

Iffy comments

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1 The central fact

We find it harder to assent to *X knows that if not p, q* than to *X knows that p or q*, in a situation where we know that p and not q. This is of course not entirely unexpected if one doesn't believe in the material conditional analysis of indicative conditionals. But one would like to understand this better.

2 The counterfactual interference

In the central case and in an additional case, we have intuitions about the corresponding counterfactual that may interfere.

We know that Bob dislikes Ted so that if his favorite student wasn't Jane, it wouldn't be Ted. That may reduce our enthusiasm for *Alice knows that if not Jane, than Ted*.

We know that if we weren't at this cafe, we would be at the one across the street. That seems to enhance our enthusiasm for *Bill knows that if we're not at this cafe, we're at the one across the street*.

It may make sense to insulate the experiments from this interference. Imagine a Monty Hall-type scenario. We randomly put the ball in one of three places. Turns out it lands in A. We make Jane guess. She picks C. We say "no, it's not in C, it's either in A or in B; guess again".

We say

- (1) Jane knows that it's either in A or in B.
- (2) Jane knows that if it's not in A, it's in B.

In this scenario, there's no counterfactual connection (that if it hadn't been in A, it would have been in B). Seems to me that there's still a contrast between (1) and (2).

BTW, Seth writes "how is it that speakers are so happy to quickly and seamlessly trade in an embedded indicative for a corresponding embedded counterfactual? On the face of it, that would seem to be a momentous trade." ... perhaps not so much for those of us who think that the types of conditionals aren't all that different.

3 The presupposition projection explanation

It seems eminently plausible to me that there's a compatibility presupposition triggered by the conditional and that the presupposition projects in some way from the scope of the knowledge-predicate.

Seth tries to argue against this explanation in two ways.

3.1 Switching to thought

"It's not just that some unfortunate facts about presupposition projection get in the way of Bob's being able to describe my iffy knowledge state. It seems really that *Bob just does not think that Alice has the iffy knowledge she takes herself to have.* (That is not to say that he thinks Alice erred rationally. It is just to say that he thinks that Alice's iffy belief state does not constitute knowledge.)"

I wish to file a complaint against this kind of argument. I need to be convinced that we have any kind of intuitive access to what Bob (or anyone) *thinks* about conditionals, other than consulting judgments about *sentences*. Just putting things in italics doesn't help.

3.2 Non-presupposed assent

(10) Alice thinks that my favorite student is either Jane or Ted—and she’s right.

(11) Alice thinks that if my favorite student isn’t Jane, it’s Ted—??and she’s right.

“Here we get rid of ‘knows’ and the various presuppositional distractions it creates. Out of Bob’s mouth, (10) seems clearly better than (11). Why is this?”

I don’t see this as problematic for the presupposition-based explanation of the initial contrast. Yes, we need an explanation for this contrast as well, and presumably we can understand the weirdness of (11) since Bob doesn’t think that it is right that if his favorite student isn’t Jane, it’s Ted“, while it’s not obvious that Bob doesn’t think that it is right that his favorite student is either Jane or Ted.

FWIW, I find both of the following ok coming from Bob. Explanation: Bob is not endorsing the content of Alice’s beliefs but merely their rationality.

(10’) Alice is right to think that my favorite student is either Jane or Ted.

(11’) Alice is right to think that if my favorite student isn’t Jane, it’s Ted.

4 Making good on the presuppositional explanation

While I’m very much in favor of the presuppositional explanation, I’m not quite clear on how it works. Seth talks about the compatibility presupposition of the embedded conditional projecting out. Another possibility is that it is simply the factivity of *know*, which leads to the truth of the conditional being presupposed. But in either case, there’s a question of whose information state the conditional is about (I’m assuming the usual epistemic theory of indicative conditionals.)

Presumably, we may have to learn from how other subjective/relative/context-dependent expressions embed under (factive) attitudes. There are some observations and proposals in the relativist/contextualist debate (see Lasersohn, Stephenson on the linguistic end, for example). “Jane knows that pizza is tasty” seems to carry speaker endorsement just as much as Seth’s case.

5 Two further data points

Trusted informants report that the conditional knowledge claim becomes much easier to digest in two environments: as the conclusion of a logical inference and when it is explicitly marked as limited knowledge.

(1) Since Alice knows that either Jane or Ted is my favorite, she knows that if it isn't Jane it's Ted.

(2) Alice doesn't know who my favorite is; *all* she knows is that if it isn't Jane, it's Ted.

6 A Kratzerian comment

As a card-carrying part-time Kratzerian, I have to point out that under the restrictor view of *if*-clauses, our sentences might be ambiguous:

1. know [OP if p , q] ... where *if* p restricts a covert (epistemic modal?) operator underneath *know*
2. know-if p [q] ... where *if* p restricts *know*

What would it mean for *if* p to restrict *know*? Well, *Jane knows-if* p that q would say (in Hintikka-style semantics) that among the worlds compatible with what Jane knows, all the ones that make p true also make q true. I *think* that this reading would predict that Bob should assent to the sentence.

7 Some comments on the results of the pilot experiments

- Seth notes that there's a bimodal distribution in the judgments of *Alice knows that if not Jane, then Ted*. This may support the Kratzerian ambiguity idea.
- Subjects don't mind the subjunctive *Sally knows that if Bob's favorite student weren't Jane, it would be Ted*. This may suggest that they allow an *epistemic* reading of subjunctive conditionals (as sometimes discussed in the literature).