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## SOME MODELS OF LINGUISTIC UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** I discuss the conjecture that understanding what is said in an utterance is to be modelled as knowing what is said in that utterance. My main aim is to present a number of alternative models, as a prophylactic against premature acceptance of the conjecture as the only game in town. I also offer preliminary assessments of each of the models, including the propositional knowledge model, in part by considering their respective capacities to sub-serve the transmission of knowledge through testimony. In each case, the preliminary assessment is unfavourable. I end by very briefly sketching an additional model as an object for future consideration.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is natural to view linguistic understanding as, or as responsible for, a constitutive alignment of mind with the linguistic expression of content. So viewed, linguistic understanding is some of what sustains the abilities of some amongst the minded to take cognitive advantage of some amongst the contentful. It therefore seems appropriate to pursue the theory of understanding as a chapter of epistemology, construed as aiming to provide an account of the nature, or natures, of such alignments between mind and world.

From that perspective, the most obvious starting point for a theory of understanding is the conjecture that linguistic understanding

is a form of propositional, or factual, knowledge; more specifically, the conjecture is that understanding is knowledge of facts about the linguistic expression of content. If the conjecture was correct, then—assuming that knowledge does not have a disjunctive nature—it would allow for a partial reduction to two previous problems: the problem of accounting for the facts about the linguistic expression of content and the problem of providing a general account of knowledge of facts. And the conjecture gains plausibility from elementary reflection on the pattern of ordinary thought about understanding. For we ordinarily find plausible that when an auditor has understood what a speaker has said (/what their words mean), the auditor knows what the speaker has said (/what their words mean). And we ordinarily find plausible that someone knows what a speaker has said (/what their words mean) just in case, for some fact or facts to the effect that the speaker has said that such-and-such (/that their words have such-and-such a meaning), they know that the speaker has said that such-and-such (/that their words have such-and-such a meaning). Of course, ordinary acceptance of such implications doesn't decide the status of the conjecture. For one thing, our ordinary judgments about cases may be erroneous, or less fine-grained than further reflection demands. For another, our task is to explain what it *is* to understand, and not simply what happens to be the case whenever we do. Nevertheless, the conjunction of naturalness and plausibility lends some credence to the opening conjecture.

Beyond that conjunction, a variety of considerations might be offered for or against the conjecture.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most compelling consideration in favour of the conjecture is the thought that it provides the only viable model of understanding. The main brief of this paper is to present some alternative models with the aim of preventing our being swayed prematurely towards the conjectured model by (premature) thought of its being the only game in town. (Section 2.) A secondary aim is to attempt a preliminary assessment of the various models I shall present. In the course of attempting that, I shall consider one important consideration that has been presented in favour of the opening conjecture. (Section 4.) The consideration arises from reflection on the role of understanding in facilitating the testimonial transmission of knowledge from speaker to auditor. In preliminary form, the consideration is that there seem to be cases in which an audience's un-

derstanding could only facilitate their acquisition of knowledge from others in the way that it does if it were itself a form of propositional knowledge. Driving the consideration is the thought that, if understanding had some other, lesser epistemic status, then it would impose that status as a higher bound on cognitions acquired on its basis, and so preclude the transmission of knowledge. In response, I shall argue for two claims. First, I shall argue that the mooted consideration fails to support the conjecture over some of the other plausible models of understanding. (Section 5.) Second, I shall argue that none of the candidate models copes satisfactorily with the needs of testimonial knowledge transmission. (Sections 6-8.) I end with the hope that that result might provoke interest in a further alternative. (Section 9.)

## 2. VARIETIES OF UNDERSTANDING

There are many varieties of broadly linguistic understanding. For present purposes, I shall distinguish six varieties, along two dimensions. First, we can distinguish the standing meanings of sentence types—e.g. the meaning common to all instances of the type of English sentence “I am here, now”—and the various speech acts that speakers can use those sentences in order to perform—e.g. asserting that, or asking whether, they are there, then. On that basis, we can distinguish understanding of meaning from understanding of (determinates of the determinable) what is said. Second, we can distinguish amongst the following forms of understanding: the standing abilities, or dispositions, of speakers that enable them on occasion to understand—what I’ve elsewhere labelled *ability-understanding*; the episodes in which speakers exercise those abilities successfully—*achievement-understanding*; and the states that speakers enter on the basis of those episodes—*state-understanding*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can distinguish at least the following six varieties of understanding:

- (1) *Ability-understanding of meaning*. Understanding as an ability, capacity, or disposition, to understand the meaning of a sentence type—e.g. one’s having facility with the words and forms that constitute that type.
- (2) *Achievement-understanding of meaning*. Understanding as an episode in which the ability in (1) is

- exercised successfully—e.g. one’s coming to state-understand, or understanding, the meaning of a presented sentence type.
- (3) *State-understanding of meaning*. Understanding as a state entered through successful exercise of the ability in (1)—e.g. one’s being in a state of understanding, or having achievement-understood, the meaning of a presented sentence type.
  - (4) *Ability-understanding of what is said*. Understanding as an ability, capacity, or disposition, to understand what is said (e.g. what is asserted, asked, ordered, optated, etc.)—e.g. one’s having facility with the ways in which words and forms, or sentence types, can be used in order to perform various speech acts with particular contents.
  - (5) *Achievement-understanding of what is said*. Understanding as an episode in which the ability in (4) is exercised successfully—e.g. one’s coming to state-understand, or understanding, what someone has said.
  - (6) *State-understanding of what is said*. Understanding as a state entered through successful exercise of the ability in (4)—e.g. one’s being in a state of understanding, or having achievement-understood, what someone has said.

Obviously, there is more to be said about the distinctions sketched here, and there is space for challenges to arise concerning either the necessity or sufficiency of this particular six-fold classification. In the remainder, I shall focus upon (4)-(6), so forms of understanding targeted upon what is said, rather than sentence meaning.<sup>4</sup> What matters for present purposes about the remaining three-fold classification is that it is at least plausible that there is such a thing, or way for a thing to be, as state-understanding. For it is plausible that state-understanding is the primary candidate for identification with propositional knowledge of what is said.

Talk about propositional knowledge shuns the type of temporal modification found with talk about episodes, and embraces that found

with talk about states, so that (7) and (8), by contrast with (9) and (10), are ill-formed, or take unintended ‘came to know’/‘came to be a smoker’ readings:

- (7) \*Florence knew [the answer/that smoking is addictive] in about a week.
- (8) \*Florence was a smoker in about a week.
- (9) Florence knew [the answer/that smoking is addictive] for about a week.
- (10) Florence was a smoker for about a week.

And talk about propositional knowledge, unlike talk about processes and process-involving episodes, lacks a distinctive present tense progressive form. Insofar as it has a reading, (11) is equivalent to (12), so lacks the distinctive reading seen in (13) and (14):

- (11) ?Florence is knowing [the answer/that smoking is a habit].
- (12) Florence knows [the answer/that smoking is a habit].
- (13) Florence is smoking.
- (14) Florence is smoking the whole packet.

Modulo the usual reservations concerning transitions from features of the linguistic record to an associated metaphysics, there is therefore some reason to classify cases of propositional knowledge as states, rather than as episodes or processes. In that case, although it is left open that one’s enjoying achievement-understanding might be one’s coming to have propositional knowledge, there is reason to reject the conjecture that achievement-understanding *is* propositional knowledge.

The same type of consideration cannot be used in order to undermine the conjecture that ability-understanding might be propositional knowledge. For the temporal profile of ability-understanding is closely akin to that of propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup> However, some ground for doubt is provided by reflection on the comparative immediacy with which propositional knowledge, by contrast with ability-understanding, can determine judgement, or other forms of occurrent cognition. To a good first approximation, one’s knowing that such-and-such can determine that one is disposed to judge that such-and-such without first determining that one enters any other cognitive state, or

that one judges anything else.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, one’s possession of ability-understanding can determine that one is disposed to judge, for instance, that someone has said that such-and-such, only by first determining that one attains state- or achievement-understanding. (One’s so judging might *be* the attainment of either state- or achievement-understanding.) To the extent that that is correct, it suggests that, insofar as ability-understanding is associated with propositional knowledge, the association is indirect. Moreover, it suggests that theoretical grounds for associating ability-understanding with propositional knowledge will vary in force with grounds for thinking that the characteristic outputs of ability-understanding, instances of state-understanding, are themselves instances of propositional knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Neither consideration is, as it stands, decisive. But together they serve to make it plausible that the primary form of the opening conjecture is that state-understanding is a form of propositional knowledge. That is anyway the form of the opening conjecture that I shall stalk in the remainder. I turn now to sketching some competing models of state understanding. Henceforth, I shall use ‘understanding’, unless otherwise specified, to abbreviate ‘state-understanding’.

The schematic form of the facts onto which understanding is directed can be specified as in (15), with ‘S’ instanced by terms for speakers, ‘said’ instanced by determinate speech act predicates, and ‘p’ instanced by appropriate clausal complements.

- (15) S said p.

For two instances,

- (16) Florence suggested that smoking is not addictive.
- (17) Kim asked whether Florence’s suggestion was insincere.

The facts schematised in this way each have three obvious components, signalled in (18)-(20):

- (18) An action by S: S’s production of an utterance *u*.
- (19) The content canonically characterised by the clausal complement, *p*.

- (20) An expressive relation between action/product and content.

Corresponding to the fact in (15), and its proper sub-components in (18)-(20), are the following four schematic models of understanding, with 'A' instanced by auditors and 'Φ' by specific attitude types:

- (PU) A Φs that S (/produced *u* and thereby) said *p*.  
 (OU) A Φs *p*.  
 (UU) A Φs *u* (/the production of *u*).  
 (RU) A Φs the expressive relation between *u* (/the production of *u*) and *p*.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, 'Φ' might be instanced in a wide variety of ways in each schematic model. I shall restrict attention here to broadly epistemic models, models that aim to characterise understanding either as a case of propositional knowledge, or as constitutively connected with propositional knowledge. Even with that restriction in force, the imposition of order is disrupted by the fact that propositional knowledge can itself take a wide variety of more specific forms, and can be constitutively connected, in a panoply of ways, with a menagerie of other forms of cognition. Four slightly more specific models that emerge from attending within the restriction are as follows, where the subscript 'W' signals the possibility of further specification of a way, or form, of knowing or cognizing, and it is assumed that all the forms of cognition involved are, or are constitutively connected with, forms of propositional knowledge.

- (PK) A knows<sub>W</sub> that S said *p*.  
 (OK) A knows<sub>W</sub> [/is acquainted<sub>W</sub> with] the content or proposition *p*.  
 (UK) A knows<sub>W</sub> [/has apprehended<sub>W</sub>/is acquainted<sub>W</sub> with] *u* (/the production of *u*).  
 (RK) A knows<sub>W</sub> [/is epistemically sensitive<sub>W</sub> to] an expressive relation between *u* (/the production of *u*) and *p*.

(PK) is a determinable version of the model proposed in our opening conjecture. (OK), (UK), and (RK) provide the bases for determinable alternatives to that conjecture. Notice that each of the models imposes further background requirements on the understanding subjects' possession, and exercise, of cognitive and perceptual abilities. It is plausible that (PK) requires that the subject, *A*, perceives an utterance by *S* and cognizes both the proposition that *S* said *p* and the proposition *p*; that (OK) requires that *A* cognizes *p*; that (UK) requires that *A* perceives *u* (/the production of *u*); and that (RK) requires an ability to perceive *u* (/the production of *u*) and an ability to cognize *p*. Ultimately, an account of understanding will have to include accounts of all the sub-abilities on which understanding depends, in effect an account of the *matter* of understanding. Prior to that, however, is the present target: an account of the *form* of understanding. Further details about how each of the models of the form of understanding may be developed will emerge as we progress.

### 3. UNDERSTANDING AND (UK)

I shall begin with what is apt to seem the least plausible model, (UK). Paul Ziff presents at least one version of (UK) in the following passage:

To understand what is said, in the sense of understanding the utterance uttered, is (not so simply) to hear and make out the utterance. Thus if from the lecture platform one asks students at the rear of the room 'Can you understand what is said?', the answer is yes if they can hear and make out the words: thus even Heidegger can hope to be understood. (Ziff 1970: 15)

I shall assume that Ziff here aims to characterise minimal conditions on state-understanding, rather than minimal conditions on ability-understanding. According to one reading, Ziff's proposal is that state-understanding an utterance is a matter merely of hearing an utterance and 'making out'—perhaps by recognising or categorising as words—the words that it instances. So construed, the proposal is extremely implausible. For on that reading, Heidegger might reasonably hope to be understood even if he were knowingly to speak German to an audience of monolingual English speakers, assuming only that they had

been trained to recognize or categorise as such the German words that he used.

