



Brief article

Revisiting norms of assertion

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ABSTRACT

A principal conclusion supported by convergent evidence from cognitive science, life science, and philosophy is that knowledge is a central norm of assertion—that is, according to the rules of the practice, assertions should express knowledge. That view has recently been challenged with new experiments. This paper identifies a critical confound in the experiments. In the process, a new study is reported that provides additional support for the view that knowledge is a central norm of assertion.

1. Introduction

A challenge facing any communication system is that the interests of sender and receiver often diverge, leading to dishonest signaling, such as false predator alarm calls. If dishonesty proliferates too much, then the signals will eventually be ignored and the communication channel rendered worthless. Stable and enduring communication systems thus include mechanisms that promote honest signaling. In humans, assertion is a principal means of communicating information. What prevents humans from dishonestly asserting enough to destabilize the practice?

I have argued that the human practice of assertion is at least partially sustained by a socially policed rule that *assertions should express knowledge*. This view attempts to shed light on human communication by placing it in a broader context of scientific understanding of animal communication. In particular, on this view, the human practice of assertion is partly sustained by mechanisms similar to those that sustain non-human communication systems. This provides the view with a deep and principled theoretical motivation. Importantly, it is also supported by convergent evidence from several areas of cognitive science, including developmental and cross-cultural psychology (Turri & Park, in press; for a comprehensive review, see Turri, 2016a; for a shorter review, see Turri, 2017a).

Markus Kneer (2018) recently challenged this view. He assessed four hypotheses from the philosophical literature on assertability, which differ on whether to substitute an appropriate phrase pertaining to belief, justified belief, truth, or knowledge into the schema, “Assert that P only if __,” where “P” stands for a proposition. Kneer focused his critical energy on two of these views: “Assert that P only if you know that P” and “Assert that P only if P is true.” He conducted several studies in which participants read a brief scenario and judged whether a specific proposition was true, assertable, and known. Kneer manipulated (between-subjects) whether the relevant proposition was false or

true in the scenario. Replicating previous findings (see below for references), he found that a nontrivial number of participants in several key conditions judged that an agent should assert a proposition that is false and not known. He interprets this as strong evidence against a normative connection between knowledge and assertion. By contrast, he interprets some of his results as suggesting that “justified belief” is the norm of assertion (“Assert that P only if you have a justified belief that P”).

2. Theory

Before proceeding to the main critical point, I would first like to emphasize some theoretical points of agreement. Despite being framed principally as a critical response to my work, Kneer’s contribution is arguably best understood as a response to a superficially similar but fundamentally different view from the theoretical philosophy literature. That view is only loosely related to empirical evidence. It assumes, among other things, that there is a single, exceptionless standard of assertability (for discussion, see Turri, 2014; see also footnote 3 and the General Discussion of Kneer, 2018). On this approach, if assertions should express knowledge, then in no circumstance should anyone assert anything that they do not know. This view has been repeatedly rejected in the literature (Turri, 2014, 2016a: p. 63, 2017a), because it is inconsistent with how social rules tend to work and also with a range of experimental findings. Social rules tend to tolerate exceptions. You should donate to charity, but you do not violate this rule by not donating today, this week, or this month; parents should pay attention to their children, but parents typically do not violate this rule by sleeping. Similarly, while existing evidence shows that knowledge is a central norm of assertion, it does not support the conclusion that knowledge is an exceptionalness standard of assertability, or that all people tend to reliably link assertability with knowledge in all circumstances. Instead,

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Table 1
Logistic regression predicting assertability attributions.

	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	Odds Ratio 95% CI	
							LLCI	ULCI
Truth-value	0.61	0.94	0.43	1	.513	1.85	0.29	11.61
Option	-3.82	0.70	29.89	1	< .001	45.50	11.58	178.80
Truth-value × option	2.11	1.07	3.87	1	.049	0.12	0.02	0.99
Constant	2.57	0.60	18.33	1	< .001	13.00		

Note: $\chi^2(3, n = 185) = 81.48, p < .001, \text{Cox \& Snell } R^2 = .356, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = .520.$ Reference class for truth-value: false. Reference class for option: plain.

existing evidence shows that there is a detectable, often very strong, central tendency to link judgments about assertability to knowledge. Better understanding this central tendency’s limitations is a principal objective of ongoing research, to which Kneer’s paper contributes.

