic picture there would be multiple propositions communicated.

(4) The fridge is not empty.

This would communicate the false proposition that you think the fridge is not empty *of things we'd want to eat for dinner*. Similarly, if Sarah complains about being interrupted during her writing time, it is infelicitous of Hannah to protest:

(5) I didn't know you were working!

Sarah *told* Hannah she would be working. The negated utterance would communicate that Hannah did not have sufficient reason to think that Sarah would be working (not to interrupt her), which is false. The communicated proposition thus explains the infelicity of the utterance, even though the literal proposition is true.

1.3.1. Loose talk–regulators

LT-regulators are expressions which signal that we are speaking more or less loosely. (Lasersohn 1999) There are two kinds. LT-strengtheners signal that we are speaking less loosely, LT-weakeners that we are speaking more so:

(2*) Lena arrived at 9 pm *exactly*./Lena arrived *around* 9 pm.

(3*) The fridge is completely empty./The fridge is *practically* empty.

(4*) Chicago is *precisely* 800 miles from New York./Chicago is *about* 800 miles from New York.

Unlike adverbs of degree, knowledge-ascriptions do seem to allow LT-regulators:

(1*) I knew *for sure/for certain* that you were working./I *practically* knew that you were working.

People can speak loosely even with LT-strengtheners. 'The fridge is *completely* empty!' I might announce dramatically, 'We'll have to go out'. The result of using an LT-strengthener in simple sentences is simply to reduce the gap between the communicated and literal propositions by strengthening the communicated proposition. LT-weakeners reduce the gap between the communicated and literal propositions too, but they work in the opposite direction, that is, by making the literal proposition weaker and closer to the truth conditions of the (original) communicated one.

1.3.2. *Not-so-loose talk*

It is not always appropriate to speak loosely. When participants are uncooperative, when the details are more important, when the stakes are higher, then we try to be more accurate. These things vary with context, and so the felicity of loose talk varies with context too, even when the literal proposition does not.

Police Investigation:

The scenario unfolds as in Home Office, but unbeknownst to Hannah and Sarah, Sarah is under investigation by the police for an elaborate bank heist. The next day they interview Hannah: ‘How did you know she was working?’ asks the investigating officer. Hannah explains about Sarah’s writing ambitions. ‘Did you actually see her working?’ asks the officer. ‘Couldn’t she have been on Instagram, or taking a nap?’ ‘I guess you’re right’ says Hannah, ‘I didn’t know that she was working.’

(1) was felicitous in Home Office, but in Police Investigation it is not. In Home Office it would have been inappropriate for Sarah to respond by protesting ‘But I could have been on Instagram!’ In Police Investigation the challenge is appropriate. We can see a similar pattern in our other examples of loose talk:

- (6) Lena arrived at 9 pm. Circumstances: Lena arrived at 9.02pm. Context: We’re interested in figuring out who might be in a photo taken at the party with a time-stamp of 9.01pm
- (7) The fridge is empty. Circumstance: the fridge contains a few condiments and leftovers of uncertain age. Context: we’re cleaning the house to pass it on to new occupants.

In each case, the literal proposition is the same one as before, and the circumstances have not changed. But the context has – including the background assumptions and goals of the people involved – and the sentences are now infelicitous.

On the loose talk picture outlined above, this change has a natural explanation; the communicated proposition is now a different one, one which is false. (6) communicates that Lena was there by 9.01 pm – false – and (7) communicates that the fridge is empty of condiments and leftovers – also false. In the context of Police Investigation, Hannah’s uttering (1) would communicate that her reasons for thinking that Sarah was working were good enough to rule out her being on Instagram (or planning a bank heist) – false.

1.3.3. *What is said*

The distinction between literal and communicated propositions raises a slightly subtle issue about what a loose talker *says* as opposed to merely communicates, conveys, or implicates. Suppose Samia utters ‘The fridge is empty’ in a context in which the communicated proposition is that the fridge is empty of things we might want to eat for dinner. Has Samia said that the fridge is empty? Or has she merely said that the fridge is empty of things we might want to eat for dinner? Does she bear the saying relation to the literal proposition? Or just to the communicated one?

It might seem tempting to hold that in loose talk, speakers do not say the literal propositions. Loose talkers are often aware that the literal proposition is false, and we have seen that – assuming all goes well – listeners will not take them to be communicating, or committed to the truth of, that proposition. For these reasons, we might think that the literal proposition somehow does not make it to the status of what is said by the speaker – it is merely part of a mechanism which, together with the context, generates a proposition that the speaker communicates.

Initially, this idea may seem pleasantly generous to speakers, but I want to resist it anyway. It is in tension with the very idea of loose talk, which involves people saying things that are not exactly right, but only close enough. This idea is ubiquitous in descriptions of loose talk:

It is a truism that people speak ‘loosely’—that is, that they often **say things** that we can recognize not to be true. (Lasersohn 1999, 522)

But by **saying that** the coffee is all gone, I convey the less precise thought indicated. (Davis 2015, 403)¹⁵

I shall illustrate how our language habits might serve us well in practical ways, even while they involve us in **saying what is false** rather than true. (Unger 1971, 199)

I take this characterisation at face value: loose-talkers say the literal proposition. In (1)–(3) above that means that they say false things. That’s ok – in fact, I take it to be a key feature of what loose talk is.

2. Fancy loose talk about knowledge

Now I will argue that felicity is assessment-sensitive. We can get clearer about what this means by considering the consequences for the Home

¹⁵In Davis’ example there is not enough coffee left to make a cup, though there are some leftover grounds. Bold type added in each case.

Office vs. Police Investigation cases. In Home Office Hannah said that she knew Sarah was working (by uttering (1)). In Police Investigation, she retreats from that claim, saying 'I guess you're right. I didn't know that she was working.' This shows that felicity is context-sensitive. But the details can be filled in in different ways.

(Use-Sensitivity) The felicity of loose talk is sensitive to context of use. The sentence 'I knew that she was working' is felicitous as uttered by Hannah in Home Office, but a new utterance of the same sentence would not be felicitous in Police Interview.

(Assessment-Sensitivity) The felicity of loose talk is sensitive to context of assessment. 'I knew that she was working' is felicitous in Home Office, but the very same utterance (made in Home Office) is not felicitous when assessed from the context of Police Investigation.