A second construal avoids the immediate difficulty with the first by adding a requirement to the effect that ‘not so simply’ hearing and making out an utterance involves recognition of relevant semantical—or more broadly, content expressive—features of the words used in the utterance. It would then be a requirement on adequate specification of the proposal that it went beyond the minimal account (UK) by incorporating an explicit account of what the latter itself involves: an account, that is, of the recognition of broadly semantical features of words. The obvious risk attending this departure from (UK) is that appeal to a more basic form of state-understanding, to be accounted for by one of the other models, is thereby smuggled into the account.

A third construal aims to avoid that obvious risk by refusing to specify the required background or context against which understanding takes place by appeal to state-understanding. The core of Ziff’s proposal, so read, is that state-understanding of an utterance—occupancy of which state distinguishes those who understand the utterance from those who don’t—is a matter simply of apprehending the utterance against the not so simple background of a specific type of cognitive or non-cognitive ability.<sup>9</sup>

So construed, Ziff’s proposal belongs to a tradition of deflationary attempts to minimise the specific cognitive burdens that attend utterance understanding.<sup>10</sup> A central goal of the deflationary tradition is to treat states, or episodes, of understanding as determined by the obtaining or occurrence within a special context, or against a special background, of states, or episodes that do not involve cognition of the expression of content—e.g. to treat them as broadly perceptual states or episodes. Michael Dummett states the central deflationary thesis as follows, attributing it to Wittgenstein:

[G]iven you understand the *language*, that you are, as it were, in that *state* of understanding, nothing need happen, in which your understanding of the sentence consists, no *act* of understanding, other than your hearing that sentence. (Dummett (1993ba): 99)<sup>11</sup>

Reflexes of the tradition vary according to whether they view the relevant context, or background, as itself involving (potential for) cog-

nition of the expression of content, and according to the specific views that they embed concerning the determinants of understanding on an occasion—whether, for example, they view those determinants as merely sense-perceptual. The common thread running through the tradition is the shared view that the specific difference between someone who understands an utterance, and someone who does not, need not depend upon a specific difference in their cognition of the expression of content: with the right context or background in place, coming to understand an utterance can be a matter, for instance, simply of coming into perceptual relation with it. Although Ziff does very little to elucidate the required context, or background, of understanding, it is plausible that he means the parenthetical qualifier, ‘not so simply’, to signal the place for such an account.

Defence of such a deflationary account of understanding requires defence of the claim that exercises of ability understanding have no reflex in episodic or stative cognition of the expression of content. Dummett makes plain the main obstacle such a defence must surmount:

If [the claim that there is no genuine occurrent sense of “understand”] could be successfully maintained, the conception of understanding an utterance could be reduced to that of hearing it, while possessing a dispositional understanding of the words and the construction it employs. But it is difficult to see how it can be maintained that no occurrent notion of understanding is required: for it is possible to be perplexed by a sentence on first hearing, through a failure to take in its structure, and to attain an understanding of it on reflection. (Dummett (1993a): 102-3)

Dummett’s worry is well taken. However, it is not quite decisive against the deflationist’s proposal as understood here. For it is open to the deflationist to allow that understanding can take a definite occurrent, or stative, form, and even that it can take a form involving definite cognitive changes in the subject of understanding. What the deflationist is committed to denying is that any such changes are a matter of the subject’s first-order cognition of the expression of content.

The deflationist reading of Ziff’s proposal leaves open a number of options for further specification. The most important decision point

concerns the required context or background for state-understanding. Here, there are three broad options: first, one might seek to provide an account of the context or background by appeal to potential for some form of cognition of the expression of content; second, one might provide an account by appeal to extra-cognitive factors, for instance membership in a linguistic community; third, one might provide an account by appeal to cognitive factors not involving cognition of the expression of content. I shall take these options in order.

Although he is not part of the deflationary tradition, Frege provides a useful sketch of a version of the first option:

When we use the word “integral”, for example, are we always conscious of everything that belongs to the sense of this word? Only in very rare cases, I think. Usually, just the word is present to our consciousness, though associated with a more or less dim knowledge that this word is a sign that has a sense, and that, when we wish, we can recall this sense. . . . This sign serves us as a receptacle in which we can, as it were, carry the sense about, in the consciousness that we can always open this receptacle should we have need of what it contains. (Frege (1914/1979): 209).

From the deflationary perspective, what is attractive about Frege’s sketch is its articulation of a way in which one might count as understanding an utterance (or inscription) of a particular word if one met two conditions: first, one knew that one had the ability to bring to consciousness the sense of a word—as content of stative or episodic cognition—and, so, since propositional knowledge is factive, one possessed the ability; second, the word itself was present to one’s consciousness—presumably, through perception, memory, or imagination. In effect, the proposal amounts to a combination of (UK) either with a dispositional form of (OK), involving appeal to an epistemically appropriate disposition to entertain expressed content, or with a dispositional form of (PK), involving appeal to a disposition to acquire knowledge that the word expresses that content. In effect, then, Frege’s proposal combined (UK) with a form of (RK).<sup>12</sup>

The main problem with Frege’s sketch, from the deflationary perspective, is that—as it stands—it requires completion with an account

of the ability to which it makes central appeal: the ability to bring to consciousness the sense of a word. Frege can be read as making appeal to either of two abilities. One is the ability to bring occurrently to mind—for instance, in judgement, or processive thinking—the sense, or content, expressed by a word. Plausibly, such an ability would have to co-occur with stative cognition, as when belief or knowledge gives rise to judgement. On that reading, Frege’s aim would be articulation of a model of the role of stative cognition in the determination of occurrent consciousness, rather than articulation of a deflationary model of state-understanding. On the second reading, the ability to which Frege appeals is the ability to enjoy stative cognition of the sense of a word. Although that reading of Frege’s sketch makes it relevant to the deflationary project, it offers the project limited support. First, it reveals that completion of the sketch would require the addition of, and so cannot do duty for, an account of state-understanding as directed onto the expression of content. Second, in revealing that requirement, it makes obvious, through comparison with the missing component, that what Frege here sketches is a model, not of *state*-understanding, but rather of a specific form of *ability*-understanding.<sup>13</sup>

The initial plausibility of a deflationary take on Frege’s sketch derives from the fact that two subjects might possess the same general ability-understanding of a word or sentence—so might both have the ability to understand (uses of) that word or sentence—and yet differ in that one, and not the other, is conscious of a particular occurrence of the word or sentence in an utterance or inscription. In certain circumstances, it would be natural to characterise the difference between the two subjects as a difference in understanding. And one might then seek to identify that difference with a difference in their respective enjoyment of state-understanding. However, a less demanding alternative characterisation of the difference between the two subjects is available. Although the two subjects differ, their difference is confined to a difference in ability-understanding: while both subjects ability-understand the *types* of word or sentence instanced in the utterance, only the instance-conscious subject ability-understands the *particular* instance or the *particular* utterance. Rather than furnishing a model on which the role of state-understanding is usurped by ability-understanding and perception, Frege’s sketch serves only to provide

grounds for distinguishing the generic ability to understand what is said by use of utterances of a particular type from the specific ability to understand what is said in a particular instance of that type.

The upshot to this point is that the proponent of a deflationary form of (UK) should aim to account for both the foreground trigger to state-understanding, and the background against which that trigger operates, without appeal to cognition of the expression of content. The standing risk that attends pursuit of that aim is that, in avoiding substantial commitment to cognition of the expression of content, the combined account of trigger and background will be insufficiently substantial to capture state-understanding and will, at best, capture only a form of ability-understanding.

We can get a better sense of the dangers in this area by considering a deflationary account that aims to appeal only to non-cognitive factors. On one salient interpretation, David Kaplan sketches a version of such a view in the following passage:

To use language we need a special relation (I hesitate to call it epistemological) to the linguistic representations. I think that this special relation simply is what is commonly called linguistic comprehension or understanding. And I tend to think that comprehension is primarily a matter of one's standing within a linguistic community. (Kaplan (2005): 998)<sup>14</sup>

The brevity of Kaplan's sketch means that it is open to multiple interpretations, even in context. Two of these, either of which may be the intended interpretation, can be set aside for present purposes. According to the first, Kaplan's aim is limited to gesturing towards an account of a form of ability-understanding—the power to 'use language'. According to the second, Kaplan's aim is to distinguish his preferred account of understanding, on which the cognition involved in understanding encompasses only representational features of linguistic vehicles, from an account that he finds in Bertrand Russell's work, on which the cognition involved in understanding encompasses—through acquaintance—the elements determined by those representational features. It is the third, and possibly unintended, interpretation that bears on the present discussion. According to the third interpretation, the

background required in order that a subject's apprehension of an utterance can suffice for state-understanding is limited to their standing within a linguistic community.

Even on the third interpretation, the bearing of Kaplan's suggestion on the status of deflationary accounts of understanding depends upon its further specification. In particular, it depends upon whether the specification of necessary conditions on standing within a linguistic community, and the further conditions for which that standing suffices, are themselves cognitive and, if cognitive, are themselves forms of state-understanding. However, once that requirement on deflationary bearing is made clear, it becomes obvious that any account able to meet it will be highly implausible. Indeed, it becomes clear that on its (perhaps unintended) third interpretation, Kaplan's proposal gains whatever plausibility it has from the fact that standing within a linguistic community typically both requires, and also makes available, a substantive repertoire of cognitive resources.

Consider, for example, a straightforward case wherein one's standing within a linguistic community might fail to make available cognition of the content expressed by an utterance, an ordinary English speaker's take on my inscription of sentence (21):

(21) Ptarmigans lour.

Although (21) is a piece of more or less ordinary English, many ordinary English speakers would fail to cognize either the meaning of, or what is said by the use of, this sentence. By any normal standards, such ordinary English speakers would fail to enjoy state-understanding of (my use of) (21). Now since ordinary English speakers often have access to extra-ordinary speakers, dictionaries, and the like, it is often possible for them to acquire the required cognition, and so to come to have state-understanding. Thus, such a speaker might be informed that (21) means *Arctic grouses appear dark and threatening*. In a somewhat attenuated sense, then, we might be willing, prior to their consultation of sources, to ascribe to them ability-understanding of (21) (or perhaps the ability to acquire ability-understanding). However, our willingness to ascribe to such speakers ability-understanding does nothing to undermine our unwillingness to ascribe to them state-understanding.

Alternatively, in some contexts, we might allow that appropriate engagement with competent speakers can put an ordinary English speaker



in a position to enjoy vicarious cognition of content expressed by (21). Compare the following sort of case, described by Gareth Evans:

A group of people are having a conversation in a pub, about a certain Louis of whom *S* has never heard before. *S* becomes interested and asks: ‘What did Louis do then?’ There seems to be no question but that *S* denotes a particular man and asks about him. Or on some subsequent occasion *S* may use the name to offer some new thought to one of the participants: ‘Louis was quite right to do that.’ Again he clearly denotes whoever was the subject of conversation in the pub. (Evans (1973): 6-7)

It is plausible, not only that *S* is in a position to *denote*, so talk about, Louis, but also that *S* is able to *think* about Louis, to cognize, for example, the content that Louis was quite right to undertake a particular course of action, at least while *S* is in conversational contact with autonomously competent speakers. And similar claims would be plausible had the conversation turned to the appearance of ptarmigans. The fact that standing in a linguistic community can, in appropriate circumstances, put one in a position vicariously to enjoy cognition, and the fact that it can furnish one with an attenuated form of ability-understanding, conspire to give the deflationary interpretation of Kaplan’s sketch a plausibility that it would otherwise lack. Once it is cleanly separated from the more plausible positions that surround it, its plausibility lapses.

The third option for a deflationist account of understanding involves the attempt to provide an account of understanding by appeal to cognitive factors not involving cognition of the expression of content. This is the option taken up in recent work by Ian Rumfitt. According to Rumfitt, understanding an utterance is:

... a second-order cognitive capacity: [in the case of uptake of assertion-like sayings] one who possesses it is in a capacity to gain new knowledge from old (Rumfitt (2005): 444).<sup>15</sup>

Specifically,

My understanding an utterance *u* as [assertion-like] saying that *P* puts me in a position

- (a) to know that *P*, in the event of my coming to know that *u* is true;
- (b) to know that *u* is true, in the event of my coming to know that *P*;
- (c) to know that *u* is false, in the event of my coming to know that not *P*; and
- (d) to know that not *P*, in the event of my coming to know that *u* is false.

