

Epistemic Modal Belief Reports Are a Problem for von Fintel and Gillies

In their paper, “‘Might’ Made Right”, Kai von Fintel and Anthony Gillies offer a sophisticated contextualist view about the epistemic modal, ‘might’, in order to account for some intuitive data about denial and retraction that seem to favor relativism. But there is a problem with their view. It cannot explain appropriate responses to epistemic modal belief reports. I suggest that we can explain *all* of the data by giving a pragmatic story based on attitudes of uncertainty that are often implied by utterances of ‘might’-sentences.

I start by presenting a common piece of data about epistemic modals.¹ Consider:

(DIS) George: The Dodgers might have won last night.

Sandy: That’s false. They lost.

This is exactly the data that the relativist predicts.² The challenge, then, is to give a non-relativist view of epistemic modals that can account for this data.

Von Fintel and Gillies give such an account. It relies on the idea that with a single utterance, a speaker can perform multiple speech acts. They call the relevant speech act ‘putting in play’.³ However, their view does not give the right account of reports of epistemic modal beliefs. I focus on the following case:

(BEL DIS) Fred: George believes that the Dodgers might have won last night.

Sandy: That’s true. But he’s wrong.

Here are three *prima facie* constraints on an explanation of this case. The explanation should

1 Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson [2005], Egan [2006], MacFarlane [forthcoming], von Fintel and Gillies [forthcoming].

2 See Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson [2005]; Egan [2006]; and Stephenson [2007], MacFarlane [forthcoming]. For (I think, decisive) criticisms see von Fintel and Gillies [2008], and Cappelen and Hawthorne [2009].

3 Von Fintel and Gillies [forthcoming, 15]. They hint at such a speech act in von Fintel and Gillies [2007, 44].

respect our intuitions that (i) what Sandy says is true, (ii) Sandy is talking about George's mental states, and (iii) Sandy is talking about the same state in the first and second sentences of her response. I make two attempts at satisfying these constraints on behalf of von Fintel and Gillies. But I find that both are unsuccessful. Trying to respect these constraints leads us away from von Fintel and Gillies's story for the unembedded cases.

I conclude by briefly offering a positive sketch for satisfying the three constraints. The fundamental piece of the account is a mental state I call 'a hedge'. This is a state of uncertainty that one takes toward *non-modal* contents. When one takes some proposition as a possibility we can say that one hedges that proposition. This account aims to explain *all* of the problematic cases of disagreement in terms of hedges. I claim that such a view satisfies all three constraints that we placed on an explanation of (BEL DIS).

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