I will argue for (Assessment-Sensitivity). This is not incompatible with (Use-Sensitivity), but goes beyond it to imply that we can keep the context of use the same, and the felicity will still vary with context of assessment.

If felicity is assessment-sensitive, then a single utterance can be felicitous from one context of assessment but not from another. I will use cases with this feature to argue for my thesis. But producing such cases is made difficult by two things. The first is that many utterances are transient – quickly forgotten and never assessed from later contexts. The second is that we are often happy to let loose talk go and give speakers the benefit of the doubt. (No-one wants to join the grammar-police, still less the felicity-police.) Given transience and a general amnesty on utterance-crimes, cases in which we try to 'nail' speakers for infelicity from a later context will seem strained and far-fetched.

Neither problem is insurmountable. We just need the right examples. There are utterances that are more likely to be remembered and assessed from different contexts, such as those which are written down or recorded in some other way: speeches, books, emails, newspaper and journal articles, social media posts, adverts, and protest signs appearing in photos. Call these *recorded utterances*.

People do respond quite critically to some subtypes of recorded utterances, especially those pertaining to political or controversial moral topics. Even when speakers are aware that their utterances will be recorded and critically assessed, we find examples of loose talk in political speech. Former US President Donald Trump tweeted: 'Our country is full.' Anti-lockdown protesters proclaim: 'The curve is already flat. Stop flattening the economy!' Austerity advocates say 'our coffers are empty.'

Journalists and academics say things like ‘Violence against women of colour is invisible.’ In each case, the utterer can be understood as communicating a proposition other than the literal one: Trump means to communicate that the USA is *too full to admit more people*, the protesters that the curve is flat *enough*, austerity advocates mean that our coffers are *too close to empty*, and phenomena are called ‘invisible’ to communicate that they are easily missed or ignored – *close to invisible*.

Utterances like these attract criticism, but not all kinds of criticism are relevant for establishing assessment-sensitivity. Grounds on which we might criticise a recorded instance of loose talk include:

- (a) the proposition communicated in the original context is false
- (b) the proposition which would have been communicated had the sentence been uttered in the new context of assessment is false.
- (c) the literal proposition is false

I will focus on the third kind. The first would not help because if, in the original context, the communicated proposition was false, then the utterance was already infelicitous, and so we have not demonstrated assessment-sensitive *variation* in felicity. The second introduces further complications because it can sometimes be responded – with justice – that the agent did not utter it in the new context, and so should not be understood as communicating that proposition.

We will focus then on criticisms which target the literal proposition in a way that is consistent with the utterance having been felicitous in the original context. This means that the utterance was not then appropriately criticisable on the grounds that the literal proposition was false (that would have been too pedantic, like Carter’s examples of true-but-infelicitous utterances in Section 1.3.) So if it is so-criticisable from the new context, the felicity status of the utterance has changed, and it follows that felicity is assessment-sensitive.

Here is the general picture. A speaker utters a sentence which, in the context of use, expresses a literal proposition: *p*. The speaker thus says that *p*, but in the context, they communicate a different proposition, *q*, thanks to background assumptions, shared goals, etc. If *q* is true, the utterance is felicitous – even if *p* was false. But the conditions which support the communication of *q* are complex, fragile, and specific to the context of use. Background assumptions and goals which we share with our allies might not be shared more broadly. The details of the context may even be unknown or unreconstructable in other contexts,

with the result that it may be too difficult to recover, in a new context, that q was communicated in the original. Thus q need not be what is communicated by the utterance relative to the new context of assessment. Since the felicity of the utterance relied on the communication of q , that felicity is not preserved in the later context.

Here is an example using *knows that*.

The lottery

Iskra and Jan both buy a lottery ticket. The draw happens, Jan wins, Iskra does not. Iskra mentions this to her friend Katya during class, who surprises her by passing a note which says:

(8) Jan knew he was going to win that lottery!

Iskra pushes for clarification: how could he have known? Katya tells her that Jan rigged the lottery machine so his numbers would come up.

(8) is literally false, but is felicitous when assessed from the context of use. Jan did not know that he would win; for all he knew, his rigging might have failed. If he could have ruled that out, his reasons for thinking he was going to win would have been better – closer to knowledge. Nonetheless, the utterance was felicitous when assessed from the context of use because it communicated the proposition that Jan had good reason to think he was going to win. If Iskra were to respond pedantically with ‘No, Katya, he didn’t know’ on the grounds that for all Jan knows he might be a ticket-less brain in a vat it would have sounded ridiculous and displayed a tin ear for loose talk.

On the other hand, Iskra might discuss the same lottery note in her seminar the next day. She says, ‘Katya wrote this, see: (displaying the note)’ and explains about the rigged lottery. One of students pipes up: ‘yes, but what Katya wrote is really wrong anyway. For all Jan knew he could have been a ticket-less brain in a vat. So he didn’t actually know he was going to win.’ The student criticises Katya’s utterance on the grounds that the literal proposition was false. And now the criticism is apt. Katya’s literally false utterance was felicitous when assessed relative to the original context of assessment but not relative to the later context of assessment in the epistemology seminar. So the felicity of loose talk is relative to the context of assessment. Loose talk about knowledge is fancy.

It is not just philosophers who criticise speakers for saying things that are literally false – even if they were originally used to communicate

things that were true. Consider the following criticisms of the controversial political examples above.

- (9a) America is not full. It's the 146th most densely populated country in the world.¹⁶
- (9b) The curve isn't flat; we had more new infections today than yesterday.
- (9c) If our coffers were empty, we wouldn't be spending US\$7 billion a year on defence.
- (9d) Violence against women of colour isn't invisible – tell that to the person getting hurt.

In each case, the criticism targets the literal proposition, arguing that it is not true. In some of these cases, the critic might even endorse the communicated proposition (violence against women of colour doesn't show up well in certain kinds of statistics) and still object to the utterance.¹⁷

2.1. L.S. Stebbing and the value of loose talk

This is a picture on which loose talk is vulnerable to criticism, and so one might wonder why anyone would take the risk of using it. But there are good reasons to speak loosely. In local and cooperative contexts loose talk can be simple, clear, and brief. Words like *straight*, *broke*, and *empty* – though demanding – express simple, clear ideas with a single word. It is quicker to say 'the fridge is empty' than 'there's nothing in the fridge that we'd want to eat for dinner.' Speaking so that one's utterances are literally true is onerous, and it can be difficult to phrase things accurately.