Understanding a[n assertion-like] saying, in other words, allows knowledge to spread back and forth between the saying’s content and attributions of truth to it, and between that content’s negation and attributions of falsity to the saying (Rumfitt (2005): 443).<sup>16</sup>

Like Frege’s proposal, Rumfitt’s proposal combined (UK) with a form of (RK), according to which understanding an utterance is a matter of a specific type of sensitivity to the expressive relation between a particular utterance and its content. Rumfitt’s proposal differs from Frege’s in that the outputs of exercises of the background ability, or capacity, to which his proposal appeals do not—except in special cases<sup>17</sup>—involve the cognition of the expression of content by an utterance, i.e. first-order responsiveness to the fact that that content was expressed by an utterance. Rather, on Rumfitt’s proposal, the outputs of exercises of one’s understanding involve cognition—specifically, knowledge—either of the proposition expressed by an utterance (/the negation of that proposition) or of the proposition that the utterance is true (/false). The deflationary credentials of Rumfitt’s proposal derive, therefore, from the fact that the proposal makes no appeal to a distinctive form of first-order cognition of the expression of content.

Rumfitt’s proposal, and in particular the specific form of (RK) that it implements, is obviously superior to the other deflationary accounts that we have considered to this point. Proper assessment of the proposal demands comparison with its major competitors, (PK) and (OK). I shall pursue comparison of the three extant views by considering their

relative capacity to sub-serve explanation of the transmission of knowledge via testimony.

#### 4. TESTIMONY AND UNDERSTANDING

According to John Locke, speech is

... the common Conduit, whereby the Improvements of knowledge are conveyed from one Man, and one generation to another. (Locke (1689): III, xi.1).<sup>18</sup>

Gareth Evans argues for a connection between that view of the nature of linguistic capacity and the present topic. He writes:

... [I]t is a fundamental, though insufficiently recognized, point that communication is *essentially* a mode of the transmission of knowledge. In application to the case we are particularly interested in, this means that, if the speaker *S* has knowledge of *x* to the effect that it is *F*, and in consequence utters a sentence in which he refers to *x*, and says of it that it is *F*, and if his audience hears and understands the utterance, and accepts it as true (and there are no defeating conditions), then *A* himself thereby comes to know of *x* that it is *F*. (Evans (1982): 310-311)

He continues:

If we are prepared to take for granted our grasp of the semantical concepts which this principle employs, we can use it to yield epistemological dividends. But it is possible to use the principle the other way round, bringing our intuitions about *knowledge* to bear upon the explicitly semantical concepts—the concepts of reference, saying, and understanding—in the middle. We shall then be thinking of communication as a relation between speaker and hearer which can constitute a link in a chain of knowledge-transmission. We already show tacit appreciation of this point when, looking at the link from the hearer's point of view, we typically gloss understanding as knowing what the speaker is saying... (Evans (1982): 311).

Evans' talk of a *typical* gloss here suggests reticence in endorsing that gloss. But he in fact appears to assume both that the gloss is to be accepted and that it is to be understood in an especially demanding way. For the passage just quoted is taken to support the following:

The audience must proceed... to the *right* (i.e. intended) interpretation. And if he is to be credited with understanding, he must *know* that it is the right interpretation. (Evans (1982): 310).

Evans appears here to present a remarkably strong form of a model of understanding in the ballpark of (PK).<sup>19</sup> Where (PK) demands of one who understands only that they know what was said, Evans imposes the dual requirements that one who understands (i) 'proceeds to the right interpretation' and (ii) knows that the interpretation to which they proceed is the right one.<sup>20</sup> Michael Dummett presents a similar dual component model of the form of cognition required for communication in the following passage:

If language is to serve as a medium of communication, it is not sufficient that a sentence should in fact be true under the interpretation placed on it by one speaker just in case it is true under that placed on it by another; it is also necessary that both speakers should be aware of the fact. (Dummett (1978): 132)<sup>21</sup>

Reflection on the structure shared by Evans' and Dummett's proposals occasions four important questions. The first question—already raised by reflection on some of the models considered above—is, does state-understanding have a plurality of psychological components or attendants? We've already considered the suggestion that it does, via considering models on which the cognition involved in understanding itself depends upon other forms of cognition or perception. But Evans' proposal raises the question in an especially pressing form by indicating the possibility that state-understanding may involve more than one of our candidate models, (PK)-(RK). Given an affirmative answer to the first question, the second question is, how are the components or attendants of understanding ordered? The second question itself fragments into questions of constitutive, explanatory, and epistemological

order. Is one or another component partly constitutive of the other components? Does one or another component play a role in explaining the occurrence of the others? Does one or another component serve as epistemological ground for, or otherwise underwrite the epistemic standing of, the others? The third question—also presupposing an affirmative answer to the first—is, how, if at all, are the components or attendants of understanding integrated with one another? Are the components more or less independent occupants of the mind, or are they integrated elements in a larger structure? The fourth question concerns one rationale for an affirmative answer to the first, and offers one way of dealing with the second and third: are some, or all, of the tasks that Evans and Dummett distribute across multiple-components in fact carried out by a single component? For example, is the work performed, in their models, by a combination of the placing of a correct (/shared) interpretation together with knowledge that the interpretation is correct (/shared), really the work of a single element. Is the epistemic load that is borne, in their models, by knowledge that an interpretation of a speaker is correct (/shared) in fact shouldered by simple possession of knowledge that the speaker has said that such-and-such, or by some other single cognitive state or capacity? This is not the forum for detailed pursuit of these important questions, but they will play some role in shaping comparative assessment of our candidate models. For present purposes, we will view Evans' argument sketch as intended to support (PK), rather than the putatively more demanding model that he in fact proposes, on the assumption that (PK) is able to carry the epistemic load of his mixed model.

Returning to Evans' argument sketch, its first step is the remarkably strong claim that 'communication is *essentially* a mode of the transmission of knowledge' (Evans (1982): 310). That step might be questioned on a variety of grounds. For instance, it might be argued that communication can have taken place where only belief comes to be shared by speaker and audience; and it might be argued that the most basic function of linguistic communication is the spread of affection, rather than cognition. However, the initial stage of Evans' argument appears to depend only on a slightly weaker claim: that linguistic communication *can*, in some circumstances, be a mode of—so can suffice for—the transmission of knowledge. The second step is then required

to be that hearing, understanding, and responding appropriately to what one hears and understands—for instance, by accepting what is asserted—can suffice, in the same circumstances, for communication and, hence, for the transmission of knowledge.

It is important that, in assessing the second step of Evans' argument, one focuses initially on cases in which knowledge *is* transmitted via linguistic communication, and considers, in those cases, the functional importance of understanding, rather than beginning with the functional elements that Evans lists—i.e. the speaker saying *p* as a consequence of knowing *p*, the audience hearing, understanding, and accepting as true the speaker's utterance, and there being no defeating conditions. For otherwise, Evans' claim that the combination of functional elements that he lists suffices for the transmission of knowledge is liable to be crowded out by a range of putative counterexamples. I shall mention three types of counterexample, all forms of what might be called epistemic cul-de-sacs.<sup>22</sup>

First, the only requirement that Evans imposes on the connection between the speaker's knowledge and their utterance is that the speaker says *p* 'as a consequence' of knowing *p*.<sup>23</sup> But if we allow for sufficiently deviant relations of consequence-so that, for instance, the speaker intends to speak falsely, but fulfilment of their intention is disrupted by their knowledge and they accidentally give voice to a proposition' that they also know—then it is plausible that knowledge could not thereby be transmitted, at least via what was, from that point on, a normal route.

Second, and related, someone might speak as a normal consequence of their knowledge, but be in such danger of speaking falsely, that—due to safety or reliability conditions on knowledge—the audience could not acquire knowledge on the basis of their acceptance of what the speaker says. For instance, consider Sal, a non-native English speaker who knows that it is raining, and uses English to say so, while—since the weather is closely approaching snow—it might very easily have been snowing rather than raining. We can suppose that Sal is sufficiently sensitive to weather conditions that there is little danger that, had it been snowing, Sal would anyway have believed that it was raining. The nearby possibility of snow is therefore no bar to Sal's knowing that it is raining. However, Sal's non-native competence with English

is in certain respects very fragile. In particular, Sal would incorrectly have applied the word ‘rain’ to the sort of snow that is in great danger of occurring. In that case, it is plausible that one could not acquire knowledge from Sal’s weather report.

Third, someone might be barred from transmitting knowledge to another by the factiveness of knowledge. For instance, Val knows that Sal’s fly is open and Sal does not know that his fly is open. Since it is impossible for Sal to know that Sal’s fly is open and Sal does not know that his fly is open, Val and Sal can meet Evans’ conditions while Sal fails to acquire Val’s knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

It may be that the cases just presented are merely putative counterexamples to the sufficiency of Evans’ conditions. In particular, it may be that all the cases involve one or another type of defeating condition. And, related to that possibility, it may be that those cases that survive confrontation with Evans’ ‘no defeating conditions’ condition can be addressed through various additions to, or modulations of, Evans’ conditions. However, there is no immediate cause for optimism on either count. That is so especially if one requires that the ‘no defeating conditions’ condition, and any amendments to Evans’ other conditions, not beg the question in favour of knowledge transmission in the way that they, and their interconnections, are specified. And absent such a requirement, the safest course is surely to focus attention on the function of elements meeting Evans’ conditions in cases where knowledge is transmitted. With respect to those cases the question will be, does knowledge transmission depend upon the audience’s cognition of the speakers’ utterance being a piece of propositional knowledge concerning what the speaker said?

However, we are not yet out of the woods. For there may be cases in which an audience comes to know what a speaker knows, on the basis of cognition targeted on the speaker’s utterance, but where ambient circumstances conspire to shoulder an abnormal epistemological load. Just as there may be epistemic cul-de-sacs of the sort we have just considered, it may be that there are counter-cul-de-sacs—what might be called epistemic thoroughfares.<sup>25</sup> For one sort of case, a speaker who knows that they can speak English might enable an audience to know that the speaker can speak English by uttering the English sentence ‘I can speak English’. Assuming that the audience can recognize that the

production of those words indicates the speaker’s possession of facility with English, the audience might come to know on that basis that the speaker can speak English, without depending on understanding and acceptance of what the speaker has said. Another sort of case is one involving features that might otherwise make for epistemic cul-de-sacs that also involves epistemically operative compensating factors. For instance, Sal’s fragile competence with the English sentence ‘It’s raining’, which was responsible for the second type of cul-de-sac considered above, might be compensated by Val’s preparedness to correct Sal if his weather reports should go awry. In that case, it might be argued that one can come to know from Sal that it is raining even in cases where he might easily have misreported, due to Val’s disposition to intervene.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty this makes for Evans’ argument sketch is that, absent further controls, pieces of audience cognition of what a speaker has said that do not meet operative standards on knowledge may yet be subject to compensation in such a way that the epistemic channel as a whole enables the audience to acquire knowledge from what the speaker has said. For instance, Val utters the sentence ‘It’s snowing’ in order to say that it’s snowing. Sal takes it that what Val has said is that either it’s morning and it’s snowing or it’s afternoon and it’s raining. If we suppose that Val spoke so close to noon that there was significant danger of Sal taking it, from what he took Val to have said together with the time, that it’s raining, then we might take it that, in those circumstances, Sal can’t acquire from Val knowledge that it is snowing. However, Mal is also present. Mal knows about Sal’s propensity to make this type of mistake about utterances of ‘It’s raining’, and is prepared to correct him in those cases—the afternoon cases—where it is liable to lead Sal astray. If Sal can acquire knowledge from Val in those circumstances, then it would appear to be possible for an audience to acquire knowledge that a speaker possesses, on the basis of the speaker’s utterance, but where the prevailing conditions allow this to take place despite the audience’s ignorance of what the speaker said.

