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# Simple Contextualism about Epistemic Modals is Incorrect

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## Simple Contextualism about Epistemic Modals is Incorrect

### *Abstract*

I argue against a simple contextualist account of epistemic modals. My argument, like the argument on which it is based (von Fintel and Gillies 2011 and MacFarlane 2011), charges that simple contextualism cannot explain all of the conversational data about uses of epistemic modals. My argument improves on its predecessor by insulating itself from recent contextualist attempts by Janice Dowell (2011) and Igor Yanovich (2014) to get around that argument. In particular, I use linguistic data to show that an utterance of an epistemic modal sentence can be warranted, while an utterance of its suggested simple contextualist paraphrase is not.

### *1. Introduction*

During the first decade of the 2000's, many theorists migrated away from a simple contextualist account of epistemic modals like 'might' and 'must'. Apparent puzzles have led some to abandon the contextualist theory of the truth-conditions of sentences involving these terms.<sup>1</sup> Others have responded by pairing contextualism with a complex pragmatic story.<sup>2</sup> But lately, some theorists – in particular, Janice Dowell (2011) and Igor Yanovich (2014) – have

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1 In its place, some theorists have adopted alternative truth-conditional theories, while others have situated epistemic modals in a non-truth-conditional framework. The alternative theories include relativist – MacFarlane (2011), Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherston (2005) and Stephenson (2007) – expressivist – Yalcin (2007), Yalcin (2011), Swanson (forthcoming) and Rothschild (2012) – and dynamic – Veltman (1996), Willer (2013), Groenendijk, Stokhof and Veltman (1996), Beaver (2001) and Yalcin (2012) – accounts.

2 See von Fintel and Gillies (2011), Montminy (2012) and some suggestions in Lennertz (2014).

attempted to defend the simple contextualist account against these apparent puzzles.<sup>3</sup> Dowell's work suggests that paying closer attention to our judgments about key cases greatly improves the prospects for the simple contextualist account. And Yanovich suggests that realizing how the context is affected by the practical goals of the inquiry helps to save the account. However, in this paper, I will use unexplored linguistic data to show that the main point of one original argument against simple contextualism is, indeed, compelling. So, I will conclude that we should, accordingly, reject the theory.

What I call *simple contextualism* is characterized by two theses:

(1) A sentence of the form 'It might be that S' at a context expresses a proposition that is true just in case, where p is the proposition expressed by S at the context, p is consistent with the relevant information of the context.<sup>4</sup>

(2) The responses to an utterance of a 'might'-sentence can be explained in terms of the proposition it expresses at the context of utterance.

(1) is the contextualist proposal about the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed by a

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3 The discussion in Schaffer (2011) also leads us in this direction. However, Schaffer is open to a pragmatic explanation of some of the problems, allowing that they "might only concern *implicatures* or other matters downstream from the propositions at issue" (2011: 219) and also suggesting further investigation of the pragmatic solution of von Stechow and Gillies (2011). My focus in this paper will be Dowell's work and Yanovich's work.

4 This sort of account is accepted by Dowell (2011), Yanovich (2014) and many others, including von Stechow and Gillies (2011), Schaffer (2011), Montminy (2012) and Stanley (2005). These accounts are related to Angelika Kratzer's (1981, 1991) seminal treatment of natural language modals. Ninan (2010) also accepts something like this (where the relevant information must include that of the speaker), though he takes pains to stress that this is an account of what he calls 'assertoric content', not compositional semantic value. See note 5 for more on this distinction.

‘might’-sentence at a context.<sup>5</sup> (2) is the part of the theory that makes it simple – distinguishing it from theories that rely on more complex pragmatic explanations of linguistic data. I should note that neither Dowell (2011) nor Yanovich (2014) explicitly endorses (2).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, much of the discussion in both papers suggests a view like simple contextualism, in which all of the explanations of the conversational data rely on only the proposition expressed. I will argue that, though Dowell and Yanovich both offer insight into the nuances of the standard objections to simple contextualism, we should still reject the simple contextualist picture as inadequate.