Loose talk also has rhetorical power. L.S. Stebbing wrote about the virtues of hyperbole in her 1939 book on logic and rhetoric in political life: 'anyone who habitually speaks with moderation tends to be regarded as either as an ignorant fellow or as incapable of effective action' whereas 'sweeping

¹⁶See e.g. Ezra Klein's 4/9/2019 article in Vox <https://www.vox.com/2019/4/9/18300621/donald-trump-immigration-population-america-full>. Here the sentence about comparative population densities gives the familiar style of argument that the country does not have the property of density to the maximal degree.

¹⁷It seems to me that recorded utterances are frequently treated in something like the way the New Critics recommended treating literary texts: such utterances take on a life of their own, independent of the intentions of the author and the context of production. Indeed, this is what some authors hope will be the fate of their utterances. As a result they may work to make their point as clear and independent of context as they can – including avoiding loose talk requiring detailed knowledge of context for its interpretation – and anticipating that their words will be read by careful – even pedantic – critics in very different contexts of assessment.

statements may be regarded as a device having the [...] effect both in arresting attention and persuading others to accept our views.' (Stebbing 1939, 99) She quotes a passage from Bertrand Russell as an example:

If you are sitting in the Underground and a well-dressed woman happens to walk along the car, watch the eyes of the other women. You will see that every one of them, with the possible exception of those who are even better dressed, will watch the woman with malevolent glances, and will be struggling to draw inferences derogatory to her. (99–100)

Stebbing notes that Russell has failed to justify the claim that 'every one of the less-dressed women turn malevolent glances at her' and suggests that he is 'generalising from his own experience uncorroborated by other evidence' but then (generously) suggests instead that he is engaging in what she calls 'loud talk':

It is more probable, however, that he [Russell] is deliberately making a sweeping generalisation simply for the sake of attracting attention. His laudable desire in writing the book from which this passage is quoted was to point out to us how often the causes of our unhappiness lie within ourselves. He says 'all' when, so I am assuming, he means 'most'; perhaps 'half' (or even less than half) would have been all that was justifiable. To speak this moderately would not be so effective for his purpose. Russell often, in his popular books, uses this trick of attracting attention, much in the way in which Macaulay was inclined to say, 'Every schoolboy knows' what, indeed, most of us do not know, and what, indeed, is sometimes not even true. (100)

The passage provides us with a new example of loose talk – using 'all' to communicate 'most' – and reinforces four features of the picture presented here, namely (i) that loose talk has uses that can outweigh its vulnerability to criticism, (ii) that Russell says 'all' though he means 'most' (or something even weaker), (iii) loose talk can be criticised from a new context of assessment on the grounds that the literal proposition is false and, (iv) she helpfully gives an additional example of loose talk that employs *knows that*.¹⁸ But my central point here is that the rhetorical power of loose talk can be a reason to engage in it.

A third reason – related to the second – is that loose talk can signal trust, intimacy, and solidarity – precisely because those are the things it relies on. It is most obviously suited to unrecorded conversations among allies in private places. Given this, its use can signal that the

¹⁸'Every schoolboy knows ...' example uses both 'every' and 'knows' (and so provides two examples of looseness) but Stebbing's criticism makes it clear that she means to target both: that is, the knowledge attribution as well as the quantifier-choice.

speaker takes themselves to be talking to, and for, like-minded people that they trust. This is perhaps part of the explanation for its use in political speeches and writing that aims to persuade.

Advantages over conventional relativisms

The view outlined here combines skeptical invariantism about the content of knowledge ascriptions with relativism about their felicity. The combination has advantages over the two more familiar varieties of relativism: indexical and non-indexical.

The defining feature of indexical relativism is that propositional content varies with the context of assessment. This feature gives rise to the classic problem of disagreement: if the skeptic in his context of assessment is not denying the proposition that the ordinary speaker accepts in theirs, then it is hard to see how the skeptic is disagreeing with, and hence undermining, everyday knowledge ascriptions. And then it is hard to see why skepticism matters.

Indexical relativists require – and often provide – some more complicated story about how disagreement is to be understood. But for my kind of skeptical invariantist, the problem of disagreement does not even get started, since the skeptic and the ordinary speaker are arguing about the very same propositions. This is the simplest and most natural way to understand the enduring interest and threat of skepticism; having no need for an elaborate story about disagreement is an advantage of the view.¹⁹

Non-indexical relativism, by contrast, seems to have a neater story regarding disagreement: utterances express the same proposition

¹⁹Perhaps that is too fast. After all, there are two propositions involved in loose talk: the communicated proposition and the literal proposition. In everyday knowledge ascriptions we communicate the former and the skeptic denies the latter. Is not that talking past one another? For the full story here, I think it is helpful to distinguish the Strong Skeptic from the Weak Skeptic (as I will also do in the last section of this paper.) The Weak Skeptic says that (most) knowledge-attributing propositions are false. The Strong Skeptic goes further and says that we have no reason to believe any propositions either. Consider 'I know Sarah is working' uttered in a context in which it communicates that I have good enough reason to think Sarah is working not to interrupt her. The Weak Skeptic denies the literal proposition but not the communicated proposition. The Strong Skeptic denies both the literal proposition and the communicated proposition. We thus have a straightforward story about disagreement with the Strong Skeptic (and hence why Strong Skepticism is so troubling): it rejects a proposition that we normally accept, namely, that we have reasons for our beliefs. Disagreement with the Weak Skeptic, however, turns out to be superficial and it can be explained by loose talk. We do not know (speaking strictly now) that Sarah is working. We just took ourselves to be in a context in which we could reasonably expect to communicate that we had good enough reason to think she was working not to interrupt her by saying that we did. This explains both why we, as ordinary speakers, will utter knowledge-attributing sentences, and why we will – in the epistemology classroom – back off them in response to skeptical scenarios. I think this is the right view on disagreement with both kinds of skeptic.

across contexts of assessment, but this proposition is one which itself takes different truth-values relative to different contexts of assessment. For the sake of argument, let us grant that this is a suitable way to capture disagreement.