The type of case we should focus on, then, in assessing Evans’ argument sketch, is one with the following properties. Such cases involve knowledge transmission, from a speaker to an audience, via the speaker’s giving verbal expression to their knowledge and the audience’s exploiting that verbal expression in order to partake in the

speaker's knowledge. Moreover, they are cases in which the epistemic status of the output of transmission—the audience's acquisition of knowledge—is positively dependent only upon the status of the individual components of the testimonial chain that Evans' mentions and their proper integration, and not (or only negatively) upon extrinsic factors of a sort that might make for converse-cul-de-sacs.<sup>27</sup> Evans' claim can then be taken to be that, in cases of that sort, the audience's exploitation of the speaker's verbal expression of their knowledge is required to go via propositional knowledge of what the speaker has said.

So construed, Evans' claim has considerable plausibility. Suppose that we were to conceive of the function of the cognition that underwrites an audience's exploitation of the speaker's utterance as supplying access to an essential *lemma* in an argumentative justification for the output of transmission. In that case, it is very plausible that, were the cognition to have a lesser epistemic status than propositional knowledge, then it would be bound to leech from the epistemic status of the output, to drag the output down to (at best) its own epistemic level. For reflection on cases—prominently, Gettier-style cases—suggests that argumentatively justified knowledge is subject, not only to a no *false* lemmas condition, but also to a no *unknown* lemmas condition. For related reasons, a number of theorists have found plausible that a fact or true proposition can serve as a reason for one, or can serve for one as evidence, just in case it is the object of propositional knowledge.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore plausible that if an audience's understanding of an utterance provides them with access to a lemma, a factual reason, or evidence that then plays an essential role in their acquisition of knowledge from a speaker, then their understanding will take the form of propositional knowledge.

##### 5. TESTIMONY AND MODELS OF UNDERSTANDING

Suppose that that conditional is true. The assessment of Evans' argument sketch then turns on the question whether the function of utterance understanding, in sustaining the epistemic transactions at issue, is that of supplying access to a lemma in an argumentative justification. Grounds for considering a negative answer to the latter question

might be found from a number of sources. For present purposes, we will restrict attention to those arising from our competitor models of utterance understanding, (OK) and (RK).

One way of viewing the force of Evans' argument sketch in supporting adoption of (PK) is the following. In order for knowledge to be transmitted, via the channel exploited in the target range of cases, the speaker must give expression to some of their knowledge. In particular, in order to transmit their knowledge that such-and-such, they must say that such-and-such. Moreover, and crucially, the *audience's* occupancy of particular cognitive or epistemic states must determine that the speaker has done this, that they have said that such-and-such. For otherwise, it will be consistent with the audience's cognitive and epistemic state that the speaker did not say that such-and-such, and that would appear to undermine the possibility that the audience's occupancy of that state could underwrite the preservation, between speaker and audience, of cognitive or epistemic standing that determined other facts, the knowledge that the speaker sought to transmit. Now, since propositional knowledge is factive, an audience that knows that the speaker has said that such-and-such is in a cognitive or epistemic state that determines that the speaker has said that such-and-such. Hence, if understanding is a form of propositional knowledge, the audience's understanding can determine the required facts concerning what the speaker has said, and so play its role in facilitating the transmission of other factive cognitive or epistemic standings. However, if other cognitive or epistemic states are able similarly to determine the facts about what a speaker has said, then Evans' argument sketch will support equally models that identify understanding with those other cognitive or epistemic states.

How, if at all, could models other than (PK) identify understanding with fact-determining cognitive or epistemic states? Consider, first, a sketch model of some cases of knowledge of logical consequence. A basic requirement on any such model is that knowledge of the obtaining of a relation of consequence should determine that the relation of consequence obtains. The view that all cases of cognition of logical consequence involve propositional knowledge that a particular consequence relation obtains is able to meet that requirement.<sup>29</sup> However, another model that also appears able to meet the requirement is the

following. Knowledge of cases of consequence can involve a second-order capacity to gain new knowledge from old, so that, for example, if one were to come to know that the premises are true, one would then be in a position to know that the conclusion is true, and if one were to come to know that the conclusion is false, one would then be in a position to know that some of the premises are false. Since the projected second-order capacity is a capacity potentially to acquire propositional knowledge, and since such knowledge is factive, the capacity can only be possessed if the facts pattern in accord with the capacity. Minimally, then, possession of the capacity determines that the distributions of truth-values amongst premises and conclusion will pattern in accord with the potential outputs of the capacity. Given modest additional assumptions concerning requirements on possession of such a capacity, and its modal profile—for instance, that possession of the capacity is independent of, and so cannot be undermined, by any particular way for premises or conclusion to attain truth-values—it is at least plausible that possession of the capacity determines more, namely that a relation of consequence obtains between premises and conclusion. If that is right, then a model of cognition of logical consequence as a second-order capacity is on a par with a model of such cognition as a form of propositional knowledge in its ability to underwrite determination, by cognition or epistemic standing, of the facts about consequence.

Rumfitt's version of (RK) takes a similar approach to the determination of facts about what is said. Recall that, like the model of cognition of consequence that we have just considered, (RK) views understanding as a second-order capacity to gain new knowledge from old. In part, where the utterance was used to say  $p$ , the capacity is to know  $p$  in the event of coming to know that the utterance is true. Insofar as Evans' argument sketch carries conviction, it provides grounds for holding that possession of the required capacity requires, and so determines, that the utterance was used to say  $p$ . Hence, there is some reason to think that Evans' sketch does not, as it stands, favour (PK) over (RK).

Consider, second, a sketch model of the role of broadly objectual perception in the acquisition of propositional knowledge. In appropriate circumstances, seeing an object, and perhaps its particular features, can put suitably equipped subjects in a position to know that the object

is thus-and-so. For instance, subjects who possess the concept *chair*, together with an ability to use that concept in response to what they see in a way that meets appropriate epistemic standards, can be put in a position to know that a particular demonstrable object is a chair by seeing it in appropriate circumstances. Like the class of cases in which knowledge is acquired partly on the basis of what a knowledgeable speaker has said, the class of cases in which knowledge is acquired partly on the basis of what one sees is unlikely to form a well-behaved object of epistemological inquiry. In particular, more or less work in sustaining one's capacity to acquire knowledge on the basis of what one sees is liable to be done by features of the surrounding circumstances, features that may or may not then be objects of perception. However, as in the case of knowledge acquired from what a speaker says, it is plausible that there is a range of more or less central cases in which knowledge is acquired on the basis of what one sees and where seeing is only able to play its role in facilitating the acquisition of knowledge because it is itself subject to appropriate epistemic standards. In particular, it is plausible that there are cases where one is only able to acquire knowledge on the basis of what one sees because one's seeing, as it occurs in those cases, determines the fact—or perhaps the present existence or occurrence of some components of the fact—that one comes thereby to know. If that is right, then we have a second model on which a psychological state or occurrence that is not a state of propositional knowledge is yet able to do (some or all of) the same work as knowledge in determining, for the subject, the layout of the subject's environment.

(OK) takes a similar approach to the determination of facts about what is said. It views understanding an utterance as an attitude directed immediately onto the content expressed by the utterance. For instance, where the utterance was used to say  $p$ , (OK) views understanding that utterance as a matter of bearing its proprietary attitude to  $p$ . Moreover, (OK) has it that the attitude to which it appeals is subject to broadly epistemic conditions. Merely entertaining a content that happens to have been expressed by an utterance would not suffice for understanding the utterance. And neither would it suffice to have been caused so to entertain the content through experience of the utterance. Rather, the entertaining of content must be both triggered

by, and suitably responsive to, the content's expression by the utterance. To a first approximation—an approximation that we will have reason in the remainder to return to—(OK) takes it that the attitude to which it appeals is subject to the following condition: if someone is suitably equipped—if they have the required concepts and applicational abilities—and are in otherwise appropriate circumstances, then their coming to bear the attitude to the content  $p$  would put them in a position to know that a speaker has said  $p$ . Then, since the factiveness of propositional knowledge transmits to the state of being in a position to know, it also transmits to the attitude to which (OK) appeals. One cannot bear the attitude to the content  $p$  except in response to someone having given expression to  $p$ . Hence, there is some reason to think that Evans' sketch does not, as it stands, favour (PK) over (OK).

The epistemological proximity of the three candidate models might lead one to think that, if any of the models applies to a subject, then all three models are liable to apply. For example, Rumfitt's version of (RK) appears to allow space, not only for the spread of knowledge, but also for the spread of suppositional commitment.<sup>30</sup> In that case, possession of the second-order capacity that it identifies with understanding would put one in a position to determine patterns of commitment transmission across its left- and right-hand sides. And reflection on the constraints imposed upon that pattern by one's understanding—for instance, where  $u$  was used to say  $p$ , that supposing that  $u$  is true commits one to also supposing  $p$ , and that supposing  $p$  false commits one to also supposing that  $u$  is false—might put one in a position to attain propositional knowledge that the target utterance was used to say  $p$ . Hence, those who meet the conditions imposed by (RK) might also be in a position to meet the requirements of (PK). Alternatively, propositional knowledge that an utterance was used to say  $p$  would typically put its possessor in a position to attain propositional knowledge of a bi-conditional—where 'p' is a denominalized form of ' $p$ ', knowledge that  $u$  is true iff  $p$ —and thence to attain a capacity to spread knowledge (or suppositional commitment) across the bi-conditional. Hence, typical subjects of (PK) might also be in a position to become subject to the conditions of (RK). However, even if that were correct, and even if something similar held with respect to (OK), it would not follow that satisfaction of conditions in one of the models guarantees satisfaction

of conditions in the other models. And even if that were somehow guaranteed, the question would remain as to the relative priority of the three models, whether one of the models captures the most basic form of take on what is said, a take that serves to underwrite conditions on the applicability of the other models. For example, it is consistent with the claim that all normal subjects of visual experience thereby acquire propositional knowledge about their surroundings that their visual experience serves to explain their knowledge, rather than being constituted by that knowledge. Similarly, it is consistent with the claim that all normal subjects of understanding thereby acquire propositional knowledge, or an epistemic capacity like that detailed in (RK), that their understanding serves to explain their knowledge or capacity, rather than being constituted by it.<sup>31</sup>

From the present, lofty vantage point, the three models appear able—indeed, equally able—to cope with the needs of testimonial knowledge transmission. However, on closer examination, the complexion of the issue changes and a variety of specific strengths and weaknesses emerge. I shall begin with (RK) before turning to (PK) and then (OK).

## 6. TESTIMONY AND (RK)

The second-order capacity that Rumfitt's version of (RK) identifies with understanding is surely an important accompaniment of many cases of understanding able to sub-serve the transmission of knowledge from speaker to audience. It is of critical importance, in many such transactions, that coming to know that an utterance is true, or was used to express something that is true, can make one know, or can put one in a position to know, the expressed truth. The central question, to reiterate, concerns the extent to which that capacity is more fundamental than other forms of cognition associated with understanding. For present purposes, we can pursue the question in the following form: could the second-order capacity be the unique—or even the first—point of a rational subject's normal engagement with expressed content? I shall provide reason for thinking that it could not.

The central difference between (RK) and the other two models—(PK) and (OK)—is that (RK) makes no immediate demands on first-order stative cognition. To a good first approximation, the crucial dif-

ference between first- and second-order stative cognition is that only the former has an immediate bearing on occurrent awareness, including the capacity to entertain, and to make judgments about, expressed content. In order for second-order stative cognition to determine such occurrent awareness, it must first issue in first-order stative cognition. According to (RK), then, a subject can understand someone's saying *p* in the absence of awareness of the saying or its content—in the absence, that is, of a capacity immediately to entertain, or to judge competently about, its content. First-order cognition only emerges, if it emerges at all, where the subject acquires knowledge of, or takes a cognitive stand concerning, either the truth of the utterance or the content the utterance was in fact used to express. In those conditions, and only in those conditions, the subject's first-order cognition—their knowledge, or cognitive stand—imposes upon them further knowledge, or commitments, regarding, respectively, the content that the utterance was used to express or the truth of the utterance. I shall argue that that feature means, not only that (RK) is false to the phenomenology of understanding, but also that it is incompatible with central features of the normal epistemological situation of those who might benefit from testimony.

