

IN DEFENSE OF EPISTEMIC INDEFENSIBILITY

INTRODUCTION: This work reports on QUASI-DENIAL: a special class of utterances that are straightforward denials in their core semantics, yet which encode a speaker attitude of (violated) expectation once the interpretation departs from their truth-conditional content. Through description and treatment of this data, with the not-at-issue content analyzed as a definedness condition on speaker inferences, I arrive at a generalized notion of (*counter-*)expectation. We assume a view of *epistemic modals as evidentials* as it has been envisioned by von Fintel and Gillies (2010, 2018), according to which epistemic modals carry a lexicalized presupposition that the question of the prejacent ϕ is not settled by a direct body of evidence in the *Kernel*:

- “A kernel K^c in a context c at a world w is a non-closed set of propositions, those that are direct (enough) information at w in c . An epistemic modal base $B^c(w)$ in c at w is determined by $K^c(w)$ iff $\cap K^c(w) = B^c(w)$.”
- “Epistemic modals presuppose that the kernel doesn’t settle whether their prejacent is true.”

We also assume epistemic *can’t* to be of the form $\neg\Diamond$, *contra* Drubig (2001) *à la* von Fintel & Iatridou (2003).

CORE DATA: In the words of Karttunen (1972), “consider a speaker who realizes that the rain is pouring down from the sky. He cannot honestly proclaim [(1)], unless he doubts his own senses”:

(1) It is possible that it isn't raining. Such utterances, Karttunen claims, are “*epistemically indefensible*”.

QUASI-DENIALS (QDs), by contrast, exploit the inferential–evidential component of epistemic modality (Rett 2016) to express agent attitude toward a prejacent. Below are 2 QD flavors, differentiated by context:

- (2) [Said of rain visibly falling onto one’s head.] (where $K \models \phi$)
 (3) [Said of people with dripping-wet raincoats entering the room.] (where $K \models \Diamond\phi$ i.e. $K \not\models \phi$)

Speaker A: a. It can’t be raining. \rightarrow Speaker is surprised that ϕ .
 b. # It must not be raining. \rightarrow Speaker is surprised that ϕ .

Speaker B: Wait a minute... Surely, you can’t expect it to not be raining?

Speaker A: *It is perfectly reasonable for me to say so, ... (the defense!, i.e., Speaker A’s self-justification)*

(of (2a)): ...The weather report said 0% chance of rain. This rain does not conform to my expectations!

(of (3a)): ...The weather report said 0% chance of rain. Perhaps these people got caught in the sprinklers? Seeing them covered in water is not necessarily enough evidence for me to conclude that it’s raining.

ANALYSIS: The QD (2a) is “trivially false”: the non-inferential evidence entails the truth of ϕ . Not so for (3a), where K merely entails the possibility of ϕ . The speaker’s justifications show that agents may express skepticism/surprise, drawing from private inferences, to substantiate QDs *independently* of the truth or falsity of the prejacent. So counter-expectation obtains independently of truth-conditional falsity. By what means is this speaker skepticism encoded? (*N.B.*: non-negated epistemic *can* needn’t express *violated* expectation).

QDs show that the meaning contributed by negated epistemic possibility modals is not limited to signalling inferential evidentiality, but also carries a presupposition relating inferential *and* non-inferential evidence:

The Inferential Consistency Presupposition for Epistemic *can*:

An utterance of the form $[[can\ \phi]]$ is defined only if the inferential evidence that the S brings to bear on the question of the prejacent is consistent with K , undefined otherwise.

DISCUSSION: I propose that *counter-*expectation is the result of this presupposition’s failure: when $K \models \phi$, pragmatic enrichment will derive the performativity of a violated expectation toward an inconsistent inference. QDs are used *not* to outright deny the truth of ϕ , but to *indicate* that the speaker is bringing to bear private, inferential restrictions into casting doubt on the question of the prejacent. In discourse, the use of QDs constitutes a cooperative, inquisitive move by the speaker to accommodate the inclusion of the prejacent into the Stalnakerian CG. Further research shall be extended to desiderative attitude predicates.

REFERENCES: Karttunen, Lauri (1972): *Possible and must*. • von Fintel, Kai and Anthony S. Gillies (2010; 2018): *Must stay strong; Still Going Strong!*. • Rett, Jessica (2016): *On a shared property of deontic and epistemic modals*.