The non-indexical relativist has a different problem. Nearly everyone, even those who have no truck with assessment sensitivity, thinks of propositions as getting truth-values relative to parameters. The truth of the proposition expressed by 'It is raining' varies with the world because it expresses a proposition that is true relative to worlds in which it is raining and false relative to worlds in which it is not. Some also think propositions get their truth values relative to time and location. If propositions get their truth values relative to worlds and times (to arbitrarily pick parameters for illustration), then we can think of them as determining a function from pairs of possible worlds and times to truth-values. This is the proposition's intension.²⁰

The defining feature of non-indexical relativism is that the truth-value of a proposition is assessment-sensitive. The result is that its intension is a function from a triple of worlds, times, and contexts of assessment, $\langle w, t, c_a \rangle$, to a truth value. It is this feature that makes the intensions 'fancy' – they are functions that take contexts of assessment as arguments.

Fancy intensions are the problem. A proposition is a claim about the way the world is, and it is true or false, depending on whether the world is the way it says it is or not. Given this, we have a natural explanation for why the truth-value of a proposition varies over worlds; the way things are varies over worlds. This also explains why the truth-value of a proposition would vary over time; the way things are varies over time. But how could the truth-value of a proposition vary with context of assessment? If we were to answer this question on the model of the previous answers, we would say: because the way things are varies depending where they are being assessed from. But – I hold, at least – this is not true, and so intensions ought not to be fancy.²¹

Non-indexical relativism's commitment to fancy intensions is a commitment to something more metaphysically radical than anything

²⁰Some semanticists identify propositions with their intensions, but others dislike the way this collapses certain distinctions (e.g. it identifies all necessary and permanent propositions) and so I prefer to say that a proposition determines an intension, which allows me to say that different propositions may determine the same intension.

²¹More specific formulations of non-indexical relativism might replace c_a with something that is determined by c_a , such as an epistemic standard. Since this is determined by c_a , the intension remains problematically assessment-sensitive. The way things are does not vary with epistemic standards either, even if the truth-value of a sentence could.

required by indexical relativism. It is a matter, not just of truth-value variation as a result of a semantic mechanism, but of truth-value variation as a result of a variation in the way the world is – variation in the way the world is across context of assessment. Call this, if you like, *ontic* relativism as opposed to mere *semantic* relativism. Ontic relativism seems wrong to me. One might even hold that it just does not make sense – in the way that one might think that ontic conceptions of dialetheism, or vagueness, do not make sense. What would it mean for the world itself (at a particular time) to be one way with respect to a context of assessment c_1 but not that way with respect to a different context of assessment c_2 ? The world is some way. And if it is that way, it is that way independently of context of assessment (that's just part of what it is to be!) and so whatever way it turns out to be, it will be that way with respect to all contexts of assessment. So there are no fancy intensions.

As a strict matter of dialectic, a hardcore non-indexical relativist is free to deny my premise about there being no variation in the way the world is with context of assessment. 'I'm a relativist!', she might say, 'What did you expect?' But I find fancy intensions troubling – troubling in a way that indexical relativism is not – and perhaps you do too. If so, then sceptical invariantism with fancy loose talk offers the triple win of a straightforward account of disagreement, assessment-sensitivity, and no fancy intensions.

	Indexical	Non-Indexical	Loose-Talk
Disagreement	×	✓	✓
Assessment Sensitivity	✓	✓	✓
Avoids fancy intensions	✓	×	✓

3. Objections

3.1. Fancy loose talk and the norms of speech

The most serious challenge to fancy loose talk that I am aware of can be put this way: it makes it hard to see which sentences a speaker is permitted to utter. On a view on which loose talk is merely use-sensitive, it seems clear that a speaker is permitted to utter a sentence S in (context of use) C , only if S is felicitous in C . But though an utterance only has one context of use, it may have multiple contexts of assessment, and so if felicity is assessment-sensitive, there may be some contexts of assessment that make it felicitous and some which do not. How is a speaker to judge whether it is permissible to utter the sentence? A sentence can be

uttered or not; it can't be uttered relative to some contexts of assessment and not relative to others. To ward off the threatening incoherence, we need a story about how the norms of speech can be governed by felicity, if felicity is assessment-sensitive.

A very simple strategy would be to utter a sentence in a context of use only if the utterance is felicitous relative to *all* contexts of assessment – super-felicitous! But then, utterances would always be expected to conform to the most demanding standards since there can always be very strict contexts of assessment – even if they are centuries in the future. This strategy threatens to erase the phenomenon of felicitous loose talk completely. Moreover, it seems too strict in particular cases; Hannah in Home Office does not really need to concern herself with a police investigation she knows nothing about.

A different strategy – also pleasingly simple – would be to select a single context of assessment to pay attention to. If the utterance is felicitous with respect to it, then it is permissible for a speaker to utter it, if not, then not. A natural choice would be a context of assessment with the same conditions on loose talk as the context of use. Phrased as a kind of neo-Gricean maxim of quality: make your contribution to the conversation as precise as is required by the accepted purpose and assumptions of the conversation *that you are in*. Such a strategy would make it permissible for Hannah to utter (1) in Home Office because the standards in that context of use permit it – even if the higher standards of Police Investigation do not.

The problem with this second strategy is that it threatens to collapse into mere use-sensitivity. If the relevant context of assessment always gives us the same answer as the context of use, we have assessment sensitivity in name only. Further, we could raise the question of how, on this view, a criticism from some stricter context of assessment could be apt. If the speaker has complied with the norms of speech, then in some sense, they have done nothing wrong in uttering the sentence.

For these reasons, I think that neither of these simple strategies is right. Instead, we need to take seriously a more complicated idea that goes to the very heart of loose talk, namely that there are rules about the violation of rules. Roughly: your utterances ought to be true. But, sometimes, we think we can get away with utterances that are not. When is that?

The heart of our answer so far has been one that continues to take truth quite seriously, namely: you can get away with uttering a sentence that is not literally true so long as what you communicate is true.²² For example, you can say that the table is flat so long as your listeners are

not going to take you (falsely) to be announcing your astonishing new discovery in chemistry. ('Planium! A substance that can be formed into perfectly flat surfaces!') but will instead understand that you mean (truthfully) that it is flat enough to do the jigsaw on. Essentially what we noticed in observing that loose talk was assessment sensitive, is that – especially for recorded utterances – what gets communicated by a sentence in a context varies with context of assessment.

