

# GETTING GETTIER'D ON TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT: There are noncontroversial ways in which our words are context dependent. Gradable adjectives like 'flat' or 'bald', for example. A more controversial proposition is that nouns can be context dependent in a reasonably similar way. If this is true, then it looks like we can develop a positive account of semantic content as sensitive to context. This might be worrying for the epistemology of testimony. That is, how can we garner knowledge from testimony if it's the case that, though our syntactic utterances are *identical*, the semantic content of them may fail to be uniform? What if we mean different things by the same words? I argue that these kinds of semantic divergences provide the groundwork for a new kind of Gettier case. That is, given the likelihood of divergent semantic content, we can see a way to scenarios in which, despite that the semantic content is uniform, we might get justified true beliefs that nevertheless fail as knowledge. This, because it just as likely could have been the case that relevant contexts were dissimilar, and thus relevant semantic content would have been divergent. Lastly, where the phenomenon does occur, we never would have known the difference.

KEYWORDS: Syntax, Semantics, Context Sensitivity, Epistemology, Testimony, Gettier

In this article I will argue that we routinely fail to transmit knowledge by testimony for Gettier-type reasons.<sup>1</sup> I argue for the plausibility of a broadly construed context sensitivity for semantics. The claim is that it is possible for speakers to intend, by the very same words, to express divergent propositions. Moreover, I claim that assuming syntactic uniformity, those semantic divergences easily fail to become obvious. Where we mean different things by the same words, we generally don't notice that this is the case, without doing some heavy clarificatory lifting. Thus, it follows from a very general kind of context sensitivity for semantic content, and the divergences that result from it, that these failings in communication are, perhaps even standardly, opaque. Where they occur we fail to impart knowledge by testimony. That is, if I mean to testify that *p*, and you understand me to be testifying that *q*, despite that the syntactic form of the

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?," in *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Michael Huemer (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 444-446.

testimony is uniform across our interlocution, then you have learned neither  $p$  nor  $q$  from me. In addition, and given the plausibility of the opaque cases, I argue that we ought to think that even when speakers successfully share semantic content, they may well not have, and never noticed. Therefore when semantic content is uniform across speakers, it is in this sense fortuitous, the accident of its uniformity itself being opaque. It follows that when we appear to have successfully transferred knowledge by testimony, we have in fact been Gettier'd on those transfers, since it may well have been the case that we had meant different things by the same words, without ever having noticed.

In some cases it is uncontroversial that we mean different things by our words. Take for example indexicals (like 'I,' 'he,' 'they,' etc.) or gradable adjectives (like 'flat,' 'bald,' 'far,' and so on). These are examples of our contexts informing the meaning of our words – "the table is flat" can be true in one context, and not so in another. When context becomes a relevant factor in determining speaker meaning across interlocutors, it generally seems that we plainly share that context, such that its significance is obvious. When context is shared in an obvious way the efficaciousness with which we communicate arises not just from sharing a language, but also from a mutual base of reference points driven by the relevant context and employed with all candidness by speakers therein. Alternatively, when speakers fail to share a context it seems clear to all persons at hand that this is the case, such that speakers correct to account for that ambiguity.

The problematic cases begin with unapparent context sensitive meaning. I'll show how this is possible in (at least) two ways.

## I. Two Base Cases

Can nouns be context sensitive similarly to indexicals and gradable adjectives? It would be interesting if they could be. For if context sensitivity is so broadly relevant to assertions then utterances are potentially *drastically* dissimilar. So much so that instances of syntactically identical utterances across interlocutors might still be semantically divergent. Though we might utter exactly the same sentence, we may take ourselves to be saying something different from our conversational counterpart. The schism in meaning that this possibility belies leverages a serious challenge within the epistemology of testimony.