The outline of my argument is as follows. Given (1), there will, in each particular context, be an approximate paraphrase of the ‘might’-sentence – something of the form: ‘S is consistent with the body of information having property F’ (where S is a sentence and F names a

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5 I phrase contextualism as a thesis about the proposition expressed by a ‘might’-sentence (or as a thesis about truth-conditions, which are determined by such a proposition). I don’t claim that this is a thesis about the semantic value of a ‘might’-sentence. Indeed, see Ninan (2010) and Rabern (2012) for the position that contextualists can avoid some problems with embedding by separating the notion of the proposition expressed by a ‘might’-sentence in a context (what they call the ‘assertoric content’) and the semantic value of a ‘might’-sentence. This point is anticipated in Yalcin’s (2007) discussion of what he calls *the diagonal view*. For the larger observation that the proposition expressed (assertoric content, informational content, what is said) should, in general, be distinct from the compositional semantic value (ingredient sense), see Lewis (1980), Dummett (1973, 1991), Stanley (1997) and Ninan (2012).

6 Dowell (2011) leaves open that the prejacent of a ‘might’-sentence may sometimes be available for response. MacFarlane (2011), von Stechow and Gillies (2011) and Dowell (2011), herself, show that relying on the prejacent is not a *general* solution to the problem. Yanovich (2014) also mentions the prejacent, though this is in the context of a discussion of von Stechow and Gillies (2011), and it is unclear whether he endorses such an explanatory strategy.

property).<sup>7</sup> I will use this fact to argue against the simple contextualist view, presenting pairs of conversations that differ in appropriateness based on whether the ‘might’-sentence or its proposed paraphrase is used. This will yield, for each suggested paraphrase, a disjunctive conclusion: that the paraphrase is not accurate or that it is accurate but something other than the proposition expressed by the ‘might’-sentence at the context is what the response targets. Showing this for each possible contextualist paraphrase shows either that no contextualist paraphrase is correct or that one is but something other than the proposition expressed by the ‘might’-sentence at the context is being responded to. That is, this shows that we need to reject either (1) or (2) and accept either an alternative view of the proposition expressed or a more complex pragmatic account.

## 2. *The Original Problem*

In “A Flexible Contextualist Account of Epistemic Modals”, Dowell responds to a number of related issues that have been pressed as problems for simple contextualism. I’m going to focus on one of these issues – responses to utterances of ‘might’-sentences.<sup>8</sup> Here is the sort of

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7 It is worth noting that such paraphrases may only be *approximate*. This is because, in the paraphrase, I often use a definite description to pick out the relevant body of information, even though one could hold that the body of information is picked out rigidly. The approximateness, however, does not affect our results, since we are only concerned with truth-values in this world (for instance, none of our conversations involve embedding under alethic modals, subjunctive conditionals, or attitude verbs). Thus, picking out the information by description is good enough for our purposes. Accordingly, I drop the talk of *approximateness* in speaking of the paraphrases.

8 The other issues involve retraction, disputes and eavesdroppers. The two main sources for these sorts of concerns are Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson (2005) and MacFarlane (2011). Some, but not others, are taken to be serious hurdles for contextualism by von Fintel and Gillies (2011). I will not address the other popular problem for simple contextualism, which is originally raised in Yalcin (2007). Dowell (2011) does not address this either,

case on which I wish to focus. My presentation draws heavily on the way von Fintel and Gillies (2011) and Dowell (2011) set up the problem. While her parents were away, Beebe had an epic party. A few days after they returned, her parents grounded her for doing this. Since the house was spotless and there were no other clues, someone must have told them about the party. Beebe and Doug are trying to figure out who tattled. They don't yet know who the tattler is, but they have correctly ruled out some people who were at the party – among them, Patti. Skeeter has not yet ruled out Patti and thinks that, given Patti's poor track record for keeping secrets under pressure, it is somewhat likely that she tattled. Doug and Beebe call Skeeter into the room to see what information he has. Skeeter has no knowledge of what Doug and Beebe already know:

(Tattle)        Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

Skeeter: Well, Patti might be the tattler.

Doug: No. She went out of town before Beebe's parents returned.

(Tattle) seems like a natural conversation in which all of the utterances are appropriate.

Remember that contextualism says that (1) a sentence of the form 'It might be that S' at a context expresses a proposition that is true just in case, where p is the proposition expressed by S at the context, p is consistent with the relevant information of the context. In (Tattle), there seem to be two natural possibilities for what information is relevant in the context. One is that it is Skeeter's own information; the other is that it is the information distributed amongst the members of the group consisting of Beebe, Doug and Skeeter (what I will call the *group's* information<sup>9</sup>). Let's see the problem with each of these suggestions.

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though Yanovich (2014) attempts to show how his theory is consistent with the data in this area.