A reasonable norm of speech then would require the speaker to consider other possible contexts of assessment, and guard against the possible communication of falsehoods. This suggests the following principle linking norms of speech to the (assessment-sensitive) facts about felicity:

A speaker is permitted to utter a sentence *S* in a context of use *C* only if they can reasonably expect that the utterance will not be assessed from any contexts with respect to which it is infelicitous.

Or, making our conception of felicity explicit:

A speaker is permitted to utter a sentence *I* in a context of use *C* only if they can reasonably expect that the utterance will not be assessed from any contexts with respect to which it communicates a false proposition.

To evaluate the principle, it helps to consider some cases in which someone might be tempted to speak too loosely:

Careful lawyer

A lawyer drafts a contract between two parties who are keen to collaborate. At a meeting with both (though her clients are group A), she asks 'What would happen if Group A didn't deliver the widgets by the first day of the month?' Neither party is concerned: 'We'll definitely be able to get the widgets there regularly' A says. 'The factory is only a few hours away.' Group B adds that plus or minus one day isn't a big deal, it's really the regular top up of the supply of widgets that counts. As both parties intend it then, 'on the first of each month' communicates 'around the first of each month.'

But lawyers need to think about alternative contexts of assessment. If things go badly and the parties become combative, the question may be less about how the profits will be shared and more about who can be forced to absorb the losses. Suppose Group B were to fail to sell the expected number of widgets, the project fails, and no money is coming in. As it turns out, her client's deliveries were often a day late. They still

²²A parallel principle addresses the true-but-infelicitous cases: when is it not ok to utter sentences which are literally true? When doing so would communicate falsehoods.

fell squarely within what the two groups intended to communicate by ‘1st day of each month’ but Group B might sue for breach of contract anyway. The contract could be read by a judge who would have to decide the issue. The lawyer looks back to her draft and adds the phrase ‘time not of the essence’ after ‘1st day of each month.’ Within her legal system, the phrase functions as conventionalised LT-regulator, like ‘roughly’ or ‘about.’ Now the utterance literally expresses the looser requirement both groups have in mind – and does so in a way that will be available from later, stricter contexts of assessment.

In this case, the lawyer is concerned with how the utterances in the written contract will be assessed from later, stricter contexts. And in this case, she’s right to adjust what is uttered in the light of those judgments. But utterers do not always consider all the contexts of assessment they should.

Teenage Tim

Teenage Tim wants to convince his parents that he can be responsible with money so that they will let him get a car once he is old enough. He gets a Saturday job, and begins saving a small amount each week, with the aim of demonstrating his self-control and trustworthiness over time. On a facebook thread on Tim’s wall, his cousin Teenage Tam writes: ‘Must be pretty sweet getting paid every week!’ Tim does not want to give his friends the impression that he has tons of money to spare and replies ‘I wish! Having a job is expensive! There’s taxes and transport and lunch. Clothes for work, even coffee with my colleagues sometimes. I’m working my butt off but somehow I’m still broke!’ ‘Broke’ of course, is a lot like ‘flat’ and ‘free.’ His utterance of the sentence ‘I’m still broke’ expresses the literal proposition that he has no money. But it can communicate – and it does when he uses it here – that Tim does not have money for what Tam would consider discretionary spending: for example video games, movie tickets, and fast food. One sign that the literal proposition differs from the communicated proposition in this context is that it would not be appropriate for Tam to object (except as a joke) ‘whatever, Dude. I saw a quarter in your wallet just this morning ...’ That is in tension with the literal proposition, but there is no tension at all between it and the one that was communicated.

But social media posts can have a longer half-life and broader contamination zones than their authors intend. Later that day, Teenage Tim’s parents see the post, and they are furious – in part because they are

concerned about the effect on his younger brother, Tom, whom they hope will also get a job one day. 'What is Tom going to think when he reads that?' they protest over dinner. 'You're not broke, you're saving up for a car. Just because you've chosen to spend your money on something doesn't mean you don't have any.' In this case, Tim's parents complain about his saying that he is broke, and they are utterly uninterested in what was communicated to Cousin Tam. Rather, they complain that what Tim said is literally false, and moreover, that it is in danger of communicating a falsehood to Tom. In this case, Tim might very well wish he had paid more attention to other contexts of assessment for his utterance.

Careful lawyer pays attention to a context of assessment that she cannot reasonably expect not to arise (the judge.) Teenage Tim does not pay attention to context of assessments that he cannot reasonably expect not to arise (his parents and his brother's readings.) In both of these cases, the speaker should have considered the relevant contexts of assessment. We have already seen contrast cases in which it seems right for a speaker to ignore possible contexts of assessment in which the utterance would be infelicitous. One was Hannah speaking in Home Office but assessed from Police Investigation (or the epistemology classroom.) We noted that it seems too much to expect her to take into account a possible police wiretap from an investigation she knows nothing about.

Our principle gets the right result for the cases we have looked at. It explains why loose talk is often appropriate as unrecorded utterances between allies; when assessed with the standards in place at the context of use, the utterance is felicitous, and the speaker can reasonably expect it not to be assessed from other contexts. It also explains why a lawyer must consider the assessment of uncooperative parties and an adjudicating judge after a deal has gone sour: she cannot reasonably expect that her contract will not be assessed from such a context. It explains why Teenage Tim should not have posted 'I'm still broke' in as public a place as Facebook: because he couldn't reasonably expect his parents and younger brother not to read it. It explains why it would have been ok for Teenage Tim to say it in a *private* spoken conversation with Teenage Tam: because the utterance would have been felicitous in that context of assessment and he could then have reasonably expected the utterance not to be assessed from other contexts. And it explains why Hannah hasn't done anything wrong in Police Investigation. Her utterance was infelicitous from that context of assessment, but we think that Hannah had a reasonable expectation that her utterance would

not be assessed from there – indeed, a reasonable expectation that it would not be recorded.²³

The principle applies a kind of upwards pressure on standards for loose talk, and that pressure can be beneficial: communication is often improved when a speaker takes alternative contexts of assessment into account. But it is not always appropriate. There are good reasons for loose talk: it makes space for shortcuts, which can improve clarity and save time and energy; loose talk resists pedantry in the service of practicality. Moreover, it is not a good idea to speak as if you are always expecting the teacher to overhear you or as if you are speaking for posterity. Flouting – intentionally violating – the maxim above can be a method of communication too. For example, the local politician who is deliberately careless about assessment from the perspective of national commentators on the other side might do this to convey the message that he is speaking for a particular group – *his people*, as it were. Though it can be criticised as unacceptable loose talk from some contexts of assessment, it might be used anyway in full awareness of this to deliberately implicate that the goals in place in those other contexts are not the speaker's goals. This can reinforce intimacy and group membership and cement in-group/out-group divides.

