The lecture that we have heard consists of excerpts from Professor Stanley’s forthcoming book *Knowledge and Interest*, and it consists of two parts, a messy part and a clean part; the messy part is from the book’s introduction, which describes the “central data that is at issue in this debate,” and the clean part is from Chapter 7, which presents an interesting criticism of a semantical theory of knowledge-attribution sentences that makes their truth-conditions relative to non-time-world circumstances of evaluation, e.g. to a judgment-maker at a time. There is a nice discussion of Peter Lasersohn’s semantical views, with kudos, bricks, and bats to Mark Richard, Jeff King, Gareth Evans, John Hawthorne, David Kaplan, and David Lewis. Though I found this discussion of great interest and would have welcomed more discussion of an earlier view of Jason Stanley’s in which “what is said” and “what is believed” can be used to refer to entities that are not propositional, e.g. semantic values that are neutral with respect to time and place, a view of Stanley’s of which I am a fan, I was more provoked by the messy part: the appeal to intuitive linguistic data employed by supporters of epistemological contextualism, e.g. Stewart Cohen, Keith De Rose, a time-slice of David Lewis, among others. I will focus on what Professor Stanley says about the data in his paper and not worry the scholarly question about their relation to other views.

Professor Stanley wants intuitions about the truth and falsity of knowledge claims to make a “prima facie case for the thesis that knowledge is not just a matter of non-practical facts but is also a matter of how much is at stake” to the knowledge attributor or the putative knower. Since this prima facie case is of some importance to Stanley’s project, I shall spend some time discussing the allegedly clear intuitions that would support his claims. At one point in the lecture Stanley inserts a caveat about the status and robustness of these intuitions, which indicates that he does not take them as seriously as I will be taking them in this comment. So though I hope to offer some opposing linguistic intuitions that will be cautionary in a helpful way, I do not want to hang my worries like a dead albatross about Stanley’s neck. There is a moral to my story, which is that epistemological contextualism’s linguistic intuitions are less a noble steed than a worn-out dray-horse, and one should not blithely mount it and expect to ride off in all directions, or even at all.

Stanley reviews five types of examples, which he calls ‘Low Stakes’, ‘High Stakes’, ‘Low-Attributor-High-Subject Stakes’, ‘Ignorant High Stakes’, ‘High-Attributor-Low Subject Stakes’. The examples are all about Hannah and Sarah getting to the bank to deposit their paychecks and whether Hannah knows that the bank will be open.
tomorrow (on Saturday). In the first, Low Stakes, case, Hannah and Sarah drive past the long lines at the bank on Friday, but they have no pressing financial need to deposit their checks. Realizing that it isn’t very important to deposit their checks on Friday, Hannah says, “I know the bank will be open tomorrow, since I was there just two weeks ago on a Saturday morning.” Let me be very literal minded: let’s suppose that as they drive past the bank, out pops this utterance from Hannah’s mouth. As an example of linguistic behavior, I have never found this description of the example, and this use of ‘know’, linguistically natural. I would not myself initiate a segment of a conversation with an ‘I know that p’ sentence if I were Hannah. I would say merely, “The bank will be open tomorrow…,” or, anticipating Sarah’s groundless anxiety, I might say, “I am sure the bank will be open tomorrow,” or manifesting my Hannah-ish, take-charge attitude, I might say only Hannah’s second sentence, “We can deposit our paychecks tomorrow.”

What I am pretty clear about is that I would not say, “I know…”

Likewise, in the High Stakes case where financial need is pressing, if I were Hannah I would not say in response to a remark of Sarah’s that banks do change their hours, “I don’t know that the bank will be open…” I would say instead, “Not unless it is a holiday – so don’t worry,” or “And a meteor could hit the bank tomorrow morning – in which case we’d have to drive six blocks to use an ATM.” The one thing I would not say is “I don’t know that the bank will be open…”

Is it just because I am not a professional epistemologist that I find that the word ‘know’ does not glide effortlessly off my tongue when I consider these examples? It seems, in fact, linguistically out-of-place, curiously enough.