9 As will become clear, the claim that the *shared* (rather than *distributed*) information of the group is relevant

First, suppose that only Skeeter's information is relevant. Then we cannot explain the appropriateness of Doug's response in a manner consistent with simple contextualism. For according to (1), we can form a conversation, (Tattle<sub>S</sub>), in which Skeeter uses a contextualist paraphrase of the 'might'-sentence (under the assumption that his information is relevant). And according to (2), Doug's reply in (Tattle<sub>S</sub>) should be appropriate if and only if his reply in (Tattle) is (assuming the same background for (Tattle<sub>S</sub>) as (Tattle)):

(Tattle<sub>S</sub>)      Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

Skeeter: Well, it is consistent with my information that Patti is the tattler.

Doug: # No. She went out of town before Beebe's parents returned.

Since Doug's reply is appropriate in (Tattle) but not (Tattle<sub>S</sub>), one of our assumptions – (1), (2), or the assumption that Skeeter's information is relevant – must be false. Perhaps the culprit is our supposition that Skeeter's information is relevant.

So, let's investigate the other possibility – that the relevant information is the group's information. This seems to avoid the last problem. We can form a conversation, (Tattle<sub>G</sub>), involving a contextualist paraphrase of the 'might'-sentence which – as predicted by assumption (2) – matches (Tattle) in appropriateness in this scenario:

(Tattle<sub>G</sub>)      Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

Skeeter: Well, it is consistent with the group's information that Patti is the

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leads to the same problem as the thesis that it is Skeeter's own information that is relevant. The shared information of any group cannot be more informative than the information of any member of the group. For more on group information, see Cook (2013).

tattler.

Doug: No. She went out of town before Beebe's parents returned.

What we can call the *group reading* of Skeeter's utterance of the 'might'-sentence in (Tattle) looks promising.

However, as MacFarlane (2011) and von Fintel and Gillies (2011) point out, it seems that Skeeter's utterance of the 'might'-sentence in (Tattle) is *warranted*, but the group reading cannot make sense of why this is so. In order to be warranted in making his utterance, Skeeter would have to have a justified belief about what is consistent with the group's information. But he need not, in fact, be justified in having beliefs about what information Beebe and Doug have in the situation surrounding (Tattle). So, it seems that Skeeter would not be warranted in asserting a proposition about the group's information.

As MacFarlane (2011) stresses, the simple contextualist faces a more general dilemma here. For *any* position about what information is relevant in (Tattle), we will be unable to explain one of the following two things: why Doug can respond by saying "No" or why Skeeter is warranted in making his utterance. If the candidate information does *not* include Doug's, then the appropriateness of his response will be inexplicable. And if the candidate information *does* include Doug's, then we won't be able to explain why Skeeter's utterance is warranted. Though I've focused on just two candidates for the relevant information – albeit two of the most natural candidates – these sorts of problems arise for all candidates. This, I take it, was the scene onto which Dowell (2011) came.

### 3. Dowell's Reply and Challenges to Warrant

Dowell responds to this dilemma in two steps. First, she argues that the sorts of cases that

are typically used to make this argument are under-described. She thinks that, as a result, our intuitions about appropriateness of conversations like (Tattle) are often unclear, weak, or wavering. Whether or not she is right about this, she allows that there are ways of describing the situation in which (Tattle) takes place where we *do* have a clear intuition that Doug's reply is appropriate. It is in this context that she makes the second, and more important, part of her reply. She asks us to distinguish an assertion's being *semantically competent* from its being *epistemically warranted*. *Believing* the proposition asserted is a necessary condition for an assertion to be semantically competent, while being *justified* in believing it is a necessary condition for that assertion to be epistemically warranted. Dowell realizes that an assertion can be semantically competent without being epistemically warranted, and this is what she claims is the case in (Tattle). Our intuition that Skeeter's utterance of the 'might'-sentence is appropriate is, she suggests, an intuition that his assertion is semantically competent, *not* that it is warranted. Thus, she claims that the argument against the group reading, which assumes that Skeeter's utterance is warranted, fails and that we can retain simple contextualism.