One way this might come about is in instances where interlocutors have 'unique contexts.' By this I mean that their individual contexts differ sufficiently insofar as the contexts in fact inform their semantics idiosyncratically. Arguably, this can happen a number of ways. I'll assume a fairly straightforward account of differing backgrounds to account for the idiosyncratic semantics. In the 'unique

contexts' case I'll show how these dissimilar contexts may result in false beliefs from testimony.

Following the 'unique contexts' case, I will show how one might get Gettier'd on testimony. Here the standard Gettierizing 'accident-operator' is built to be the interlocutors' relevant contexts. That is, it just as likely could have been the case that, given their contexts, their semantic content (and what they took themselves to be saying) didn't match up. However, in some cases despite divergent contexts, interlocutors can still manage to communicate effectively. In any standard epistemological circumstance if a justified true belief arises by some accident, we find our intuition is that it just isn't knowledge. In standard Gettier cases this just-as-likely factor is traditionally external to the subject. Here we find that a new kind of Gettier case presents itself where the just-as-likely factor is this: under utterly normal circumstances two interlocutors can effectively mean different things by their identical utterances. Moreover, they might not know it because it just isn't obvious (the utterances are after all syntactically identical) given that the divergence across context isn't obvious. If that's true then the worry that we're (maybe even *often*) talking around one another becomes salient. If the worry is salient then it becomes an epistemological defeater for garnering knowledge from testimony. Therefore, we routinely fail to transfer knowledge via testimony for Gettier-type reasons.

### I.I Unique Context & False belief

Meet Bronwyn and Faye. Bronwyn grew up in Hudson Bay, Saskatchewan – a highly forested area with an estimated average of 600 trees per acre. The farm on which she was raised is just outside of town, and in fact entirely isolated by the surrounding forests, which are made up mostly of fir trees and paper birch, made thicker still by the tall growing bushes of Saskatoon berries. As a young adult Bronwyn moves away to live in New York City, where she studies as an undergraduate at NYU. On her dorm floor lives Faye, who also moved to New York, but from Texas. Faye grew up all her life in the southern states, and, prior to leaving home at eighteen, had never so much as seen the kind of greenery that surrounded Bronwyn completely, before coming to New York. The two make fast friends over their first year at NYU and in the summer Bronwyn invites Faye back to her farm to meet her family. A few days into their Canadian get-away, the following conversation takes place:

Faye: What a beautiful place. It must have been a wonderful to grow up here.

Bronwyn: It was. You know, I built a tree house out here when I was a little girl.

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Faye: Oh, yeah? Where about?

Bronwyn: Just north of the house, at the edge of the forest.

Faye: Hmm. I was just walking in that forest this morning and I didn't see your tree house. It must be gone now.

Bronwyn: It's not gone. In fact, I just came from there. Are you sure you were in the north forest?

Faye: Yes, I was in the north forest. I guess there is a tree house at the edge of the forest. I simply must have missed it.

Bronwyn's experiential evidence informs the semantic content – the meaning – that maps to the syntactic structure of 'forest.' Assume that when Bronwyn utters 'forest' she means 'a cluster of trees with a minimal density of 600 trees/acre.' Faye, however, having grown up in Texas all her life, and only just moving to New York, will have a drastically different experiential background for the content formation of 'forest.' When Faye utters 'forest' she means 'a cluster of trees with a minimal density of 100 trees/acre.'

Assume the 'north forest' is the kind of forest that increases in density as you venture further into it, as forests tend to. Where the first trees appear its density is 100 trees/acre, which we know is sufficient to satisfy Faye's semantic content for 'forest.' However, for Bronwyn the forest proper will not count as having started until the density of the trees reaches 600/acre, in fact several meters away from Faye's 'edge of the forest.' Does Faye know that there is a tree house at the edge of a, or the, forest?