In the Low-Attributor-High-Subject Stakes case, wondering whether Hannah will be at the bank on Saturday, Jill utters to a friend, “Well, Hannah was at the bank two weeks ago on a Saturday. So she knows the bank will be open.” I would have thought that wondering whether Hannah will be there tomorrow, Jill would have uttered “Well, Hannah was at the bank two weeks ago; but I wonder whether she will be there tomorrow.” If I were Jill, the last thing on my mind would be the state of Hannah’s knowledge, and the first thing would be instead whether I’m an idiot to go to the bank tomorrow, hoping to run into Hannah because I attribute knowledge of its being open to her. I might just as well wonder whether I will meet Bill Clinton at Disney Land because he knows that it’s open tomorrow. Of course, if Jill’s mad passion for Hannah is that great, she might as well hang her neurotic hopes for bumping into Hannah on Hannah’s knowing the bank is open, along with the dry cleaners, Ralph’s, the Seven-Eleven, and LA Fitness, where, since she is stalking Hannah on weekends, she has seen Hannah on Saturdays in the previous two weeks.

In the case of Ignorant High Stakes, I have the same response as in the case of Low-Attributor-High Subject Stakes.

In the High-Attributor-Low-Subject States case there are some interesting linguistic possibilities. In this example Bill is phoned and asked “whether the bank will be open.” Bill replies, plausibly enough, “I was there two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open.” What would most of us go on to say to Hannah in this context? Would a natural continuation be “So, I know the bank will be open tomorrow”? No. We – or less tendentiously, I – would not use this ‘know’ sentence. Considering the external possibility that “banks do occasionally change their hours,” Hannah says, “Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open.” Perhaps Bill should have been more reflective.
Suppose he had said to Hannah instead, “I was there two weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was open. But perhaps it was open only by accident. Come to think of it, the tellers were acting pretty strangely, and they didn’t look too healthy either. They reminded me of that movie about those walking dead people. And, you know, bankers’ hours are pretty capricious. That’s why they’re called ‘bankers’ hours’ – you never know whether the tight-fisted, money-loving s.o.b.’s are ever going to be in their offices or in their tellers’ cages, or when. So you’ve got me whether that bank will be open tomorrow. I don’t know, but good luck!”

Hannah fixes on Bill’s claim in my story that perhaps the bank was open Saturday morning two weeks ago only by accident or chance – banks do change their hours, Sarah says. So Hannah concludes, in agreement with Bill in my story, “Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open.”

I think that Hannah is probably right. In my story Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open tomorrow, but that is the least of Bill’s problems, or for that matter, of Hannah’s for fixing on Bill’s claim that perhaps the bank was open two weeks ago only by accident or chance. Only the cognitively impaired are going to say, “I don’t know that the bank will be open on Saturday.”

Professor Stanley has got some strikingly clear intuitions about these five cases. In the Low Stakes case, a highly unnatural linguistic context for the use of a first-person ‘know’ sentence, one in which it would be natural for Hannah to utter one of (a) ‘The bank will be open tomorrow’, (b) ‘I am sure the bank will be open tomorrow’, (c) ‘We can deposit our pay checks tomorrow’, these utterances are all, supposing the bank will be open on Saturday, intuitively true. I do not have Stanley’s confidence that Hannah’s utterance “I know the bank will be open…” is both felicitous and true, since I do not think in this context it is felicitous or natural. In fact, it is anomalous in the context as described.

In the High Stakes case I have the same reaction.

In the Low-Attributor-High Subject Stakes case, Stanley says that “our” intuition is that Jill’s utterance “She knows the bank will be open” about Hannah – Jill knows nothing about Hannah’s financial needs – is false; that is in agreement with Hannah’s first-person utterance “I guess I don’t really know that the bank will be open…” Well, not really in agreement, since Stanley’s dialogue for Hannah – and it is a linguistically natural dialogue – was “I guess I don’t really know…” We (Stanley’s ‘We’), appreciating the way that Hannah’s financial exigencies raise the standards of assessment, take it that Hannah really does not know, all guessing aside and all her hedging to the contrary, in Stanley’s example.

I wish I shared the clarity of this intuition that Jill’s utterance is natural as well as false, but not finding it the former, I am uncertain that it is the latter, as is Hannah, apparently, in the words that Professor Stanley has written for her.

In the Ignorant High Stakes case Stanley says that “our” reaction is that Hannah’s utterance “I know the bank will be open…” is false. “Our” reaction, white man? I confess that I find the case of Hannah’s ignorance just as linguistically problematic as the case of Jill’s was.

Finally, in the High-Attributor-Low Subject Stakes case, Professor Stanley says that “our” reaction is that Hannah’s utterance “Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open…” is true. Of Stanley’s case I noted that I for one, in propria persona for Bill,
would not have said “I know the bank will be open…”, but only in the bizarre context of my story would I, in Bill’s persona, have said, “I don’t know the bank will be open…” But I am no clearer that Hannah’s utterance “Bill doesn’t really know that the bank will be open…” is true than I was when I was not clear that Hannah’s first-person utterance “I don’t know that the bank will be open…” is true in the other cases where the bank’s being open matters to Hannah.