Unfortunately, the linguistic data do not bear out Dowell's claim about Skeeter's utterance being unwarranted in (Tattle).<sup>10</sup> These data show that Skeeter's assertion is warranted while the group reading paraphrase is not. Contrasting the following two conversations precisifies the warrant argument in a way that is immune to Dowell's reply. Both of these

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10 Dowell (2011) contends that other linguistic data support her claim. Her idea is that it seems more warranted for Skeeter to ask, "Might Patti be the tattler?" than it is for him to say, "Patti might be the tattler." The robustness of this intuition may be questioned. More importantly, to the extent that it is a common judgment, it could easily be accommodated pragmatically by a theory that denies part (2) of simple contextualism. A pragmatic explanation of the contrasting data that I give is harder to come by, since the simple contextualist holds that Skeeter asserts similar propositions in (Tattle Warrant) and (Tattle Warrant\*).

conversations take place against the same background as (Tattle). The second gives a paraphrase of the group reading of the first. Skeeter is challenged in both for saying something unwarranted, but, as is clear, this challenge is appropriate in one conversation but not in the other:

(Tattle Warrant)      Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

Skeeter: Well, Patti might be the tattler.

Doug: # What makes you say that? You aren't in a position to say what is consistent with the information that Beebe and I have.

(Tattle Warrant\*)      Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

Skeeter: Well, it's consistent with all of our information that Patti is the tattler.

Doug: What makes you say that? You aren't in a position to say what is consistent with the information that Beebe and I have.

Given simple contextualism and the assumption that Skeeter's 'might'-sentence expresses a proposition that takes into account the group's information, Doug's reply should be appropriate in (Tattle Warrant) if and only if it is appropriate in (Tattle Warrant\*). But, again, this is not what we find. So, we need to reject one of our assumptions.

Again, we can follow MacFarlane (2011) in realizing that this sort of result will generalize to all the suggested bodies of information that include Doug's information. Since there is no adequate position about what body of information is relevant, as long as we are assuming simple contextualism, we should conclude that the problem is simple contextualism itself. Thus, the Dowellian defense of simple contextualism fails, and we need to reject (1) – the

contextualist theory of the proposition expressed by a ‘might’-sentence – or (2) – the claim that responses to an utterance of a ‘might’-sentence can be explained in terms of the proposition expressed by that sentence at the context of utterance.

#### *4. Yanovich’s Practical Contextualism*

MacFarlane’s idea is that there can be no body of information that explains both why an agent can be warranted in assertively uttering a ‘might’-sentence and why a hearer can respond based on her own information. Yanovich (2014) develops a version of simple contextualism, called Practical Contextualism, that he thinks can avoid this dilemma. Instead of focusing on the information of some group of agents, Practical Contextualism allows the information to be described in a way that does not mention the possessor of the information. According to Practical Contextualism, a sentence of the form ‘It might be that S’ at a context expresses a proposition that is true just in case, where p is the proposition expressed by S at the context, p is consistent with all of the knowledge that could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal of the context. It is clear that this account is in line with contextualism as stated in (1). This account is intuitively attractive, linking ‘might’-sentences with inquiry and with wider practical purposes. Yanovich suggests that it can help with the warrant problem, since one may have a justified belief about what knowledge could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal without having a justified belief about the information of another agent. Such a view might be able to get the advantages of a group reading without encountering warrant obstacles.

Unfortunately, this account falls prey to the same sort of argument that I gave in the previous section. In particular, there are cases where the utterance of a ‘might’-sentence is

warranted, while the utterance of the Practical Contextualist paraphrase is not. This will show either that the Practical Contextualist paraphrase is not the correct paraphrase of the ‘might’-sentence at the context or that the hearer responds to something other than the proposition expressed by the ‘might’-sentence at the context. Either way, this shows that simple contextualism, when developed in the vein of Yanovich’s Practical Contextualism, is incorrect.

The case on which I will focus is like our previous case, where our characters are concerned with who tattled about the party. The only difference is that in this example, it is stipulated that the practical goal of the conversation is to figure out which person should be uninvited from the *next* party, which is taking place later that night. Our characters don’t want to invite the person who tattled about the last party. This addition to the example is merely meant to make the prediction of Yanovich’s Practical Contextualism clear. Remember that the view says that when one utters a ‘might’-sentence, one expresses a proposition about what is consistent with all of the knowledge that could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal in the context. In our case, the knowledge that could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal is the information that could reasonably be gained before the beginning of the party. So, the contextualist paraphrase for “Patti might be the tattler” in the context of the scenario is something like “It is consistent with all of the information that can be obtained by us in the next couple of hours that Patti is the tattler.” As we will see, a speaker can be warranted in assertively uttering the former sentence without being warranted in assertively uttering the later:

(Tattle Warrant 2)     Beebe: Skeeter, we’re trying to figure out who told my parents about our last party, so that we can uninvite her from the party tonight.