Part of the difficulty with saying that Faye knows that there is a tree house at the edge of 'the' forest begins with her evidence to the contrary. What makes that evidence palpable, moreover, is its predication on her contextually unique semantic content for the syntactic utterance of 'forest.' Considering the less stringently dense Faye-forests, the proposition that Faye took Bronwyn to express is false.<sup>2</sup> For Faye

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Bridges worries that these kinds of miscommunications boil down to someone simply being *wrong*. For example an interlocutor might speak truly in conversation, prompting another interlocutor to make some justified knowledge assertion that's yet easily answerable as false. It might be case that the kinds of miscommunications we're worrying about here are simply the result of a misapplication of terms, rather than a more troubling difference in legitimate semantic content, but it's difficult to see who is wrong in the case of Faye and Bronwyn, partly for the ship of Theseus-type reasons. When does it start and stop being a forest? Since this isn't clear, I'm comfortable maintaining that there are at least these cases

to go back and double-check we remain certain that she would find no tree house at the edge of the 'forest,' since where she will look for the edge of the forest will in actual fact be a different place from the place to which Bronwyn is referring. Moreover, everything that counts as a forest for Bronwyn will in a sense count as a forest for Faye. By virtue of Faye's idiolectically weaker standards for forest hood, all Bronwyn forests slide into that Faye-inclusive group since they're more than sufficiently dense. Contra positively, not all Faye-Forests will qualify for forest-hood on Bronwyn's standards. The question of whether or not the tree house is at the edge of a forest is only true in virtue of Bronwyn-forests. Thus, Faye doesn't know that the tree house is at the edge of the, or a, forest. It is also *actually* false that the tree house is at the edge of the, and a, forest on Faye's standards, but actually true that the tree house is at the edge of the, and a, forest on Bronwyn standards.<sup>3</sup>

## I.II Unique Context & Accidentally True Belief

Case two is a standard Gettier case.

Lucas: Faye tells me there's a forest behind your family home.

Bronwyn: Yeah, and there's a tree house at the edge of that forest.

Faye: Oh yes, there's a tree house at the edge of that forest.

Lucas: Oh, did you see it?

Faye: No, I've seen the forest but not the tree house at its edge. But there is a tree house at the edge of that forest. Bronwyn told me so.

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where divergent semantic content is unproblematically a phenomenon that can result in interesting miscommunications, without either interlocutor being flatly wrong. See Jason Bridges, "Wittgenstein vs. Contextualism," in *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: A Critical Guide*, ed. Arif Ahmed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109-128.

<sup>3</sup> It's conceivable that Bronwyn include something like, "Wait – you know that I mean by 'edge of the forest' the point at which the trees are dense enough to count as a 'forest,' right?" This kind of interlocation might not be enough to change Faye's standards for forest-hood, but would almost certainly help to clarify the object of reference in the conversation. Alternatively, interlocutors might be motivated by more pressing or immediately relevant circumstances to exercise exhaustive clarity. For example, if Bronwyn and Faye were signing a contract with respect to forests, the meaning of the locution would be more explicitly defined. Of course naturally conversations don't translate to the clarificatory demands of contracts.

We know from the first case that the semantic content assigned to ‘forest’ by Bronwyn and Faye differs by 500 trees/acre. It follows that the edge of the forest for Faye will be several meters out from the inner most forest, where the trees will be dense enough to qualify as a Bronwyn-forest. However here, unbeknownst to either Faye or Bronwyn, on the opposite side of the Faye-forest there is another tree house. So, on the south facing edge of the Bronwyn-forest is the tree house of which Bronwyn speaks, and on the north facing edge of the Faye-forest there happens also to be a tree house. Thus, when Bronwyn says (using Bronwyn standards for forest-hood) that there is a tree house at the edge of the forest behind her family home, she speaks truly. Thus, the information that Bronwyn’s testimony imparts to Lucas is true. Moreover, when Faye concurs with Bronwyn that there is a tree house at the edge of the forest behind her family home, she too speaks truly, even on Faye standards for forest-hood. But, that Faye’s assertion is true is merely so in virtue of facts unbeknownst to herself. Neither she nor Bronwyn are aware of the second tree house on the edge of the Faye-forest. Faye’s belief that her assertion is true is justified because of Bronwyn’s testimony. However the tree house that actually makes Faye’s assertion true is alien to Bronwyn. Thus, the truth of Faye’s assertion cannot appeal to Bronwyn’s testimony for its justification.<sup>4</sup>