Relativism about the felicity of loose talk, I contend then, makes sense and has some plausibility, even though one utterance can have multiple contexts of assessment.

3.2. True-but-infelicitous vs tightening the standards

Here is a second objection to fancy loose talk. In Section 1.3, we noted the striking fact that utterances can be true-but-infelicitous. We are planning dinner and say 'well, the fridge is completely empty' and you respond 'no it isn't, there's air in there.' The response is infelicitous, though literally

²³There is a genre of advice according to which the appropriate standards of accuracy for some utterances are in fact determined by a context of assessment with stricter standards. Sometimes one is advised to write nothing in an email that one would not write on a postcard, say nothing to a student that one would not want to see reported in the New York Times, or anything about someone that you would not say to their face. My favourite version is directed at undergraduate students in Jim Pryor's advice for writing philosophy papers: write as if the professor who will assess your work is lazy, stupid, and mean (because that will help to make your writing explicit, clear, and careful.) (Pryor 2012) Advice like this is designed to influence more than just the looseness (i.e. accuracy) of utterances – it may also be intended to influence standards of politeness or formality. And sometimes the idea is not that you can reasonably expect your utterances to be assessed from these contexts, but rather that it will influence your writing in a positive way if you imagine that it is. (e.g. Pryor's advice.) But I do think at least one motivation for the advice in this genre is to (appropriately) tighten up the standards for loose talk.

true. (An older sibling might well roll their eyes and Mum could reply wryly: 'Is air what you want to have for dinner then?' alluding to the fact that the communicated proposition was that the fridge was completely *empty of dinner options*.)

But does this really happen with knowledge claims? As a reviewer for this paper pointed out, there's a widely discussed phenomenon that seems in tension with this. Many writers think that it is easy to tighten the standards for knowledge attributions but much harder to relax them, with the result that the pedant usually wins. We say: 'I know I have hands' and the sceptic says 'no you don't, you can't rule out that you are a brain in a vat' and we think both that the sceptic has said something felicitous and that his intervention has tightened the standards for loose talk, making it now inappropriate for us to repeat the knowledge ascription. If that is how it works, how could you be *too* pedantic? Wouldn't any pedantry merely tighten the relevant standards?

Sometimes it does. We need to distinguish here between responses within contexts in which the original conversational goals – the ones that made loose talk appropriate – remain in place, and responses within contexts with other goals, or responses which themselves change the context in a way that affects the felicity of loose talk. For the expression *empty*, we can contrast contexts in which we are choosing whether to order takeout with contexts in which we are cleaning the fridge before moving. For *knows that* we can contrast contexts in which we're choosing whether to interrupt Sarah or not, and contexts in which we're addressing sceptical doubts in epistemology.

One person says 'The fridge is empty'. Another says 'No it isn't, there is a dried up carrot in one drawer.' We're all agreed that the response is literally true. Is it true-but-infelicitous? That depends on the context. Suppose we are all in it together, trying to figure out dinner. Then the initial attribution of emptiness communicates the proposition that the fridge is empty of things that could constitute dinner. The response objects but on grounds that do not conflict with the communicated proposition – presumably nobody thinks we should eat the dried out carrot for dinner. So the response was infelicitous, even though true.

For the contrast case, suppose instead that the initial speaker and the objector disagree about what the present goals should be. The initial speaker (say the teenage child) wants to talk about whether they should order take out – maybe they even hope their audience is on their side in this and might be willing to accommodate presuppositions of such goals. But the objector (a parent) thinks they should not be

thinking about dinner until they have finished cleaning the house to move out. The teenager says ‘The fridge is completely empty’ meaning to communicate that it is empty of dinner options. But their mother is not as accommodating as they’d hoped: ‘No is isn’t, look – there is a dried up carrot in there!’ Again the objection is literally true. And this time it is felicitous. The objector has not bought into the goals that made the loose talk felicitous. The objection makes it clear that the practical goal of deciding on dinner options is not shared after all. One lesson: the boundary between pedantry and standards-tightening can depend on features of the context of use.

Similarly with *knows*. Hannah person says ‘(I won’t interrupt Sarah now), I know she’s working.’ Someone objects ‘Hannah can’t rule out that Sarah is playing Tetris in there.’ The response is literally true. Is it true-but-infelicitous?

That depends on the context. If everyone involved is focused on the case in which we are trying to make a practical decision about whether or not to interrupt Sara, the communicated proposition is that Hannah has good enough reason to think that Sarah is working (not to interrupt her). The objection is not in conflict with that proposition – Sarah told Hannah she’d be working, and under the circumstances, that is a good enough reason to think that Sarah is working that Hannah should not interrupt her – even if she could not establish definitively that Sarah is not playing Tetris.

For the contrast case, suppose the objector is an epistemology student. Their goal is the literal, theoretical truth, and they scoff in the face of lowly practical goals like eating, writing books, and maintaining friendships. Now the point about being unable to rule out that Sarah is playing Tetris is felicitous; it is in conflict with the literal proposition.

When we are doing philosophy, we are more likely to see the context of assessment altered in a way that tightens the standards for loose talk. Philosophers are often both aiming at the literal truth and willing to put in extra labour to get closer to it.²⁴ Moreover, we – like lawyers – anticipate non-cooperative contexts of assessment with respect to which loose talk is inadvisable. Perhaps that is why it always seems so easy and inevitable that our objections tighten the standards for knowledge-ascriptions, rather than getting dismissed as infelicitous. But in other contexts,

²⁴ I say ‘often’. I think one way to interpret what is happening in Moore [1939] (1993) and Moore [1925] (1956) is that Moore is refusing to give up his loose talk. One reason this work can seem puzzling (and usually requires some background theory to interpret) is that we don’t normally refuse such requests in philosophy. We are nearly always open to being asked to tighten up our language.

other people, even other philosophers, can be more interested in practical matters. Because of this, literally true objections do not always simply raise the standards – sometimes they are infelicitous.

