

RE-THINKING THE DUPLICATION OF SPEAKER/HEARER BELIEF IN  
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY†

ABSTRACT

Most epistemologists of testimony assume that testifying requires that the beliefs to which speakers attest are identical to the beliefs that hearers accept. I argue that this characterization of testimony is misleading. Characterizing testimony in terms of duplicating speaker/hearer belief unduly restricts the variety of beliefs that might be accepted from speaker testimony.

What does it mean to testify to something? Testimony involves communication between epistemic agents in an attempt to convey information. Elizabeth Fricker (1987, 68-9) defines testimony precisely: "A speaker, believing that *p*, and wishing to communicate this belief, makes an utterance which constitutes his asserting that *p* ... a hearer, observing and understanding it ... comes also to believe that *p*." (See also Fricker 1994, § 3 and 1995, § 2). Recently cited by Jennifer Lackey (forthcoming, n4) as representative of the literature, Fricker's definition expresses what I'll dub the *paradigmatic view of testimony*. With few exceptions, this view is dominant among contemporary epistemologists. It can be stated like so

*PVT: Speaker (S) testifies to hearer (H) just in case S intends to communicate her belief that p to H and, if H accepts a belief, H accepts the belief that p.*

PVT has these components: (i) the communicable content expressed between **S** and **H** is transferred via the medium of *belief*; and (ii) **S** intends to communicate a belief to **H**. In addition to these first two components, there is a discernable third component of PVT—namely, the assumption that the *same* belief is transferred between **S** and **H**. Although the former components have been recently criticized,<sup>1</sup> it is nearly received wisdom in the epistemology of testimony that the beliefs to which a speaker attests are *identical* to the beliefs a hearer receives. If I'm speaking with you and

comment: "Miami ran three hundred and twenty-seven yards against Dallas" (e.g.), the paradigmatic view considers our exchange successful only if you, the hearer, recover that very belief. I'll dub this the *duplication thesis* of testimony. Duplication of speaker/hearer belief occurs when the proposition to which a speaker attests is identical with the proposition that a hearer accepts. To question this assumption is timely. Sanford Goldberg (forthcoming, n6) recently pointed out that only rarely is the duplication thesis called into question.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing upon recent work in language pragmatics, I argue that the duplication thesis mischaracterizes the range of beliefs that can be communicated using testimony. Specifically, I argue that testifying does *not* require the duplication thesis. On the contrary, successful communication using testimony sometimes depends upon hearers accepting propositions that are merely *implied* or *suggested* by a speaker's utterance, as opposed to those *expressly stated*. Plausibly, the testimony offered by **S** to **H** in contexts where the meaning of **S**'s testimony is unclear, partial, or otherwise indeterminate, gives rise to **H** accepting the testimony-based belief that *q*, where *q* is merely implicated by **S**'s testimony. The upshot is that epistemologists of testimony who endorse PVT neglect the *variety* of beliefs that might be acquired from speaker say-so.

This paper proceeds in two sections. In the first, I argue that duplication of speaker/hearer belief is a limiting condition on testimonial communication. I conclude that duplication of

speaker/hearer belief isn't required for testimonial communication after all.

## 1. Implicating testimony

Contrast the duplication thesis of testimony with relevance theories of communication. According to some relevance theories (Sperber & Wilson 1987; 1995; 1998), contents communicated in speech go well beyond what can be encoded in words. Relevance theories thus challenge the duplication of speaker/hearer belief that paradigmatic theorists consider integral for testimony-based communication. For, if an act of communication – testifying, for example – is of ambiguous significance, the belief(s) **H** happens to acquire becomes a matter of **H** accepting one or the other better supported interpretations of the testimony's relevance. So relevance theory has it that the strict duplication of speaker/hearer belief is an inessential complication for either conveying information or for understanding speaker meaning.