Does Faye know that a tree house is at the edge of *the* forest? Yes and no. Because every Bronwyn-forest is trivially a forest for Faye, the tree house to which Bronwyn refers is on the edge of some forest. But, it’s not the same tree house that makes Faye’s assertion true. Without radical concessions, if Faye knew which tree house Bronwyn was referring to, she wouldn’t assent to the tree house being at the edge of a forest. It might seem better said that Faye knows that a tree house is at the edge of *a* forest, but this too is peculiar. Who *doesn’t* know that *somewhere* there is a tree house at the edge of a forest? Or, if Faye knows that a tree house is at the edge of a forest because the actual tree house that makes her assertion true is a separate tree house from the one to which Bronwyn refers, then exactly what kind of epistemic connection can be drawn between the second tree house on the edge of the Faye-forest and Faye’s knowledge assertion? The justification of her belief leans on Bronwyn’s testimony. Its truth, however, is fortuitous. Thus we will say that Faye’s been Gettier’d.

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<sup>4</sup> I am here leaning on a traditional account of epistemological testimony that trades on the transmission principle. That is, one cannot impart knowledge without first having knowledge (justified true belief) of the propositional content. Jennifer Lackey, in *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), proposes several challenging counter examples to this thesis. However, given space constraints it will suffice to assume the limitations of the traditional account here.

## II. Accidentally Shared Contexts & True Beliefs

The transmission principle for testimony tells us that the truth of what is believed by the hearer must match up with the truth of what's been asserted by the utterer. I argue that it's *easy* for it to match fortuitously. This is true because of the context dependence of an utterer's semantic content. Our contexts are easily divergent for one reason or another. It follows from this that our semantic content is easily divergent, in virtue of our contexts. Where our semantic content is divergent, the truth of our utterances can easily match fortuitously.

What exactly gets lost in interlocution when our semantic content is relevantly divergent? I have tried in the base cases to illustrate some examples. Specifically, I have tried to show how the referent itself can go astray. In what remains I hope to show how the referent can remain whilst we nevertheless fail to preserve knowledge. I turn now to cases of accidentally shared contexts. My hypothesis is that although semantic uniformity can be provided by accidentally shared contexts, and thus may preserve justified true beliefs, the case of accidentally shared contexts will nevertheless fail to provide for testimonial knowledge due a hybrid Gettier-type concern about belief and meaning.

### II.I The New Gettier: An Argument

Suppose that two interlocutors share a relevant context, and thus share semantic content. Suppose further that the context is only accidentally shared. Because the context is only accidentally shared, the semantic content is only accidentally shared. Given that the context is *accidentally* shared (it just as likely could have been the case that their contexts, and thus their semantic content, were divergent) *any* resultant belief is disqualified from knowledge on Gettier-principles. By 'any' I mean that the resultant belief need not appeal to its truth or falsity to determine its epistemic eligibility. It doesn't even get that far. The problem of accidentally shared contexts is logically prior to the truth or falsity of the resultant belief. The problem is that there doesn't seem to be any *prima facie* discernable evidence to distinguish in real cases between unique contexts resulting in accidentally true beliefs, and accidentally shared contexts resulting in true beliefs. Yet one seems more worrying than the other. In the latter true or false beliefs don't matter – any belief from an accidentally shared context cannot amount to knowledge. But if it's not obviously discernable whether a case is accidentally or verifiably contextually (and thus semantically) uniform, how can knowledge from testimony ever be preserved?