The durability of literal talk

A final case requires more discussion. What does assessment-sensitive felicity mean for the sceptic, who wants to utter sentences like:

(10a) I don't know that I have hands.

(10b) Hannah doesn't know that Sarah is working.

Could the sceptic's knowledge-denials – true and felicitous when made – be *infelicitous* relative to some later context from which they are assessed? And if so, would not our principle – which tells us not to utter sentences unless we can reasonably expect that they will not be assessed from a context with respect to which they communicate a false proposition – say that they should not be uttered? That seems like the wrong result.

Most utterances in philosophy seminars go unrecorded, giving speakers good reason to think they will not be remembered long enough to be assessed from other contexts. But some seminars are recorded and made public on the internet, and other sceptical utterances are recorded in books and papers. It would be problematic if our principle classed these utterances as infelicitous. But how can the sceptic's literally true utterance be permitted when the pedant's is not?

An obvious difference between the Pedants and the Sceptics is that the Pedants are being assessed from within the conversation in which their utterance is made, whereas the Sceptic's was felicitous in the epistemology seminar. It seems unlikely that one can reasonably expect not to be assessed from the context in which one is speaking.

A second point to consider is that the further we get – in time and cultural distance – from the original context of use, the harder it will be to successfully recover the communicated proposition. What is communicated depends on things like the immediate physical context, the shared goals of the speaker and their audience, and the conversation's common ground. When writing for posterity, an author might do some work to make these things explicit in their text, thus allowing their sentence to communicate more than it literally says. Generally, such context-setting work will tend to close the gap between any proposition

communicated in the latter context and the proposition communicated in the original context of use. For example, the sceptic might write things like ‘even though Hannah has good reason to think that Sarah is working, she doesn’t know that she is.’ This rules out the communication of the false proposition. But a writer might also try to simply write (or say) what they literally mean, and so rely less on a separate communicated proposition. Quite generally, speakers and audiences recognise that it is harder to be sure of merely communicated propositions as temporal and social distance increases, and so out of necessity, rely on the literal proposition more and more. At the limit, all we have is what the speaker literally said. The literal proposition is thus more durable than any communicated one – it will survive into more and more distant contexts.

The striking phenomenon of true-but-infelicitous utterances then – relying as it does on a communicated false proposition – is something that we will tend to get within temporally and socially close-knit conversations: family arguments over dinner and arguments between house-mates about whether Hannah should have interrupted. But, our principle does still permit the sceptic in the epistemology seminar to utter *Hannah didn’t know that Sarah was working* because the sceptic can reasonably expect that their utterance would not be assessed from any contexts with respect to which it communicates a false proposition. In the context they are using it, it communicates a true one (the literal proposition) as a result of the goals of the context, and to audiences in further away contexts, the literal and communicated contents coincide as a matter of necessity. Hence even if the discussion group in 100 years is a group of non-sceptics, the sentence does not communicate the false proposition that, for example, Hannah did not have good reason to think that Sarah was working.²⁵

²⁵Suppose the skeptical epistemologists are unlucky: the conversation in their seminar is secretly recorded (perhaps it took place over Zoom) and posted online. Some philosopher-hating physicists watch the video and write an article about it for the university newspaper, mocking the skeptical claims. ‘Philosophers claim not to know their colleagues are working!’ ‘As far as they know, other members of the department spend all their writing time playing Tetris and learning Tik-Tok dances!’ The force of these criticisms comes from taking them to communicate the looser proposition; the accusations sound bad if they communicate that philosophers claim to have insufficient reason to think that their colleagues are working. And of course, such a communicated proposition is false (I’m assuming my colleagues’ intimidating output is sufficient reason to think they are working a lot.) In this case it seems clear that the philosophers have a natural defence: they can and should say that their remarks were ‘taken out of context.’ The surrounding discussion that ensures that the false proposition is not the one communicated has been left out of the article. What they said was literally true, they meant to communicate the literal proposition and their expectation of not being assessed from the context in which it communicates a false one was reasonable.

3.3. Contextual dominance

Philosophers have frequently preferred contextualism to sceptical invariantism. One reason is the widespread belief that contextualism *dominates* invariantism, in the following sense: there are, as we discussed in Section 1.1, many varieties of invariantism, and these can be combined with different theories of loose talk, to generate different predictions about which utterances are felicitous, and which not. But for any such view, there will be a parallel contextualist view according to which, whenever the sceptical invariantist says that the utterance is false-but-felicitous in a context, the contextualist says it is true.²⁶ Such pairs of views are, in a sense, empirically equivalent. Each makes a set of predications about what speakers will judge felicitous, and they agree on all the predictions. Suppose we have a pair of theories – one contextualist, one sceptical invariantist – which make the same good predictions. The contextualist argues that their view always is superior because it is empirically adequate *without attributing falsehoods to speakers*.²⁷ Considerations of hermeneutic charity thus favour the contextualist view.

My response is that the dominance argument has two flaws. It relies on too narrow a conception of the evidence, and it employs a misplaced principle of charity. First, it is a mistake to think that our evidence is exhausted by judgements of utterance felicity. Speakers also judge whether utterances are literally true, and invariantist and contextualist views come apart on this.

My claim here has been denied by some extremely authoritative sources. Schaffer (2004) claims it a matter of ‘standard linguistic methodology’ that ‘our linguistic intuitions provide evidence for acceptability, and do not discriminate between semantic and pragmatic sources.’ (145) I take him to be saying that they do not discriminate between contextualist accounts and loose talk, and he cites Chomsky in support: ‘We may make an intuitive judgement that some linguistic expression is odd or deviant. But we cannot know, pretheoretically, whether this deviance is a matter of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, belief, memory limitations, style etc.’

But Schaffer’s point here is undermined by his own examples of hyperbole – his explicit model for loose talk. When a speaker says ‘the plane was a mile long’ (circumstances: it is a normal commercial jetliner) or ‘I’m

²⁶The contextualist view need not be defined via the sceptical invariantist one, of course.