Consider the significance of relevance theory for PVT by reflecting on the performance of an unambiguous speech-act. Philosophically, it is neither interesting nor important that communication between speaker and hearer is often direct, unambiguous, and clear. Unless I mumble, slur my speech, or otherwise make it difficult for you to understand me, my comment to you about the yards Miami ran against Dallas makes it obvious that the belief you acquire is caused by my utterance about that fact. But important challenges to this view emerge from cases where a speaker's utterance, due either to context, ambiguity, or some other reason, explicitly display *different* – even directly contrary – speaker beliefs. Consider, for example, Grice's letter of faint praise (1989, 33):

*A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows: "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc." (Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover, he knows that more*

*information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only on the assumption that he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating).*

For the purposes of this essay, there are two points about Grice's letter I wish to emphasize. The first concerns the professor's expressly stated utterance. It is safe to say that the professor's expressly stated beliefs are *distinct* from the beliefs that readers of Grice's letter might accept. Plausibly, ambiguous or context-dependent utterances implicate beliefs that, while not duplicating the beliefs the speaker directly attests to, nonetheless convey the information the speaker intends to communicate. What this points to is that success conditions on communication (in this case, *testimonial* communication) sometimes depends upon information implicated to **H** through **S**'s utterance; *not* on a literal 'content-preserving' interpretation of what **S** said. Readers of Grice's letter might accept myriad implicatures, among them: X should have tried harder in philosophy; the job should go to someone else; X would be better off in a different career, and so on. The powerful suggestion is that language pragmatics (and communicable implicature in particular) plays an essential role for interpreting heavily context-dependent utterances. Although this is not a novel observation for philosophers of language, its application to the epistemology of testimony is revealing. It shows that testimony does not always involve a speaker's expressly stated beliefs. This is the second point I wish to emphasize about Grice's letter.

There is an obvious sense in which the professor testified to X's English skills (etc.); but there is an equally obvious sense in which the professor *meant* to testify to X's philosophical aptitude. If so, PVT fails to capture the range of beliefs that can be testified to. To be sure, the belief the professor intended to communicate – namely, that X is no good at philosophy – isn't what is communicated when testimony is viewed narrowly in terms of duplicating speaker/hearer belief. Yet it is misleading (if not simply false) to suspect that beliefs about X's English skills (etc.) are the intended, actual, or even only beliefs that

the professor testified to. The upshot is that the point of the professor's implicature is completely missed if testimony is viewed as requiring the duplication thesis. If we're entitled to a swift conclusion, it's this: variation between speaker/hearer belief is neglected – wrongly – if the duplication thesis is considered a necessary condition on successful testimonial communication.

But what reasons are there for thinking that the professor testified to an implicature? Relevance theory provides support for the thesis that a speaker's utterance can implicate testimony, and provides rough criteria for when this occurs. Some brands of relevance theory (for example, Sperber and Wilson 1987, 1995; 1998) hold that human cognition tends towards the *maximization* of relevance. On this view, loosely pragmatic considerations about what reference letters are for allow **S** a range of communicative techniques to satisfy the purpose of the letter; the same consideration provides **H** with a range of interpretive techniques to understand them. Grice's letter illustrates this nicely. Grice's faint-praise gloss suggests an *anticipated* report about *X*'s philosophical aptitude. In the 'absence' of such a report, the relevance of what first appear to be puzzling comments about *X*'s English skills (etc.) becomes clear: Grice's professor is testifying that *X* is no good at philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

That the beliefs to which a speaker attests need *not* be identical with the beliefs a hearer receives ramifies more widely into considerations about what constrains the sorts of beliefs that might be implicated using testimony. What is needed is a principled reason to accept that the beliefs implicated by a speaker's utterance are the beliefs that the speaker testified to. For, in the absence of sufficient reasons for refraining from too radical an interpretation of **S**'s implicatures, **H** might derive beliefs from **S**'s testimony that are patently inconsistent with speaker-testimony. The belief that "X speaks English and regularly attends lectures" might be converted by a hearer into the warranted belief that "X makes fantastic pancakes" (e.g.). It could be the case that *X* makes fantastic pancakes, but that has nothing obviously to do with the beliefs other people have about *X*'s English skills (etc.). What this points to is that rejecting the duplication thesis must be accompanied by considerations about what can

and cannot be implicated using testimony.

Plausibly, interpretations constrained by consistency with a speaker's general communicative aim provide more thoroughgoing and general reasons for what beliefs **H** might accept from **S**'s utterance, rather than those that might be accepted from too radical a loosening of success conditions on communication. I take up this issue again in the next section.