The confidence with which Professor Stanley implicates that there are linguistic facts “as to whether the relevant attributor can truly ascribe the predicate ‘knows that the bank will be open’ to the relevant subject” is impressive, but I cannot locate these facts in my speech, and I wonder whether fluent speakers of Standard North Eastern American English – what Paul Ziff insisted on archly denoting by ‘NEAE’ – will locate these facts in their speech as well. This is not what Stanley asserts, I must admit. He straightforwardly asserts that there are these FACTS – tout court. Well, maybe there are, but it is not obvious to me that they are supported by linguistic facts.

Well, as Wittgenstein once put it, in rather different language, to Norman Malcolm, “Thanks for the autobiography!” One might have halted me several paragraphs – ok, pages – ago and said, “Look, Jay, linguistic usage aside, is it true or not that in the first, Low Stakes case Hannah knows that the bank will be open and that in the High Stakes case Hannah does not know that the bank will be open?”

If, as I took it, Hannah’s utterance in the first case was paraphrasable by “I am sure…”, or even by “I have a right to be sure…” (in A.J. Ayer’s fashion in The Problem of Knowledge), her utterance is true.

But in the High Stakes case, mousey, little Sarah’s whining “that banks do change their hours” does not strike me as a reason for Hannah not to know that the bank will be open tomorrow, unless, like the barn-façade cases, Hannah and Sarah live in a community sprinkled with anarchic bankers – there’s a thought. Instead, Sarah sounds as irrelevantly peevish as Descartes, remarking that in the distance square towers do look circular. In the distance I think that square towers look the way square towers look in the distance. Is that a circular way? Beats me. So even if I were an epistemological contextualist, I would have no reason to be moved by these alleged facts. A fortiori, in the Ignorant High Stakes case, there is no more reason for Hannah not to know than in the High Stakes case.

I am not a confidence-shaking, degrees-of-belief theorist, whom Stanley criticizes for artificially distinguishing these two cases. But I am not a “village” Know-that-you-Know (KK) theorist either, who simply asserts that in the Low Stakes, High Stakes, and Ignorant High Stakes cases it is clear that Hannah knows the bank will be open. I have found it intuitive in these cases that Hannah knows in the Low Stakes case, has no reason not to know in the High Stakes and Ignorant High Stakes cases, and that there is no reason for Bill to assert of himself ‘I know’, and so for Hannah to assert of him ‘he knows’, in the High-Attributor-Low Subject Stake case as described by Stanley. Only in this last case am I in agreement – a trivial form of agreement – with the KK theorists.

In the Low-Attributor-High-Subject Stakes case one would have to believe that Hannah’s utterance “I guess I do not know that p” entails, or really has the propositional content of, ‘I do not know that p’. If true, it makes false Jill’s utterance “She knows the
bank will be open”. (Should it be in the example that our primary intuition is that Jill’s attribution to Hannah is false, so that in consequence Hannah’s first-person denial of her knowledge must be true?)

In the last case, the High-Attributor-Low Subject Stakes case, because it is important to Hannah that the bank be open, “we” are expected to take Hannah’s denial of the predicate ‘knows that the bank will be open’ of Bill to be true. But Sarah, scheming minx that she is, has failed to inform Hannah, when Sarah suggested that Hannah phone Bill, that Bill is the manager of the bank, who, banker that he is, said to Hannah truly but uncooperatively (in Grice’s sense) that when he was there two weeks ago on a Saturday, the bank was open. So now, after Sarah remarks that banks do occasionally change their hours, “we” are to suppose that Hannah concludes truly that Bill does not know that the bank will be open, just because Hannah wants to avoid bouncing a check? Thus I agree – finally – with Stanley when he says “we may suppose that Bill’s confidence that the bank will be open is not affected by Hannah’s and Sarah’s situation,” though I disagree with his intuition that “Hannah and Sarah are correct to deny knowledge to Bill.”

My worry about my inability to share more of Stanley’s intuitions arises from the further weight – besides making a prima facie case that knowledge is not just a matter of non-practical facts – that Stanley puts on them: “The intuitions that we have in the … cases are just the intuitions we would expect to have, if certainly antecedently plausible conceptual connections between knowledge and practical reasoning were true,” e.g., in Stanley’s version, one should act only on what one knows, or, in John Hawthorne’s version, one ought only to use that which one knows as a premise in one’s deliberations. (Hawthorne’s version is more cautious that Stanley’s gloss.)

