Knowledge in English and German

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Abstract

Natural languages differ on whether they have distinct lexical items for objectual and propositional knowledge. English does not: *know* is used for both (1). By contrast, German employs *kennen* for objectual and *wissen* for propositional knowledge (2). Cross-linguistically, both strategies are common (Sjöberg, 2021). Still, the strategy pursued by German is typically considered more revealing of semantic structure: objectual and propositional knowledge are taken to be distinct semantic primitives (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994). Given this, *know* is either ambiguous or polysemous between a reading corresponding to *kennen* and a reading corresponding to *wissen*. Against this claim, I argue that there is only one semantic primitive and that the lexical entries of *kennen* and *wissen* both make reference to that primitive (cf. Djärv, 2021).

The claim that *know* has distinct objectual and propositional readings has not only been supported by cross-linguistic evidence such as the distinct lexical items in German, but also by language-internal data. I begin by arguing that these data do not in fact support the claim. The first datum is that some reduced conjunctions are zeugmatic (Stanley and Williamson, 2001; Benton, 2017): see 3. However, zeugma fails to arise for reduced conjunctions that eliminate potential confounds such as surprising topic shifts and the triviality of the second conjunct given the first: see 4 (cf. Liefke and Werning, 2018). The second datum is that objectual readings of *know* create extensional contexts, licensing inferences that propositional readings do not, as in 5 (Heim, 1979; Frana, 2017; Hansen, Porter, and Francis, 2019). However, the licensed inference can be explained by postulating a propositional *de re* reading of P1. This assimilates the licensed inference to others licensed by *de re* readings (6).

The absence of language-internal evidence opens up two different perspectives on the difference between English and German. On the first, English and German encode different conceptions of knowledge. Where English has one semantic primitive, German has two. On the second, both lexical items in German make reference to the same semantic primitive. German thus lexicalizes objectual and propositional knowledge separately not because they correspond to different semantic primitives, but for some other reason. The second of these perspectives is supported by the availability of concealed question readings of determiner phrases embedded under *kennen* for at least Austrian dialects of German, given which *kennen*-ascriptions can be read so as to be equivalent in meaning to corresponding *wissen*-ascriptions (7).

Further support comes from the complementarity of *kennen* and *wissen*: taken individually, they cannot cover the space of possible interpretations of knowledge ascriptions, but together they can. The complementarity of *kennen* and *wissen* is partly due to the syntactic selection properties of *kennen*: *kennen* is grammatical with noun and determiner phrase complements, but ungrammatical with declarative and interrogative complements (2, 8). Thus, German requires another lexical item to obtain the interpretations *know* receives with such complements. *Wissen* is also grammatical with some noun and determiner phrase complements, in particular special quantifiers and phrases that can receive concealed question readings (9). So, German does not require a lexical item beyond *wissen* to obtain all of the interpretations *know* receives with noun and determiner phrase complements. But it still requires such a lexical item to obtain some such interpretations: for instance (10), embedded under *wissen* a special quantifier like *etwas* must range over proposition-like objects, but this is neither the case for *know* nor for *kennen*.

The perspective I suggest raises the question of why *kennen* and *wissen* make reference to the same semantic primitive, yet differ as much as they do. On my hypothesis, these differences are not motivated by deep semantic facts, but may instead be mere historical accidents. Further research will explore what historical processes might have given rise to these accidents.

Examples

1. (a) Ayesha knows Bill.
   (b) Ayesha knows that Bill is her student.
2. (a) Ayesha kennt Bill.   =1a
   (b) Ayesha weiß, dass Bill ihr Schüler ist.   =1b
3. (a) # Hannah knows that penguins waddle, and Ted, John.
4. (a) Ayesha knows Bill and Bill, that he is her student.
5. P1 Kim knows the governor of California.
   P2 The governor of California is a supporter of high speed rail.
   C Kim knows a supporter of high speed rail.
6.   Context: The speaker points to the governor of California.
   P1 Kim knows who this is.
   P2 This is the governor of California.
   C Kim knows who the governor of California is.
7. (a) Chris kennt den Weg.
   'Chris knows what the way is'
   (b) Chris weiß den Weg.
   'Chris knows what the way is'
8. (a) *Chris kennt, dass Daria pünktlich ist.
   'Chris knows that Daria is punctual'
   (b) *Eylem kennt, wer der Bürgermeister ist.
   'Eylem knows who the mayor is'
9. (a) Flora weiß etwas.
   'Flora knows something'
   (b) Georg weiß die Hauptstadt Italiens.
   'Georg knows the capital of Italy'
10. (a) Flora weiß, dass etwas der Fall ist.   =9a
    'Flora knows that something is the case'
    (b) Lydia kennt etwas, nämlich *Anna Karenina*.
    'Lydia knows something, namely *Anna Karenina*'

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