Consider the normal situation of a subject who seeks to acquire knowledge from what they have been told. As Evans makes plain in his attempt to articulate the elements that sustain knowledge acquisition in such cases, the subject is typically required—if they are to acquire the knowledge offered to them by the speaker, rather than for example a view about the speaker—to accept as true either what the speaker says or their utterance. There are then two cases to consider: the normal case, wherein the subject has, at most, some indecisive grounds for trusting the speaker independently of the grounds that the speaker makes available through giving expression to knowledge in their possession; and an abnormal case, wherein the subject has independent and yet decisive grounds for taking it that, whatever the speaker said, they spoke truly. How should we, and indeed the subject, conceive of the subject's acceptance of what has been said in the two sorts of cases? In the abnormal case, since the subject has decisive, independent grounds for accepting whatever the speaker says to them, it is plausible that any awareness that the subject has of what the speaker

has said to them in advance of their accepting it as true is irrelevant to the transaction. In that case, acceptance and cognition of content can plausibly be merged into acquisition of knowledge that the speaker's utterance is true and, thence, via (RK), knowledge of the proposition expressed by use of the utterance. However, in the normal case, the subject is forced to accept as true the speaker's utterance in advance of enjoying any awareness of the content the utterance was used to express, and with at best indecisive grounds for thinking that—whatever that content is—it is true. That is surely false to the ordinary phenomenology of communicative transaction: we are ordinarily aware of what we are invited to accept in advance of accepting it. That is, we are ordinarily in a position competently to entertain, or to make judgments about, the content we are invited to accept. And it is surely not an adequate account of rational acceptance of what one is told.<sup>32</sup> The point is not—or not only—that awareness of what a speaker says can put one into contact with reasons for accepting what they have said. Rather, the point is that awareness of what a speaker says furnishes access to what one will immediately become committed to if one accepts what they say. And it is surely a minimal requirement on rational acceptance of presented information that—failing possession of independent grounds for acceptance—it involves prior cognizance of what one is thereby accepting.

A perceptual analogy will perhaps help to illustrate the situation. In the normal case, perceptual experience is, or sustains, awareness of one's surroundings. On the basis of how things appear to one, one forms various beliefs and one comes to accept various propositions about how things are or how they appear. Now suppose that one was the unhappy subject of a form of blind-sight with the following characteristics. One is aware that one is undergoing a series of episodes in which one's visual machinery operates in response to retinal stimulation. Each such response offers itself to one as an opportunity either to accept or to reject its deliverance: on accepting what is delivered by an episode, one acquires cognition that such-and-such is the case; on rejecting, one acquires cognition that such-and-such is not the case. That is all; one has no awareness of the content one will cognize on taking a stand in response to particular episodes. Again, there are two cases to consider: first, a case wherein one has independent and de-



cisive grounds for trusting a particular range of such episodes; and, second, a case wherein one lacks such grounds. While we might allow that rational acceptance is possible in the first sort of case, it is surely out of the question that it is possible in the second sort of case. Again, the point is not—or not only—that awareness of what one experiences can put one into contact with grounds for accepting that things are as they appear. Rather, the point is that—except in the abnormal circumstance in which one has grounds for claiming infallibility—rational acceptance of presented information, here as elsewhere, depends upon prior awareness of what one is invited to accept.

An attempt might be made to salvage (RK) by appeal to what is arguably a common feature of communicative transactions, the putative fact that the audience's stance is rarely neutral with respect to what they have been told. According to Dummett, when someone tells me something,

I go through no process of reasoning, however swift, to arrive at the conclusion that he has spoken aright: my understanding of his utterance and my acceptance of his assertion are one. (Dummett (1993bb): 419).

If Dummett's description was adequate, not only to the psychology, but also to the epistemology, of communication, then the pattern it indicates might provide (RK) with partial immunity from the present charge. For the concurrence of (RK)-understanding and acceptance would deliver first-order cognition of expressed content: a belief or acceptance with that content. And the commonality of such concurrence would then help assuage the concern that (RK) is false to ordinary phenomenology. However, without supplementation, it does nothing to abrogate (RK)'s recently explained epistemological failings.

For it to bear on the epistemology of communication, Dummett's description would have to go beyond pointing to the typical automaticity of acceptance. In addition, it would have to underwrite the rationality of automatic acceptance. And that requirement means that, whatever the independent standing of Dummett's description, it sits uncomfortably with (RK).

The central problem with (RK) is that it makes one's first-order cognition of what was said in an utterance depend upon one's taking a

particular stand concerning the subject matter of what was said, either accepting or rejecting that the subject matter is as it is said to be in the utterance. One way of seeing the oddity of this consequence of (RK) is by considering a case where one already knows that which one is being told. Suppose, for instance, that one knew  $p$ , and that this knowledge was operative in a given situation so that, *ceteris paribus*, one would reject as illusory perceptual appearances as of  $p$ 's not being the case. Still, according to (RK), in order to cognize what was said by someone who said  $p$  not to be the case, one would either have to accept or reject the truth of their utterance. But notice that the cognitive effect of rejection would be nugatory: one already knew  $p$ . Indeed, according to (RK), because one knew  $p$ , one thereby knew that the utterance was false, so rejection was forced. But if we assume that one knew at least one proposition in addition to  $p$ , then knowing that the utterance was false would not put one in a position to know which piece of one's knowledge dictated its falsehood. So, one would be no better placed to cognize the content expressed in the utterance. Alternatively, the effect of acceptance would be that, despite one's knowing  $p$ , one nevertheless accepted, for however short a time, *not-p*. The consequence that one cannot get into a position to reject claims that are inconsistent with what one knows or believes without first running a dogleg through acceptance of those claims is no happier here than would be an analogous requirement in perceptual epistemology.<sup>33</sup>

In effect, (RK) has a tendency to force one to distinguish between the a-rational type of acceptance that it claims is involved in coming to enjoy first-order cognition of what is said and the rational species involved in taking a stand on what one thereby comes to cognize. Rather than understanding, as cognition of what is said, providing invitations to commitment which one may rationally—albeit automatically—accept or reject, on (RK) one's understanding combines with a-rational acceptance in order to provide commitments which one may rationally retain or discard. When combined with the typical automaticity of acceptance, the upshot is a model on which the most immediate deliverance of a subject's understanding is their taking a stand on the subject matter of what is said. And that is surely not how understanding functions to provide us with information about the world. As John McDowell puts the point,

Now if a standing in the space of reasons with respect to a fact is acquired in hearing and understanding a remark, the standing is surely a mediated one. It is not as if the fact itself directly forces itself on the hearer; his rational standing with respect to it surely depends on (at least) his hearing and understanding what his informant says, and this dependence is rational, not merely causal. (McDowell (1994): 417)

McDowell's point is that, although the epistemic standing one can acquire through hearing and understanding a remark can encompass a remarked fact, as it will do in many cases in which one automatically accepts what one is told, one's acceptance is nonetheless a rational response to what one immediately takes in through hearing and understanding. And that requires that one can take something in through hearing and understanding whilst remaining neutral about its alethic status.<sup>34</sup> If that is right, then Dummett's observation concerning the automaticity of acceptance offers no refuge to (RK). What is wanted is precisely what (RK) refuses to offer, a form of first-order cognition that can serve as neutral input to rational acceptance or rejection. I conclude that the claim that (RK) models our most fundamental engagement with what is said should not be accepted.

## 7. TESTIMONY AND (PK)

The next model on the agenda is (PK), according to which understanding an utterance is a matter of knowing what was said in that utterance. Returning to Evans' description, we have that understanding a remark provides the immediate basis for accepting or rejecting what was said in the remark. And the argument that we developed on the basis of Evans' sketch made plausible that the basis for acceptance must itself meet epistemic conditions if acceptance on that basis is to sub-serve the transmission of knowledge. Obviously enough, (PK) sustains the requirement that the basis for acceptance meets epistemic conditions. However, if knowledge of what has been said is to play its allotted role in underwriting the transmission of knowledge via acceptance, it has to provide an appropriate cognitive interface between a speaker's saying what they do and the audience accepting what the speaker says

and so acquiring knowledge from them. The two questions on which assessment of (PK) turns concern its capacity to provide such an interface: first, an analogue of our question for (RK), could knowledge of what has been said be the unique—or even the first—point of a rational subject's normal engagement with expressed content?; second, could knowledge of what has been said serve as the immediate basis for acceptance, or rejection, of what has been said?

There is some temptation to give the first question a fast, negative answer. For the claim that the first point at which contingent information about the external world might impact on a subject is their coming to know that information is extremely implausible, suggesting as it does that there is no way in which they know it. There may be cases in which we have propositional knowledge without there being any way in which we have that knowledge: perhaps some knowledge about one's own mind or action and some *a priori* knowledge is like that. But such cases are surely special, not least in that they appear not to concern contingent information about that which is independent of their possessor. So, if the claim that propositional knowledge of what has been said might be the sole point of engagement with the expression of content amounts to the claim that there is no prior source, or specifiable channel, through which that engagement emerged, then it is liable to be given short shrift.

However, that line is too quick. Very often, we attain propositional knowledge of some fact without prior awareness of that fact, as when we exploit a combination of perception and expertise in order to acquire propositional knowledge as to the kind of thing with which we are presented. For instance, one's visual experience of a flash of colour on a bird's plumage might combine with one's expertise in the categorisation of birds in order to allow one to know that it is a red-throated loon. Similarly, then, a defence of (PK) can be mounted by appeal to the claim that knowledge of what is said is the upshot of a combination of perception—say, perception of an utterance or its production, as on (UK)—and expertise, an expert capacity to come to know what was said by the use of utterances of specific types, in specific circumstances. There is no need, on such a view, to deny that there is a way in which one comes to have such propositional knowledge, or to require that the only route is one that goes via prior cognitive engagement with the

expression of content. It would obviously take extended discussion in order properly to assess the prospects of such an account of knowledge of what is said; but they do not appear especially bleak.

By contrast with the first question, the second is liable to invite a quick, affirmative answer. For it is apt to appear obvious that knowing what a speaker has said puts one in the best possible position to accept or reject what they have said. Again, however, it seems to me that the quick answer is too quick. The basic difficulty facing (PK) here is that the direct object of propositional knowledge of what is said is different from the direct object of acceptance. To a good first approximation, knowing what a speaker has said is an unspecified form of knowing with an object picked out by a complementizer phrase. It is a matter of knowing that such-and-such, where such-and-such is a correct and appropriate answer to the question, what did the speaker say? For instance, where Flo said that smoking is addictive, one's knowing what Flo said is one's knowing that Flo said that smoking is addictive (and not one's knowing that smoking is addictive). By contrast, accepting what a speaker has said is an unspecified form of knowing with an object picked out by a nominal phrase. It is a matter of accepting that such-and-such, where such-and-such is identical with (NP) what—that which—the speaker said. For instance, where Flo said that smoking is addictive, one's accepting what Flo said is one's accepting that smoking is addictive (and not one's accepting that Flo said that smoking is addictive). It is therefore a pressing question for the proponent of (PK) how ordinary speakers make the transition from what they take in through understanding—propositional knowledge of what is said—to cognition of what they are invited on that basis to accept.

There are really two challenges here: the proponent of (PK) must provide means by which the required transition can be effected and also explain how the epistemic standing of understanding is transmitted so that acceptance can be a means of securing knowledge. The most natural way of attempting to deliver the required result is by viewing the transition as a matter of knowledge- (or epistemic standing-) preserving inference. Then the articulation of the required inference would have to go via principles able to mediate between the proposition known through understanding—an instance of the proposition-schema that *S* has said *p*—and the proposition accepted on that basis—

an instance of *p*. And the most natural principles able to mediate that transition are what I shall call *saying-equivalence* and *propositional-equivalence* (where '*p*' is instanced by canonical nominal specifications of propositions and '*p*' by the denominalized sentential analogues of those specifications):

(Saying-equivalence)  $S$  said *p* if and only if what *S* said = *p*

(Propositional-equivalence) *p* is true if and only if *p*

On the basis of these principles, the following transition can be effected:

- (P1) *A* knows that *S* said *p* [Via understanding, according to (PK)]
- (P2) *A* knows that what *S* said = *p* [From P1, *saying-equivalence*]
- (P3) *A* accepts that what *S* said is true [Initial application of acceptance]
- (P4) *A* accepts that *p* is true [P2, P3, substitution of identicals]
- (P5) *A* accepts that *p* [P4, *propositional-equivalence*]<sup>35</sup>

If that is the way that the proponent of (PK) seeks to ensure the transition from understanding to an appropriate target for acceptance, then they are required to view the two principles, *saying-equivalence* and *propositional-equivalence*, as cognized by *A* with appropriate epistemic standing—that is, they must be objects of *A*'s knowledge or be determined by *A*'s second-order capacity to preserve knowledge across their bi-conditionals—and as exploited by *A* in the course of coming to accept (some of) what they take in through understanding. The point isn't, of course, that *A* must consciously run through the steps of the proposed transition; rather, it is that interventions on the epistemic standing for *A* of steps in the transition must potentially have impact upon the epistemic standing for *A* of accepting the output.