²⁷As Lewis (1996) puts it: ‘Yet fallibilism is the less intrusive madness. It demands less frequent corrections of what we want to say. So, if forced to choose, I choose fallibilism. (And so say all of us.)’ (550)

dying of thirst' (Schaffer 2004, 140), there is no serious question about whether the speaker is saying something that is true in English. While a philosopher could dream up a fantastic contextualist theory according to which these English sentences in fact express different propositions in different contexts, making 'the plane was a mile long' and 'I'm dying of thirst' literally true when (respectively) the speaker is tired or somewhat thirsty, it would be obvious to a native speaker with no theoretical understanding of semantics and pragmatics that such a theory had got the truth-value of these sentences wrong. It would fit our linguistic intuitions about whether the sentence is felicitous, but not those about whether it is true. Similar points can be made with the aid of some of Carter's examples of loose talk, such as 'Lena arrived at 9pm.' We do have some intuitions about truth-values. And once we have broadened the conception of data to include intuitions about truth-values, the contextualist and invariantist theories are no longer empirically equivalent, and that premise of the dominance argument fails.

A second problem with the dominance argument is that the principle of charity is misplaced. To step way back – just briefly – the tendency to prefer to interpret ordinary speakers as saying true things, and attendant overuse of principles of charity, has been a strong current in philosophy since Wittgenstein's *Investigations* and the Ordinary Language Movement of the 1950s. One strain of thought was that the way to answer questions about the meanings of expressions of interest (such as 'acted freely', 'true', 'mean', 'intentional', 'know', 'perceive', etc.) was to observe ordinary speakers using them and try to discover a condition that is satisfied if and only the expressions are used, which would then be deemed to be the satisfaction condition for the expression. This method was to be contrasted with, and preferred to, earlier philosophers' tendencies to suppose that they already knew what an expression meant and then argue that ordinary speakers were using it wrong (examples: 'knows that', 'acted freely', 'solid').²⁸ Such approaches had, it was thought, landed us with philosophical problems like skepticism in the first place. A related strain of thought asks why we should expect our language to contain expressions for things that we rarely encounter and predicates that we hardly ever see satisfied. The fact that we learn and use the expressions must mean that their extensions are to be found, and found fairly frequently, in everyday life.²⁹

²⁸(Grice [1967] 1991, 3–4), (Soames 2003, Ch 7–9)

²⁹Strikingly relevant here: Norman Malcolm suggests that it must be commonplace for people to be certain about empirical statements because otherwise people would be unable to learn what the word *certain* means. (Malcolm 1967, 120)

But I think we can see why this isn't generally right by focusing on demanding expressions like *flat*, *linear*, and *straight*. Why do we have those expressions (and how could we have learned them) if things that are flat or straight are hardly ever to be met with? One idea is that it is at least as easy for us to imagine a surface with the property of flatness – once we've seen a range of surfaces with different degrees on the scale of bumpiness – as it is to imagine Hume's missing shade of blue after seeing all the other shades, or an animal with 5 legs instead of 4 though we have never met one. Perhaps this is because we can use the related gradable property to determine the property of flatness descriptively, for example, just as we can say: 'a room like this, but with 0 tables instead of 4', so we can say 'a surface like this but without any of the bumps' (degree zero of bumpiness.) Acquaintance with enough instances of a gradable property, plus some background cognitive resources, is sufficient for grasping the absolute relatives of gradable properties. The property of flatness is a simplification (perhaps we could say *idealisation*) of the various complex properties which close-to-flat surfaces have in the physical world. We can do a pretty good job of describing the world and communicating with *flat*, just as we can do a pretty good job of describing the world using idealised point particles and frictionless planes in physics. Absolute expressions let us simplify our theories – or, focusing more on the everyday – our stories about the world. Since absolute expressions are possible, easily acquired, and useful, they exist even when there is little in the everyday world that satisfies them.

3.4. But skepticism!

A final objection to sceptical invariantism with fancy loose talk is that it is skepticism, and so something epistemologists ought to fight. Acquiescing to sceptical arguments is easy, but their conclusions rob us of epistemic goods, and the epistemologist's job – some have thought – is to fight for knowledge on behalf of people everywhere. Moore interpreted Kant's famous lines from the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* in this way:

It still remains a scandal to philosophy ... that the existence of things outside of us ... must be accepted merely on faith, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof. (Kant 1787, Bxxxix, n)

Moore, in response:

it seems clear also that he [Kant] thought that the giving of such a proof was a task which fell properly within the province of philosophy; for, if it did not, the fact that no proof had been given could not possibly be a scandal to philosophy. (Moore 1993, 147)

I have sympathy with this view, but it does not require us to fight skeptical invariantism, because skeptical invariantism is weak-sauce skepticism. Call the thesis that no-one knows anything *weak skepticism*, and the view that no-one has any justification for their beliefs *strong skepticism*. Weak skepticism about (say) the future is the thesis that no-one knows anything about the future, whereas strong skepticism about the future is the thesis that no-one has any justification for their beliefs about the future.³⁰

On a standard beginner's misreading of, for example, Hume on induction (Hume 1739, 1, iii, §6), the skepticism which threatens is merely weak skepticism; the conclusion of the skeptical argument is compatible with a moderate approach: though we may never know for certain what will happen in the future, we do have many reasonable beliefs about it. Such a view can seem palatable, even commendable in its epistemic modesty.

But of course, Hume's argument really has a much more troubling conclusion, namely that our beliefs about the future have no epistemi at all, leaving us with no epistemic reason to believe them. *That* conclusion is strong skepticism and I very much hope it is false and that philosophers can save the world from it.

But since it is clear that skeptical invariantism is weak skepticism – skepticism about knowledge, not justification – acquiescing to skeptical invariantism is no scandal to philosophy.

4 Conclusion

Skeptical invariantism with fancy loose talk is somewhat skeptical and somewhat relativist. But thanks to the fancy loose talk part, it possesses both of those features in an attenuated form: knowledge ascriptions are hardly ever true, but they can be used – speaking loosely – to communicate propositions that are. Moreover, because it is the felicity of knowledge ascriptions – not their content or truth-value – that is assessment-

³⁰I owe this distinction and terminology to Gideon Rosen.

sensitive, the view is able to avoid two standard problems faced by other relativist views.

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