## 2. Going without duplication

Speech acts often contain linguistically encoded propositions that appear in contexts where their meaning is unclear. When this happens, understanding speaker-meaning requires decoding or disambiguating speaker *utterances*. To borrow an illustration from Sperber & Wilson (1998, 186), suppose that Martha utters the imperative "open the bottle" to Jones. In most situations, Martha would be asking Jones to uncork the bottle or to unscrew its cap. Uncorking the bottle or unscrewing its cap are standard ways of opening bottles. One way of explaining this would be to suggest that a verb like 'open' is specified by its direct object; thus Martha is asking Jones to either uncork the bottle or to unscrew its cap. But there are many ways to open bottles. Jones might strap an explosive to the bottle or throw the bottle from a roof top, and in some situations this might be what Martha was asking Jones to do. It would be safe to say, then, that decoding a linguistic utterance can lead to multiple beliefs that accomplish the objective or aim of the utterance. Given Jones' imagination, it's prejudicial to think that opening the bottle by smashing it on the floor is a less successful response to an interpretation of Martha's utterance than gingerly popping the cork at dinner.

If we accept that **S**'s utterance to **H** contains linguistically encoded propositions, and if we also accept the intuitive thesis that linguistically encoded propositions require deciphering prior to comprehension, then understanding testimony cannot be a simple matter of **H** accepting beliefs based on **S**'s utterance, but must instead be based on **H**'s *interpretation* of the *semantics* of **S**'s utterance. Once it is accepted that the meaning of **S**'s utterance is the locus of epistemological significance in communicative exchange, the

initially plausible thesis that testifying requires the duplication of speaker/hearer belief looks too restrictive to capture the variety of beliefs that might be culled from speaker testimony.

Cases like those described in Grice's letter show that the proposition **H** recovers from **S**'s testimony may be the negation of the proposition that **S** asserts. But damning praise limits the kinds of propositions that might be accepted by a hearer from a single instance of speaker say-so. Consider a second type of case showing that **H**'s acceptance of **S**'s testimony leads **H** to derive multiple propositions, and not necessarily the negation of the proposition **S** happens to assert. Suppose Martha testifies something to Jones on an occasion that doesn't make its relevance quite clear. Martha utters "I'm tired." "I'm tired" is a complete sentence in English. In certain contexts it's also sufficiently vague, requiring a hearer to decipher and then derive its meaning. Suppose that Martha and Jones are vacationing in Italy. Martha utters "I'm tired" in the middle of a museum tour. To what is Martha testifying? Well, at least some of the conditions depend upon the hearer, in this case, Jones. S&W (1998, 195) note some implicatures:

- (a) Martha's enjoyment of this visit is diminishing.
- (b) Martha would like to cut short their visit to the museum.
- (c) Martha is encouraging Jones to admit that he is also tired and wants to cut short the visit.
- (d) Martha would like them to go back to the hotel after this visit to the museum, rather than visiting the Duomo, as they had planned.

Is Martha testifying to any of these implicatures? There is reason for thinking that she is. Earlier speculations about relevance theory suggest that Martha is testifying to, and is understood by Jones to be testifying to, *any* of these implicatures. The reason is that any of these specific and varied interpretations offer Jones a different belief based on the relevance of Martha's utterance *and* each is perfectly consistent with Martha's communicative aim. If there is no clear or obviously better reason to select one of these beliefs as the distinct "thing-meant," then the belief Jones attributes to Martha requires Jones to settle on one or the other better supported interpretations (Kenyon 2005, § 6;

S&W 1998, § 4, 5). This point deserves to be underscored. Since any roughly equivalent interpretation of what Martha implicated will belong to a family of closely associated propositions, and since each proposition is a derivative of Martha's utterance, any can be chosen to display the content of Martha's testimony. What this points out is that communication between speaker and hearer in contexts where **S**'s utterance is ambiguous depends upon inferring its relevance from **H**'s background beliefs. Nothing in this picture suggests that communication fails (Grice 1989, ch. 14; Davis 2002, 516).

Two observations about the Martha/Jones scenario bear upon PVT. It is fair to say, first, that in contexts where the relevance of **S**'s testimony is unclear, fragmentary, or otherwise indeterminate, the belief(s) **H** recovers are at least partially determined by the contribution **H** makes to the communicative process.<sup>4</sup> Communication involves a complex interaction between interlocutors, and it is not restricted to the (comparatively straightforward) transfer of belief based upon the content of explicit speech acts. PVT's presumption that testimonial success requires the duplication of speaker/hearer belief is deeply mistaken. Since different hearers may reach different beliefs on the basis of a single utterance without any intuitive difference in the degree of communicative success, the duplication of speaker/hearer belief is *not* a necessary condition for testimonial exchange.