There are two potential sources of concern with the proposed account, the first of which may be only apparent. The first source of concern is due to the immediate target of acceptance on the present account: as with (RK), there is a risk that the present account requires that *A* accepts that what a speaker has said is true (at P3) in advance of appropriately cognizing the proposition to which they are thereby com-

mitted (at P5), that which the speaker has said. Although that result would be troubling, I think that a response is available. The proponent of (PK) can appeal to a plausible principle to the effect that cognition that a speaker has said  $p$  requires cognition of  $p$ , on the grounds that canonical thinking about a particular way of thinking—e.g.,  $p$ —requires that one’s cognition instances that way of thinking.<sup>36</sup> In that case,  $A$ ’s knowledge that  $S$  said  $p$  would require  $A$  to cognize  $p$  and therefore, to that extent, to enjoy prior awareness of what they were accepting in accepting that what was said is true. The remainder of the derivation would then be required, not to furnish awareness of what is expressed by  $p$ , but rather to ensure that that awareness is appropriately linked with  $A$ ’s knowledge that  $S$  said  $p$  so that it can share in the epistemic credentials of that cognition. It may be useful here to compare the situation of Sal, who knows that Val knows  $p$ . If Sal also knows that knowledge is factive, then he can exploit that knowledge to come to know  $p$ . Alternatively, since knowing that someone knows  $p$  requires cognizing  $p$ , Sal might simply accept what he thereby cognizes. Only in the former case would the output amount to knowledge of  $p$ ; in the latter, Sal’s acceptance of  $p$  would not be dependent in the right way on the available grounds and so would not amount to knowledge. The case is similar with respect to what is said. Absent the later steps in the proposed derivation, acceptance of  $p$  would not amount to epistemologically appropriate acceptance of what was said.

The second source of concern targets the role of the principles in the account. The concern is, not that the required principles are false, but rather that it is implausible to suppose that an audience’s capacity to exploit their understanding in order to acquire knowledge depends upon their acknowledging those principles. It seems to me plausible that one might understand an utterance and on that basis acquire knowledge from its producer without exploiting the principles whether or not one knew them, while failing to know the principles, while failing to believe the principles, and even while lacking the conceptual abilities required to cognize the principles. I shall focus here on the apparent possibility of acquiring knowledge from testimony while failing to know, or believe, the principles.

The first point to note is that, unless conforming to (PK)—knowing what a speaker has said—suffices for knowledge of the required prin-

ciples, conforming to (PK) fails to suffice for appropriate acceptance of what is said. In that case, it would be possible, according to (PK), to understand an utterance without being in a position knowledgeably to accept what was said in that utterance. That result would clearly count against (PK), so I shall begin with it.

It is surely plausible that many, if not most, people who are capable of knowing what someone has said are capable of deriving from that knowledge an identification of what was said, via knowledge of something like *saying-equivalence*, and then deriving from that, via something like *propositional-equivalence*, knowledge of what would be the case if what was said was true. But the question at issue is whether knowing what someone has said *suffices* for those capacities. And it seems to me that the answer is that it does not.

Comparison with Sal is again apposite. Although Sal knows that Val knows  $p$ , and although Sal would once have been inclined to infer to  $p$  on that basis, his inclination has been tempered by philosophical reflection. In particular, Sal holds the following: (i) that knowledge is factive only if all those who possess the concept of knowledge treat it as factive; (ii) that some people who appear to possess the concept of knowledge admit cases, with some notable feature, NF, where the transition from ‘ $S$  knows  $p$ ’ to ‘ $p$ ’ fails to preserve truth; (iii) that no decisive argument is available that shows that the people who reject factiveness in some cases do not possess the concept of knowledge; (iv) the present case, Val’s knowing  $p$ , appears to possess the notable feature, NF. Because of this, Sal is unable to exploit the factiveness of knowledge in order to arrive at knowledge of  $p$  even if he is willing to set aside what he takes to be his reasonable reluctance.

Now we can assume that Sal is willing in the vast majority of cases—cases where NF is absent—to reason in accordance with the factiveness of knowledge, and that his views about knowledge are otherwise impeccable. So there seem to be no adequate grounds on which to deny that Sal is sufficiently competent with the concept of knowledge to know that Val knows  $p$ . His reluctance to reason in accord with the factiveness of knowledge is due, not to incomprehension, but rather to his endorsement of the putative reasons against the factiveness of knowledge with which he has been presented.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the case does not require that Sal’s ability to think with the concept of knowledge is fully

autonomous. It is consistent with the case that Sal's ability is dependent on his being suitably connected with more expert thinkers. If we add that Sal would be prepared to defer to the experts—who, we may suppose, endorse factiveness—then it is hard to see what even apparent grounds remain for denying that he knows that Val knows *p*. It follows that knowing that someone knows *p* does not suffice for knowing, or for being in a position to know, *p*.

Similar cases can be constructed with respect to the two target principles. I shall focus here upon *propositional-equivalence*. Consider, for example, Val, who knows that Sal said *p*. Although Sal believes that *propositional-equivalence* is generally correct (she may think that it is correct when construed generically), she believes that it does not hold universally. She reasons as follows. (i) She believes that the only ground for endorsing the universal applicability of either direction of the equivalence is the universal applicability of the bi-conditional. (ii) She believes that the universal applicability of the bi-conditional is undermined by cases with a notable feature, NF, in which she accepts *p* but is unwilling to accept that *p* is true (one type of case involves propositions with a putatively normative subject matter, like the proposition that one should not smoke). (iii) Because she believes that the only ground for endorsing the universality of either direction of the equivalence is thereby undermined, she believes that the right to left direction is only applicable in cases lacking NF. (iv) She thinks that what Sal said exhibits NF or at least she takes herself to lack adequate grounds for thinking that it lacks NF. On that basis, she refuses to reason in accord with *propositional-equivalence*: although she accepts that what Sal said is true, she refuses, *on that basis*, to accept *p*. Moreover, even if she were to reason in accord with the principle, the outstanding apparent reasons against so doing that are available to Val mean that the upshot of her reasoning in accord with the principle could not amount to knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

Now, as in the case of Sal, we can assume that Val is willing in the vast majority of cases—cases where she is convinced that NF is absent—to reason in accordance with *propositional-equivalence*, and that her views about truth and propositional content are otherwise impeccable. So there seem to be no adequate grounds on which to deny that Val is sufficiently competent to know that Sal said *p*. Her reluctance

to reason in accord with the principle is due, not to incomprehension, but rather to the view she takes about the putative reasons against its applicability with which he has been presented. Moreover, the case does not require that Val's abilities to think with the concepts of proposition and truth are fully autonomous. It is consistent with the case that Val's abilities are dependent on her being suitably connected with more expert thinkers. If we add that Val would be prepared to defer to the experts—who, we may suppose, fully endorse *propositional-equivalence*—then it is hard to see what even apparent grounds remain for denying that she knows that Sal said *p*. It follows that knowing that someone has said *p* does not suffice for acknowledging *propositional-equivalence*.

The upshot to this point is that knowing that someone has said *p* does not suffice for adherence to *propositional-equivalence* and so does not suffice to put one in a position, on the basis of the proposed derivation, to accept (or reject) what they have said. As noted, that result clearly counts against (PK). Not only does it undermine the claim that (PK) respects the commonplace thought that understanding what someone says can suffice for putting in a position to accept (or reject) what they have said. It also raises the spectre of a threat we considered earlier, that conditions additional to those imposed by (PK) might usurp the role of understanding in underwriting the transmission of knowledge. But the most basic objection that arises from reflection on the result is that it is driven solely by theory. For there is no model-independent plausibility to the claim that the sort of idiosyncrasy that would undermine knowledge of *propositional-equivalence* must also undermine one's capacity to acquire knowledge through accepting what one has been told.

There are three main points to note here, of which the first is most important. The first point is that a candidate model that is apparently able to avoid the result is waiting in the wings: (OK). The model is a component of Locke's own response to the needs of knowledge communication:

Men learn Names, and use them in Talk with others, only that they may be understood: which is then done, when by Use or Consent, the Sound I make by the Organs of Speech, excites in another Man's Mind, who hears it, the

*Idea* I apply it to in mind, when I speak it. (Locke (1689): III.iii.2).

Locke's model of our understanding of words, a component of what Peter Pagin calls the Classical View of communication, is one on which its immediate deliverance is engagement with expressed content—the excitement of Ideas to which the words are applied.<sup>39</sup> As we saw above, such an account is able to meet the epistemic demands of knowledge transmission by virtue of the special mode of engagement with content to which it appeals. Enjoyment of that mode of engagement is such that it would put suitably equipped subjects in a position to know that the content has been expressed. But exploitation of that engagement for further cognitive purposes is not restricted to going via the propositional knowledge that it can make available. Rather, the engagement makes content available immediately for acceptance or rejection, and does so in a way that can apparently determine that its outputs have an appropriate epistemic status. Acceptance of a content that one engages through (OK)-understanding is linked epistemically with the expression of content in approximately the same way as on (PK). The major difference between the two models is that (OK) makes content available in an appropriate form for immediate acceptance or rejection without the need to run a dogleg through *propositional-* and *saying-equivalence*. Such models therefore meet the plausible demand that understanding be *transparent* to the content expressed in its target.<sup>40</sup>

The second point is that an analogous result in other putatively similar cases would be, if anything, even more implausible. Consider, for example, the case of factual memory. The analogous result here would amount to the claim that one who lacked specific pieces of general knowledge concerning the nature of factual memory and its objects would be debarred thereby from having the same knowledge in the present that they had possessed in the past.

The third point bolsters the second. It is plausible that both memory and testimony often function simply to preserve knowledge, the former intra- and the latter inter-personally.<sup>41</sup> But according to the present proposal, there are circumstances of speaker and audience ignorance of *propositional-equivalence* in which testimony would generate new knowledge. For instance, a speaker who knows *p* and says *p* on that basis might be barred, by ignorance of *propositional-equivalence* left-to-

right from knowing, on the basis of their knowledge, that *p* is true. And yet an audience who was ignorant of *propositional-equivalence* right-to-left might be able to get to the point of knowing *p* is true on the basis of what the speaker said, without being able to move from that position to knowing *p*. While we might be willing to allow for the possibility of such transactions—for instance, as special cases of the type of epistemic thoroughfare considered above—the present result is that, absent rather specialist knowledge, they might easily be the norm.

Even taken together, the three points are not decisive. But they impose a severe burden of proof on the defender of (PK) who wishes to embrace the result, especially if their defence is mounted from a position of commonsense. All else being equal, a model of understanding on which it is transparent to expressed content is to be favoured.

As an alternative to embracing the result, the defender of (PK) might instead argue that (PK) can be understood in a way that doesn't deliver the result. The result appears to depend upon our viewing the required transition from propositional knowledge to an appropriate target for acceptance as going via personal level knowledge of the equivalence principles. However, it might instead be proposed that the required transition is made automatically in a way that doesn't depend upon the subject's personal level view of the principles.

The problem with the proposed defence of (PK) is that it makes it hard to see why possession of propositional knowledge of what has been said is required to ensure the standing of the output of acceptance. Propositional knowledge of what is said appears to be serving simply to trigger the operations of a system whose function is to deliver the type of engagement with content that (OK) identifies with understanding. Since the bearing of the knowledge on the deliverance is a-rational, and since what matters about the deliverance is just its epistemic standing, however it is derived, the claim that propositional knowledge plays the required triggering role would need very special pleading. There is no obvious reason why the output couldn't be delivered in immediate response to a speaker's saying what they do, rather than having to be derived via propositional knowledge.

The outcome up to this point is conditional. *If* an alternative model is defensible, on which understanding involves immediate and epistemically appropriate engagement with expressed content, then that

model is to be favoured over (PK). We should turn, then, to assessment of (OK).