Just as “should” does not express an exceptionless standard, neither does it identify the unique standard of assertability. People distinguish assertions that should not be made from blameworthy assertions (Turri, 2013; Turri & Blouw, 2015), so in that sense there are at least two standards. This reflects a more general fact that people reliably distinguish what someone *should not do* from what he is *blameless for doing*. For instance, people reliably distinguish between broken promises that should have been kept and those that were blamelessly broken (Buckwalter & Turri, 2015; Chituc, Henne, Sinnott-Armstrong, & De Brigard, 2016; Turri, 2016c, 2017b). People also distinguish beliefs that should not be held from blameworthy beliefs (Turri, 2015). Similarly, Kneer’s findings provide some initial evidence that people distinguish assertions that *should* be made from assertions that can be *justified*.

3. Confound

People are more likely to attribute knowledge when the response options contrast knowledge to ignorance, such as “knows/doesn’t know,” than when they contrast knowledge to a different mental state, such as “really knows/only believes,” “really did know/thought she knew,” or “actually knows/only thinks he knows” (e.g. Buckwalter, 2014; Cullen, 2010). A likely explanation is that the *plain* options (“knows/doesn’t know”) increase knowledge attribution because some participants answer based on how things seem to the agent. In comparison, the options involving a *contrast* with how things seem to the agent (e.g. “actually knows/only thinks”) do not force participants to choose between reporting *how things actually are* and *how things seem to the agent*. Similar observations have been made about probing for assertability attributions with the options “should/shouldn’t” compared to “actually should/only thinks he should” (Turri, 2016b).

Unfortunately, Kneer mixed the two types of options (plain/contrast) across the two probes (knowledge/assertability). For example,

Should Bob say “Jill drives an American car”?

- Yes
- No

Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car?

- Yes, Bob really knows that Jill drives an American car.
- No, Bob merely believes that Jill drives an American car.

Thus when Kneer reports observing significantly higher rates of agreement with the first question (over 60% selected “Yes”) compared to the second (only about 20% selected “Yes ...”), there are multiple explanations for the disparity. One explanation, favored by Kneer, is that most people think that the agent actually should assert a proposition he does not actually know. Another explanation is that the results are confounded by unbalanced response options: the knowledge question was asked in a way that tends to reduce the rate of attribution, whereas the assertability question was not.

To help evaluate these two explanations, I conducted a simple

experiment to directly test the effect of response options, while also varying the statement’s truth-value. Two hundred and one U.S. residents were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned in a 2 (truth-value: false, true) × 2 (option type: plain, contrast) between-subjects design. The truth-value factor varied which version of this scenario participants read:

(False/true) Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. A Buick is an American car. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill [replaced it with a Mercedes, which is a German car / regularly cleans its chrome rims with a non-abrasive cloth].¹ One day Bob’s wife asks him, “Does your friend Jill drive an American car?”

The false version of the story is taken verbatim from Kneer’s study, and the true version is a close control matched for length and complexity. The option factor varied the options offered for the assertability and knowledge items:

Bob ___ say that Jill drives an American car. (assertability)

Bob ___ that Jill drives an American car. (knowledge)

The plain options were “should not/should” and “doesn’t know/knows.” The contrast options were “only thinks he should/actually should” and “only thinks he knows/actually knows.” Participants always rated assertability on the first screen, then went to a new screen and rated knowledge. Finally, all participants went to a new screen and answered a comprehension question: “Is it true that Jill drives an American car?” (response options “yes/no”). All response options were randomly rotated. Ninety-two percent of participants (185 of 201) passed the comprehension question.

Binary logistic regression revealed a very large effect of option for each attribution (assertability, knowledge), qualified by a significant interaction between option and truth-value (false, true) (see Tables 1 and 2). Visualization of the results shows that the interaction is due to the difference between options having the predicted effect in the false condition, dramatically reducing attribution of both assertability and knowledge and, indeed, reversing the central tendency of both from agreement to disagreement (see Fig. 1). By contrast, the difference between options had a much smaller effect in the true condition, with agreement remaining the strong central tendency for both attributions regardless of option type.

These results replicate previous findings supporting a normative connection between knowledge and assertion (e.g. Turri, 2016b), and they further demonstrate the importance of using consistent response options across the two types of judgment, especially when, contrary to how things seem to the agent, the relevant proposition is false. For example, focusing on the false conditions in this sample, we find that 93% of participants attribute assertability using the plain options, but only 2% attribute knowledge using the contrast options (a much larger disparity than even Kneer observed). Ignoring the difference between

¹ Indicates a paragraph break on the participant’s screen

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