In the High Stakes case Hannah knows that the bank will be open on Friday and is alleged not to know that the bank is open on Saturday. So there is no proposition “The bank is open on Saturday” that can be a premise in Hannah’s practical reasoning, e.g.

\[
\begin{align*}
  & I \text{ want to pay my bills.} \\
  & I \text{ will pay my bills only if my account is in the black.} \\
  & My \text{ account will be in the black only if I deposit a check.} \\
  & I \text{ will deposit a check on Saturday if the bank is open on Saturday.} \\
  & The \text{ bank is open on Saturday.} \\
  & I \text{ ought to deposit a check on Saturday.}
\end{align*}
\]

Stanley remarks that “the obvious reason why Hannah shouldn’t wait until Saturday to go to the bank is that she does not know that the bank will be open.” But those who do not require knowledge in practical reasoning offer a parallel explanation, viz. deliberation that leads to an action that achieves its goals requires true premises. If an agent has knowledge rather than merely true belief, who would gainsay it? But is it mistaken, as Stanley suggests, for Hannah to act on her belief that the bank will be open on Saturday. That Hannah does not know – if she doesn’t – that the bank is open does not entail that the bank is not open. If it is open, her practical reasoning will be successful.
In the Low Stakes case Stanley’s intuition was that Hannah knows that the bank is open. If Stanley agrees that “Kp → p” is an axiom of knowledge, the reason that it is fine for Hannah to act on her knowledge is that it is true that the bank is open, and successful deliberation, like other successful reasoning, requires “no false lemmas,” as Gilbert Harman once put it. In practical reasoning as in theoretical reasoning, one wants arguments to be sound, not merely valid.

The supporter of “intellectualism”, that knowledge depends only on non-practical facts, as Stanley loosely puts it, can at least claim this much support from my discussion of the linguistics facts: in the Low Stakes case Hannah knows; in the High Stakes and Ignorant High Stakes cases, Hannah has no reason not to know. Practical facts are no obstacle to knowledge, but successful practical reasoning does not require it.

Of the options in response to his views that Stanley canvases, he explicitly withdraws from engagement with a questioning of the motivating linguistic intuitions that purport “to reveal the powerful intuitive sway of the thesis that knowledge is the basis for action.” In particular he remarks that “those who deny these intuitions are, in effect, maintaining that some other notion, such as appropriately confident belief, is the intuitively valuable one.” But I confess that I find the epistemological contextualists’ intuitions, in many cases, lacking in linguistic robustness, but I believe that Stanley has mis-identified the competitor to his views. It is not confident belief that is his bête noire for the value of knowledge; it is true belief.

In support of his claims about the role of knowledge, Stanley appeals to a principle of Timothy Williamson’s that one ought only to assert what one knows. The Moore Paradox-like sentence “P and I do not know that P”, on the assumption that Kp ⊨ p, yields an inconsistency from “K(I(P & ¬ KI P))”. From this it follows only that “¬ K(I(P & ¬ KI P))” is a necessary truth. But Williamson thinks that there is something “wrong with asserting” any sentence of the Moore Paradox-like form. His explanation is that only knowledge warrants assertion. One can have no knowledge of a sentence of this form, so its assertion is unwarranted.

Williamson begins from the linguistic intuition that there is something “wrong” with any assertion of a sentence of this form. He concludes that what is wrong is the lack of warrant – on his view that warrant requires knowledge. But independently of his view for the moment, is what is wrong with asserting any such sentence its lack of warrant? I think that nothing in fact is wrong with my asserting ‘Fermat’s Last Theorem is true but I do not know that it is’, much less that the suppositious reason for its alleged assertoric wrongness is my lack of warrant in asserting it. I think I have good grounds for asserting it, and my assertion is a felicitous speech-act. One does not need any explanation of the form “one ought only to assert what one knows.” Such Williamsonian arguments support no claim for the essential role of knowledge in linguistic explanation. The argument also illustrates the way linguistic intuitions can mislead a philosopher.

The moral of my story is elementary: a formal semantics for knowledge-attributions is a beautiful thing – maybe a joy forever – but whether it also has explanatory power depends on how carefully the data are characterized, and whether it sheds light on an epistemological problem depends on what problem the data are really for.