### 8. TESTIMONY AND (OK)

An initial objection to (OK) is that it is not clear how it is able to cope with epistemic sensitivity to the specific forces with which content can be expressed. The objection allows that (OK) might supply an adequate model of some of our engagements with expressed content. The concern is, first, that it provides no obvious space for sensitivity to the manner in which content is expressed—as asserted, questioned, commanded, etc.—and, second, that such sensitivity plays an essential role in mandating appropriate responses to expressions of content, and so is required in order to account for the type of response involved in epistemically appropriate acceptance of some of what is said in one's presence. And the objection is premised on the thought that it is straightforward to accommodate the required sensitivity on (PK), via the differences between e.g. knowing that a speaker asserted *p*, knowing that a speaker asked *p*, and knowing that a speaker ordered *p*.

One response to the objection would be to question the alignment it proposes between understanding an expression of content and acknowledging the force with which the content was expressed. It is surely possible, for example, to grasp the content of what someone has said and yet to be at a loss as to the force with which it was expressed—as, for instance, when one is speaking with a person who consistently uses rising intonation. And it would be natural to allow that in such circumstances one might count as having understood, at least partially, what the speaker had said. However, there are two reasons for thinking that the proffered response is inadequate. First, it is clear that grasp of content without grasp of force would amount to less than perfect understanding of what a speaker has said. And since a model is available that is able to capture the more perfect case, any model not able to do so is to that extent disfavoured. Second, and more pressing in the present context, grasp of content without any grasp of force would be inadequate to underwrite knowledge transmission. If nothing about one's cognitive or epistemic standing determines whether a content with which one is presented has been presented for endorse-

ment, or rather for consideration or compliance, then one is not in a position to acquire knowledge from it by endorsing it. It could too easily have been the case that one was endorsing the content of a question or command.

A response on which (OK) is able to capture sensitivity to force is therefore to be preferred. And such a response is available. What is required is that sensitivity to force is built into the demands on the mode of engagement with content to which (OK) appeals. It would demand an analysis of the multifarious forces with which content can be expressed in order fully to develop such a response. For present purposes, I shall restrict myself to saying something about how this might be done for the broadly assertive forces that play a role in knowledge transmission, and something about a recipe for deriving a more general account.<sup>42</sup>

With respect to the broadly assertive forces, responsiveness to which is critical to the acquisition of knowledge through testimony, the appropriate mode of engagement with content would be one with the following properties. First, it would be a mode whereby one entertains content as an appropriate object for acceptance or rejection. To borrow a formulation from Burge, it would be a mode of entertaining the content as having been presented-as-true. Second, it would be a mode that is constrained so that, for example, it is only possible to enjoy that mode of engagement with content if the content has been presented-as-true—that is, expressed with broadly assertive force. More generally, it would be a mode of engagement that would put suitably equipped subjects in a position to know that the content had been expressed with broadly assertive force, that it had been asserted. Such an account would build the demands of appropriate responsiveness to assertion into the nature of subjects' attitudes towards content, and so insulate those demands from the vagaries of speakers' knowledge that caused trouble for (PK).

The general recipe would then go via the type of account that would anyway be required on (PK). One would give an account of the types of responses that are appropriate to knowledge of the expression of content via the various forces—for instance, acceptance or rejection, intending to comply or refuse, etc.—and then build the demands of that account into the nature of the mode of engagement with expressed

content that is appropriate to expressions of content with those forces. And notice that such an account is not an optional extra even on (PK). For as we have seen with respect to the generic *saying*, the pattern of response appropriate to specific forces with which content is expressed is not dictated just by propositional knowledge that content has been expressed with a specific force, but depends on additional capacities that make available the content in the right form for further cognition. And just as knowledge that someone had said *p* can be blocked from appropriate impact on further cognition by idiosyncratic views about *saying*, so can knowledge that someone has asserted, or ordered, *p*.

Much more work would be required to develop the second response to the point where it would be likely to compel conviction. But the present sketch serves to remove the immediate threat posed by the first objection. However, there is a second objection to (OK) which I do not think can be answered.

In explaining above how (OK) might meet some of the epistemic demands of knowledge transmission, I offered the following as a first approximation to the epistemic power of the modes of engagement with content to which (OK) appeals. (OK) holds that the modes, or attitudes, to which it appeals are subject to the following condition: if someone is suitably equipped, and is in otherwise appropriate circumstances, then their coming to bear the attitude to the content *p* would put them in a position to know that a speaker has said *p*. And I warned that we would have cause to return to the approximation. One central feature of the approximation is that it makes understanding a matter of knowing that *a* speaker has given expression to the entertained content, rather than specifying for the subject a particular source for the expression of content. Then two pressing questions concern, first, whether (OK) is entitled to that much by way of determination of source and, second, whether that much determination of source is enough to facilitate the transmission to the subject of knowledge that is in the possession of a specific speaker. And since (PK) is obviously able to account for the determination of a specific speaker as source for an expressed content, through knowledge that that speaker has said such-and-such, positive assessment of (OK) appears to depend upon the answers to these questions.

With respect to the first question—whether the attitudes or modes

of engagement with content to which (OK) appeals can determine that the source of content is *a* speaker—there are at least two reasons for thinking that the answer may be negative. The first reason is that a simple attitude towards content, even expressed content, appears to be incapable of determining that the form of expression was *speech*. At best, such an attitude might determine that the content has a source other than the subject. The second reason is that, depending upon how the demands on expression of content are spelled out, such an attitude may be incapable of determining that entertained content has a single, rather than multiple, sources. For instance, suppose that Val uttered the sentence ‘smoking is addictive’ and, simultaneously, Sal uttered the sentence ‘gambling is a vice’. If we allow that, between them, Val and Sal gave expression to the proposition that gambling is addictive, then the demands thus far imposed on (OK)’s proprietary attitude towards expressed content allow that one might understand what Val and Sal thereby said through appropriate entertaining of that proposition, without being in a position to establish whether there was *a* source for that content. And even if we do not allow the possibility of joint expression of content, it is hard to see how (OK) can account for sensitivity to the difference between individual and joint cases. For similar reasons, a subject who met the conditions imposed by (OK) might be in a position consistent with any of many candidate speakers having been the source of the content that they thereby entertain. In order for a specific source to be determined, from the perspective of the subject, the identity of the source must figure as an object of the subject’s attitudes. Yet the attitudes constitutive of understanding, according to (OK), are directed solely onto expressed content. Minimally, then, understanding, according to that model, fails autonomously to determine a specific source for content entertained through understanding. The options available to (OK), then, are either to accept that understanding is consistent with failure of determination of source, or to distribute responsibility for engagement with content and determination of source amongst different epistemic powers.

Considered in abstraction from present concerns, the first option has some plausibility. It is surely possible to understand what someone has said without being in a position to know the specific identity of the source of what has been said, as might be the case were one to



overhear a conversation going in the next room. However, even in that sort of case, one's cognition, including perception of overheard speech, would *determine* the specific sources of what one thereby understood, whether or not one was in a position to exploit that determination in order to acquire knowledge of the identities of those sources. And if understanding is to put one in a position to acquire knowledge from specific sources, then it appears essential that one's cognition should determine one's specific sources. For if nothing about one's cognition determined that one were being invited to accept what one, rather than another, speaker has said, then it might easily have been the case that one was accepting testimony from either source. And in that case, one's acceptance would be related too tenuously to any particular speaker for one to acquire knowledge specifically in that speaker's possession.<sup>43</sup>

A natural proposal at this point would be that cognition able to underwrite knowledge transmission involves a sort of joint cognition of utterance and expressed content, so a combination of (UK) and (OK).<sup>44</sup> But mere joint acquaintance with utterance and expressed content would appear to leave open, from the subject's perspective, whether the utterance and the content are related in the right way for cognition of the utterance to underwrite determination of a particular source for the entertained content. It would appear to be possible to be jointly acquainted with the content and an utterance even though they are not related in the right way, for example by happening, for whatever reason, to entertain the proposition that snow is white whilst perceiving an utterance of 'grass is green'. Moreover, it would appear to be possible for the acquaintance with content in that circumstance to amount to understanding *an* utterance in accord with (OK), albeit not the utterance which one is acquainted with in accord with (UK). Mere joint acquaintance with content and utterance, then, does not suffice to determine that the content was expressed by that particular utterance. If that's right, then it would appear to be possible to entertain the proposition that snow is white whilst perceiving an utterance that was used to express that content without one's overall epistemic state guaranteeing the association of content and utterance. There appears to be no reason, on the view combining (UK) with (OK), why occupancy of the latter sort of epistemic state, involving an utterance and the content it was used to express, should put the subject in a better epistemic

position with respect to the association of content and utterance than would occupancy of the former state, involving an utterance and an arbitrarily related content. In short, the fact that one might be jointly acquainted with an utterance and an arbitrary content shows that mere joint acquaintance with utterance and content does not suffice to determine a specific source for the expression of that content.<sup>45</sup>

## 9. A FIFTH MODEL?

The position to this point is as follows. (OK) and (PK), unlike (RK), offer accounts of understanding able to sustain its *neutrality*—the fact that understanding provides its subjects with an invitation to acceptance, rather than imposing on them a commitment. And (OK), unlike (PK), offers an account of understanding that is of the right *transparent* form to underwrite rational acceptance. Finally, (PK), unlike (OK), can account for the *determination*, from the understanding subject's perspective, of particular *sources* for what is said. If that is right, and the demands of neutrality, transparency, and source determination are to be respected, then none of the models with which we began is acceptable. Alternatively, if we take the negative verdict on (PK) to depend upon the existence of an adequate model that respects transparency, then we might take the failure of (OK) as evidence that we shall have to live with the peculiarities of (PK)'s account of acceptance.

The main brief of the present paper has been to provide a prophylactic against premature capitulation in one or another account of understanding due to a felt lack of alternatives. As a final service to that brief, I wish to conclude by sketching an alternative to the models considered here.

The models we have considered were derived from elementary reflection upon the components of facts about people saying things. However, we ignored an apparently central component of such facts: particular episodes or events of people saying things. The occurrence of such episodes or events, in addition to episodes of utterance, suggests the availability of a fourth schematic model of understanding:

(EK) A knows<sub>w</sub> [/has apprehended<sub>w</sub>/is acquainted<sub>w</sub> with] an episode or event in which S (produced *u* and thereby) said *p*.

Events in which a speaker said *p* are most fundamentally events in which a subject—the speaker—comes into relation—a determinate of the determinable *having said*-relation—with an object—the proposition *p*. It is plausible that apprehension or awareness of such fundamentally relational events requires acquaintance with or awareness of their subjects and their objects, so in this case acquaintance with or awareness of the speaker, and perhaps their production of *u*, and also acquaintance with or awareness of the proposition *p*. It is also plausible that apprehension of such events requires appropriate sensitivity to the fundamental type of relation that they involve, in this case a determinate of the determinable the *having said*-relation. Finally, apprehension of the event as a whole, given its nature, determines for the subject how its elements are organised. If that is right, then such a model may be able to sustain the demands of neutrality and form, by way of incorporating acquaintance with expressed content. And it may be able to sustain the demands of source-determination by way of incorporating acquaintance with the speaker, together with appropriate sensitivity to the speaker's relation to the expressed content, all via immediate apprehension of the event as a whole. I lack the space to pursue assessment of the prospects for such a model, so offer it up as a hostage to further pursuit of the nature of understanding.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Earlier versions of some of this material were presented at Mark Textor's discussion group at King's College London, a conference on *Meaning, Understanding and Knowledge*, Riga, 2009, and a seminar at the University of Birmingham. I'm grateful to audiences on those occasions for their comments. Thanks especially to Corrine Besson, Simon Blackburn, Darragh Byrne, Stacie Friend, Mitchell Green, Nils Kurbis, Hemdat Lerman, Alex Miller, Douglas Patterson, Dean Pettit, Gurpreet Rattan, Stephen Schiffer, Barry C. Smith, Tom Sorell, Matthew Soteriou, Mark Textor, Asa Wikforss, and David Yates.

<sup>2</sup>For discussion of some of them, see Pettit (2002); Longworth (2008a).

<sup>3</sup>See Longworth (2008a), 2009. Note that it is left open whether state-understanding is itself a disposition or ability, e.g. the disposition or ability to have facts about meaning or what is said serve as reasons for one, as suggested by Hyman (1999), 2006. If it is, then ability-understanding is a second (or even higher) order disposition or ability: the disposition or ability to instance dispositions of abilities. It is also left open whether ability-understanding is merely an habitual or generic of state-understanding, rather than some more substantive form of disposition or ability. Compare here 'Florence understands (/can understand) what people say' with 'Florence catches (/can catch) fish'. Finally, it is left open whether achievement-understanding is merely coming to have

state-understanding, or whether it has a distinctive nature over and above change to that state. Compare here 'Florence (has) understood what Kim said' with 'Florence (has) landed a fish'.