Of course, Martha's testimony may have a determinant meaning. "I'm tired" might just mean 'I want to rest for the remainder of the afternoon.' And from long experience Jones may believe or even know that this is the case. But the success of this exchange neither rules out nor renders less successful other interpretations, provided they too would underwrite actions or inferences consonant with Martha's general *aim* in so speaking to Jones. In other words: the success of a particular communicative act has more to do with the wider point of its performance than with the strict duplication of thoughts in the speaker and the hearer (Kenyon 2005, 14). The duplication of speaker/hearer belief may be a legitimate idealization for epistemologists of testimony, but not all idealizations are legitimate. Idealizations are unhelpful if they put the theoretical work down the wrong track. Epistemologically, it is a big step in

the wrong direction to neglect the fact that testimony is subject to the same communicative phenomena (implicature, vagueness, semantic ambiguity) that beset ordinary language. Relevance theories thus suggest a *reductio* of the duplication thesis:

- (i) Assume that testifying requires the duplication of **S/H** belief.
- (ii) In some contexts where **S** testifies *p* to **H**, the relevance of **S**'s testimony is not clear to **H**.
- (iii) **S**'s testimony implicates the beliefs (*q*, *r*, *s*) for **H**.
- (iv) There is no principled reason for **H** to choose either *q*, *r* or *s* as the correct interpretation of the relevance of **S**'s testimony.
- (v) **H** accepts *q* (or *r* or *s*) as the most relevant interpretation for **S**'s testimony.
- (vi) So testifying does not require the duplication of **S/H** belief [(iii) & (v)].

Of course, **H** may select *p* as the correct (that is, most relevant) interpretation for *p*. In that case, **S**'s ambiguous utterance *p* is identical to the belief

formed in **H**, just as the paradigmatic view says. But relevance theorists would regard this instance of duplication as a happy accident of communicable exchange and not, as PVT has it, a pre-theoretical condition imposed upon successful communication. If we hold the intuitive thesis that contextual variation imposes interpretive communicative procedures on speaker/hearer interaction, the duplication thesis unduly restricts the success conditions on testimonial communication. The substantive philosophical point is that the success conditions on communication that are paradigmatically required by epistemologists as instances of testimony proper are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for testimonial exchange.

In sum, accepting that the beliefs to which **S** attests need to be identical to the beliefs **H** accepts unduly – and wrongly – neglects the variation of belief between speaker/hearer testimony. The conclusion is that the success conditions on testimonial communication allow for the acceptance of belief outside of the strict duplication of speaker/hearer belief.

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## Notes

- † My thanks to Sanford Goldberg, Tim Kenyon, and Nathan Ballantyne for helpful comments on an earlier draft.
- <sup>1</sup> By way of criticism, Jennifer Lackey (forthcoming, § 1) convincingly argues that *statements* are the epistemologically significant items in testimonial transfer, though the content of speaker/hearer belief remains the same. Nathan Ballantyne (unpublished) argues that the testimony does not require speaker intentions. See also Sanford Goldberg (2001) for an argument in which hearers can acquire knowledge based on false speaker testimony.
  - <sup>2</sup> “[R]are are the cases in which people even bother to consider cases where what the hearer knows differs from what the speaker literally said.”
  - <sup>3</sup> Consider a few other examples illustrating this same point. Suppose that Jones asks Smith what he thinks about a new colleague; Smith replies: ‘he makes good coffee.’ There is, I suggest, an obvious sense that Smith testified in which he doesn’t think highly of his new colleague. Given the assumption that Jones is *expecting* an answer and that Smith knows this, Smith’s comment suffices as a testimonial implicature. Consider a second illustration. Suppose that Jones and Martha are at dinner. Martha asks Jones which meal he likes better, the steak or the fish. Jones replies that he’ll order the fish. Again, given Jones’ response and Martha’s expectation of relevance, Jones has testified that he doesn’t care for steak.
  - <sup>4</sup> Unlike testimonial justification which either requires a fair amount of work on the part of the hearer (reductionism) or none at all (non-reductionism), the argument here is that the initial reception of testimony requires cognitive effort, regardless of its subsequent justification.

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