Mutually shared contexts make knowledge more likely, but they cannot in principle guarantee that we garner knowledge. This is true even when the object of the knowledge ascription obtains, semantically speaking, because:

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**The New Gettier (TNG):** We routinely fail to impart knowledge through testimony for Gettier-type reasons.

If backgrounds might be shared only accidentally then knowledge from testimony requires more than semantically identical references across interlocutors with shared backgrounds. Where backgrounds are shared accidentally interlocutors will preserve uniform semantic content. There are lots of ways for interlocutors to only accidentally share context. Perhaps the situation is such that the odds of two speakers sharing some relevant background are sufficiently low, or maybe for some reason there's simply no way of verifying that there is a relevantly shared context at all. In cases where interlocutors either can't check, or, if they could, probably wouldn't share a context (though might still), we would say they accidentally share that context. To accidentally share a context is just to say that, a) it just as easily could have been otherwise and, b) we more than likely wouldn't have noticed. They are thus Gettier'd on the transfer of knowledge through testimony.

Here is the argument for TNG:

- 1) Contexts are often only accidentally shared.
- 2) When context is only accidentally shared, the truth of the resultant beliefs only accidentally matches the truth of the utterance, since
- 3) For knowledge to transfer, the truth of what is uttered cannot only accidentally match to the truth of what is believed.

Therefore, c) We routinely fail to impart knowledge through testimony for Gettier-type reasons.

## II.II The Linguistic Defeater

Suppose that Faye is wandering about town on her own when she meets Joanne. This morning Bronwyn has described to Faye the tree house that she built at the edge of the forest as a child. However, Bronwyn is unsure that the tree house remains. Bronwyn seems nostalgic for her tree house of old, and so Faye goes looking for it. In actual fact the tree house that Bronwyn built is gone. There is however a new tree house, located at the edge of the forest where the trees are dense enough to satisfy Faye's conditions for forest-hood. Joanne, unbeknownst to Faye, is new in town. By pure chance, she's from Texas too.

Faye: Excuse me? My girlfriend tells me that at the edge of the forest there is a tree house that she built when she was younger.

Joanne: I did see a tree house at the edge of the forest, just the other day.

Faye: So there *is* a tree house!



Joanne: Oh yes, there's a tree house at the edge of the forest.

It looks like there's a defeater for Faye's belief. Namely, that lots of people around could just as well have meant something totally different by 'forest.' Joanne happens to share Faye's standards for forest-hood because Joanne shares a relevant context to Faye's. Faye has acquired a true belief that there is a tree house at the edge of the forest and what Faye infers from this bit of knowledge is that Bronwyn's tree house is at the edge of the forest.

The tree house that Faye now knows is at the edge of the forest is nowhere near where Bronwyn's tree house ever would have been. Had Faye asked nearly *anybody else* in town, she would have been met with the answer, "No, there is no tree house at the edge of the forest." The just-as-likely conversation would have resulted in what would have counted for Faye as a false belief, but would have enabled her to transfer knowledge to Bronwyn, that there is no tree house at the edge of the forest, and thus that Bronwyn's tree house is gone. This bizarre chain of knowledge transferring through testimony is the result of the defeater for Faye that it just as easily could have been the case that the testimony she received had come from somebody who meant something different by 'forest.'

If this is plausible then it looks like Faye has no way of excluding the possibility that someone asserting *s* could just as easily have meant something else. If that's right, then even if a speaker *does* mean by *s* what is semantically uniform to Faye's utterance of 'forest,' the relevant defeater indicates that it would be fortuitous. Taken this way, a linguistic defeater for knowledge from testimony should give rise to new worries about the possibility of being Gettier'd on the testimonial transmission of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I'd like to thank audiences at Northwestern University (In particular, Ezra Cook, with whom I had several conversations regarding the project) and the University of Texas. Also, I would like to thank Jeremy Fantl who was my advisor at the University of Calgary when I began this project, with whom I developed the base cases for the problem.