<sup>4</sup>Although I won't attempt to defend the thought here, I think that it is plausible that the three forms of understanding of sentence meanings are to be understood through their roles in sustaining the three forms of understanding of what is said. For present purposes, my only commitment is to the interest in pursuit of an account of understanding of what is said, whatever its precise connexions with understanding of meaning.

<sup>5</sup>Cp. Wittgenstein: 'The grammar of the word "knows" is evidently closely related to that of "can", "is able to". But also closely related to that of "understands". ('Mastery' of a technique.)' (1953: §150).

<sup>6</sup>The claim is not that knowing is a disposition to judge, but only that it is possible for knowing *immediately* to determine that the knower has such a disposition. The claim is therefore consistent with the possibility that knowing can be prevented from determining judgement, for example by inhibition or other forms of countermanding cognition. And it is consistent with the possibility that there are additional general conditions on the determination of a disposition to judge, for instance that the knower must possess a generic capacity for judgement and a suitable repertoire of conceptual abilities.

<sup>7</sup>For related discussion, see Davies (1986); Evans (1981); Miller (1997); Stich (1978).

<sup>8</sup>Since some occurrences of schematic '*p*' are within the context of putatively non-extensional verbs, e.g. 'said', while some occur without those contexts, it should not be assumed that it has the same types of instances in all its occurrences.

<sup>9</sup>Compare Dummett on occurrent thought: 'Suppose that I am walking along the street with my wife, and suddenly stop dead and say (in English), "I have left the address behind". What constitutes my having at that moment had the thought that I expressed need be no more than just the fact that I know English and said those words; there does not have to have been anything else that went on within me simultaneously with my utterance of the sentence.' (1993ba: 99)

<sup>10</sup>It would be a large project to determine precise membership of the tradition, but it would be natural to consider seriously for inclusion Baker & Hacker (2005); Rundle (2001); Ryle (1949) (especially pp.50-59); Wittgenstein (1953); Horwich (1998), 2005.

<sup>11</sup>In our terms, understanding a language would be a form of ability-understanding. For doubts about the attribution to Wittgenstein, see McDowell (2009).

<sup>12</sup>Depending upon how it is spelled out, Frege's proposal might conflict with some views on which the processes responsible for the entertaining of expressed content are modular. The issue turns largely on the scope of the will in Frege's account: whether he holds that one can entertain the content expressed by a word at will, or whether one can, at most, will the allocation of modular processing resources, for instance through directing one's attention.

<sup>13</sup>For discussion of related issues in the case of visual perception, see Martin (2002).

<sup>14</sup>See also Kaplan (1990).

<sup>15</sup>See also Adrian Moore's proposal that understanding is (in general) 'knowledge of how to process knowledge' (1997: 189). Rumfitt's model exploits the type of distinction between dispositional cognition and dispositions to cognition explored in Audi (1994).

<sup>16</sup>See also Rumfitt (1995), 2001.

<sup>17</sup>The outputs of exercises of the capacity would involve cognition of the expression of content in those cases where the understood utterance was used to say e.g. that an

utterance expressed a particular content.

<sup>18</sup>As is well known, Locke appears less sanguine about the epistemic power of testimony in other parts of his work. See e.g. 1689: I.iv.23, though note that this more sceptical passage is located in a discussion of innate ideas.

<sup>19</sup>Evans elsewhere appears to opt for a more minimal model, closer to (OK): 'Full understanding [of the use of an ordinary proper name] requires one... to entertain, as expressed by the speaker, a proposition of the form *a is F*, where *a* is an adequate Idea of the referent' (1982: 403). Another divergence from (PK) is that Evans focuses on truth-conditions, rather than what is said.

<sup>20</sup>It may be that Dummett feels compelled to adopt the bipartite account by his endorsement of a Davidson inspired truth-theoretic account of the immediate target of interpretation. The second part of the account may then serve as a partial response to the type of worry pressed against that account in Foster (1976), in line with the type of response that Davidson (1976) proposes.

<sup>21</sup>It may be that Dummett means to retract this commitment when he argues in later work that knowledge transmission 'demands that the channel by which [knowledge] is transmitted be a normal one; but it does not require that channel to be itself secure.' (Dummett (1993bb): 426)

<sup>22</sup>See e.g. Harman (1973); Ginet (1980); Dretske (1982)—where the label 'cognitive cul-de-sacs' is coined—; Dretske & Yourgrau (1983). I prefer the label 'epistemic' to 'cognitive', since such cases plausibly involve no difficulty in the preservation of cognition, but only in the preservation of epistemic status. Typically, the type of cul-de-sac discussed in the literature is most closely akin to the second type of case presented here.

<sup>23</sup>In fact, Evans' demand is weaker, in effect that the speaker says of something that it is *F* as a consequence of knowing of that thing that it is *F*. The weaker demand is less plausible than the one I consider: it allows that someone might, in ordinary circumstances, transmit their knowledge that Hesperus shines brightly by saying that Phosphorus shines brightly, despite their failing to know that Phosphorus shines brightly due, for instance, to their failing to know that Hesperus is Phosphorus. For discussion of related issues, see Dummett (1978); Heck (1995).

<sup>24</sup>A fourth, more specifically theory-dependent type of putative counterexample arises from the interaction of Evans's conditions with accounts of knowledge on which the standards governing its possession are sensitive to specific features of subjects' practical or theoretical circumstances. For instance, knowing whether *p* is of very little (practical or theoretical) importance to Val, so the standards governing Val's knowing *p* are, according to the views in question, low. Val meets the low standards, so Val knows *p*. Sal meets the same low standards as Val. But by contrast with Val, the importance to Sal of knowing whether *p* is very high, so that, according to the views in question, the standards governing Sal's knowing *p* are very high. Even if Val were to tell Sal *p*, Sal would fail to meet his own high standards for knowing *p*. For more detailed presentation and discussion of cases of this sort, see MacFarlane (2005).

<sup>25</sup>The label derives from Welbourne's 1983 discussion of so-called cognitive cul-de-sacs.

<sup>26</sup>See e.g. Goldberg (2005), Lackey (1999), and MacFarlane (2005) for related cases. I am not wholly convinced that knowledge is transmitted in such cases. One reason for doubt is that if the audience's putative acquisition of knowledge goes via ordinary trust of the speaker, and acceptance of what they have said, then their cognition is liable to involve an awful lot of error and ignorance. A second, related reason is that the main

operative feature of such cases appears to be the reliability of the speaker, when coupled with compensatory factors. I don't think that mere reliability of that sort—i.e. absent the sort of background knowledge that would enable one to use the speaker, or speaker-coupled-with-compensation, as an instrument—would suffice for knowledge acquisition by an audience. Even if one were willing to allow that knowledge can be acquired in this sort of case, it would take further argument to show that such cases are of the same epistemological type as more normal cases of testimonial knowledge transmission. For one thing, it might be argued that the source of testimony in such cases is not the speaker—e.g. Sal—but rather the speaker together with the compensating factors—e.g. Sal and Val. For another, the speaker, or speaker-coupled-with-compensation, appears to function as an instrument in such transactions, while it is plausible that the epistemology of ordinary cases of knowledge transmission relies upon the speaker functioning as an epistemic agent: an agent in possession of knowledge, who acts on that knowledge in speaking as they do. For the importance of distinguishing such cases from other types of case wherein one can acquire knowledge on the basis of what people say, see Burge (1993), 1997; Coady (1992): 25-76; Moran (2005); Owens (2000): 165-166, 2006; Ross (1986); Welbourne (1986).

<sup>27</sup>It is an important question whether such cases form a distinctive epistemological kind. Doubtless, pursuit of that question would demand fuller specification of the putative kind. For pertinent discussion, see the references in the previous footnote.

<sup>28</sup>For discussion, see Dancy (2000), 2008; Hornsby (2008); Hyman (1999), 2006; Roessler (2009); Williamson (2000). Note that the formulation in the text leaves it open whether reasons only take factual or propositional form.

<sup>29</sup>It may, however, be subject to other difficulties, including those brought to prominence by Lewis Carroll 1895.

<sup>30</sup>Indeed, failing some such allowance, the Rumfitt's account would make it impossible for Sal to understand Val's saying that Sal's fly is undone and Sal does not know that Sal's fly is undone, since Sal might be in a position to know that what Val said is true, but couldn't be in a position to know that which she said.

<sup>31</sup>Thus, one might hold that object perception invariably gives rise to perceptual knowledge without viewing its further consequences as over-determined by the conjunction of perception and knowledge, since the perceptual knowledge is itself dependent upon the object perception. Similarly, one might hold that understanding invariably gives rise to propositional knowledge without viewing its further consequences as over-determined. This is a partial response to a worry pressed by Stephen Schiffer.

<sup>32</sup>Compare here Dummett's 1991: 89-92 discussion of apparent understanding in the absence of awareness.

<sup>33</sup>For pertinent discussion of perceptual epistemology, see Martin (1993); Roessler (2009).

<sup>34</sup>This claim needs careful handling, since we may not wish to rule out the possibility of factive speech acts—which may include, for example, informing that such-and-such. For full understanding of such a speech act might be held to involve proper appreciation of its factiveness, and so thought to require non-neutrality with respect to alethic status. The response to this concern that I favour involves carefully distinguishing neutrality in one's attitudes towards an expressed content—as required by the present argument—from neutrality of the commitments one takes on through taking those attitudes. Just as I can accept that Sal knows *p* without yet accepting *p*, despite the fact that what I thereby

accept entails  $p$ , so I can accept that Sal has informed Val that  $p$  without accepting  $p$ , despite the fact that what I thereby accept entails  $p$ .

<sup>35</sup>Obviously, an analogous derivation can be constructed with 'rejects' in place of 'accepts', so I won't pursue the matter here.

<sup>36</sup>Compare e.g. Tyler Burge's *Principle and Stronger Principle for Canonical Names of Senses* (2005: 174ff). A variety of other accounts of our grasp of the content of the hierarchy would issue in analogous results.

<sup>37</sup>For an array of supporting considerations, see Burge (1986); Welbourne (2003), 2007.

<sup>38</sup>If we allow that Val nevertheless counts as understanding what Sal said, she can serve as a counterexample to Rumfitt's version of (RK): she might understand an utterance used to say  $p$ , and know the utterance to be true, without thereby knowing  $p$ .

<sup>39</sup>Pagin (2008): 92, which contains a useful defence of the Classical View. It is plausible that Burge also intends to promote this type of model in his 1993, 1997, 1999.

<sup>40</sup>See my 2009.

<sup>41</sup>See especially Burge 1993.

<sup>42</sup>Notice that suitable responsiveness to the assertion/non-assertion alternation would suffice to underwrite knowledge-transmission even if one were insensitive to finer-grained distinctions amongst the other forces.

<sup>43</sup>I provide a more thorough discussion of this issue in my 2008b, with specific reference to Burge's account of knowledge-preserving testimony. See also Malmgren (2006).

<sup>44</sup>The following argument is a version of one presented in my 2008a. Notice that, in the passages quoted above, both Evans and McDowell appeal to *hearing and understanding* as underwriting knowledge-transmission, rather than appealing only to understanding. It may be that they mean to appeal to an overall account combining elements of (UK) with their favoured model of understanding *per se*.

<sup>45</sup>This is a sort of analogue of some presentations of Gettier cases, in which the problem case is derived by the following method. One begins by constructing a case in which the subject does not know because what they believe is false. Then one constructs an analogous case, in which the subject's belief is true, but their evidence, or other features of their perspective on the facts, is the same as in the case where they don't know. Here, I began by constructing a case in which the subject does not understand because what they are acquainted with fails to include an utterance and its content. Then I constructed an analogous case, in which the latter failure is rectified, without changing any other feature of the subject's perspective on those objects. From the subject's perspective, the second sort of case might as well be a case of the first sort. Martin (2001) presses a related objection against Brewer's 1999 attempt to construct fact-guaranteeing perception out of perceptual acquaintance with objects and properties. The analogous problem for that view is that one might, for instance, be perceptually acquainted with a cube and (an instance of) the property of being red without that guaranteeing, for one, that the cube is red, since one might be perceptually acquainted with a blue cube and a red sphere.

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