Skeeter: Well, Patti might be the tattler.

Doug: # What makes you say that? You aren't in a position to know whether Beebe or I already have information that rules out that Patti is the tattler.

(Tattle Warrant 2\*) Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about our last party, so that we can uninvite her from the party tonight.

Skeeter: Well, it is consistent with all of the information that can be obtained by us in the next couple of hours that Patti is the tattler.

Doug: What makes you say that? You aren't in a position to know whether Beebe or I already have information that rules out that Patti is the tattler.

This contrast shows that Yanovich's account is unsuccessful. Just as in the last section, it does this by exemplifying that the 'might'-sentence and its purported contextualist paraphrase allow for different responses. So, either the purported paraphrase is not accurate or something other than the proposition expressed is being responded to.

I want to close the section by suggesting where Yanovich has gone wrong. Yanovich agrees that contextualism does not succeed in explaining warrant if we use only a group reading. Above, I expressed some hope for Yanovich's account in saying, "one may have a justified belief about what knowledge could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal without having a justified belief about the information of another agent." The problem, however, is that most cases aren't instances of this possibility claim. In most cases (including our scenario), the knowledge of the members of one's conversational group is obviously part of the

knowledge that could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal. Furthermore, speakers are generally in a position to know this. This distributed knowledge of the members of the group is, in many cases, inconsistent with the prejacent. This means that the knowledge that could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal is inconsistent with the prejacent. Since speakers are generally in a position to know that this information can be reasonably obtained, it seems that standards of warrant will, in most cases, be at least as high for the Practical Contextualist as for the group contextualist. That is, almost every case that presented a problem for a group reading of a ‘might’-sentence will present a problem for a Practical Contextualist reading.<sup>11</sup> So, we are forced to give up either Practical Contextualism or the claim that speakers in these scenarios respond to the proposition expressed by the ‘might’-sentence.

##### 5. *Contextualism and Dowell’s Intentionalism*

Dowell proposes a more general explanatory model than we have entertained so far; it says that the information relative to which an utterance of an epistemic modal claim is made is determined by the publicly manifest *intentions* of the speaker.<sup>12</sup> This position is general in the

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<sup>11</sup> Exceptions will include, at least, cases where members of the group are unable to communicate with the speaker (perhaps because they are mute, gagged, etc.) or where the practical goal must be achieved so quickly that other group members don’t have time to share their information with the speaker. But these are just a small subset of the cases that need to be explained.

<sup>12</sup> Dowell says:

Which body of information is contextually relevant is determined by the speaker’s publicly manifestable intention for her addressee to recognize some feature of the context as helping to manifest what she takes to determine a body of information in that context. (2011: 5)

sense that an agent could intend, in any particular case, to make her claim relative to her own information, the group's information, the information which could reasonably be obtained to help achieve the relevant practical goal, or some other body of information. Let's call this thesis *intentionalism about relevant information*. I want to conclude by briefly showing that, however independently plausible intentionalism about relevant information is, it gets us no further in avoiding the problem. The conjunction of this thesis and simple contextualism is false. This suggests that intentionalism about relevant information cannot help simple contextualism solve its problem. The problem is with simple contextualism itself.

A paraphrase argument shows that Dowell's intentionalism about relevant information cannot save simple contextualism. Remember our original case:

(Tattle)        Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

                  Skeeter: Well, Patti might be the tattler.

                  Doug: No. She went out of town before Beebe's parents returned.

Now, imagine that we are in the same scenario as (Tattle), but the following conversation takes place:

(Tattle\*)        Beebe: Skeeter, we're trying to figure out who told my parents about the party.

                  Skeeter: Well, it is consistent with the information that I intend to talk about that Patti is the tattler.

                  Doug: # No. She went out of town before Beebe's parents returned.

Doug's response is degraded in (Tattle\*), though it is completely appropriate in (Tattle). But the sentence Skeeter utters in (Tattle\*) is just supposed to give a paraphrase of what he utters in

(Tattle). Given simple contextualism and Dowell's intentionalism about relevant information, any response that is appropriate to the latter should be appropriate to the former. But this is not what we find. Thus, one of our assumptions must be false. Intentionalism about relevant information does not help to provide a defense of simple contextualism. As above, the right response is to reject simple contextualism.<sup>13</sup>

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