# Know-How and Linguistic Analysis

Long Abstract

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One welcome consequence of recent interest in know-how has been the recognition of the literature as providing an excellent case study in how considerations about language might yield insight on philosophical issues elsewhere. In a notable criticism of Gilbert Ryle by Brown (1970), linguistic considerations were marshalled to argue for *Intellectualism*, the thesis that know-how is a kind of knowledge-that. After Brown's strategy was adopted and updated with contemporary syntax and semantics by Stanley and Williamson (2001), a number of critics expressed reservations about the methodology.[1] How could linguistics possibly establish substantive conclusions about the relationship between two sorts of knowledge? In the present paper I (i) briefly sketch two ways of thinking about the Brown / Stanley and Williamson (hereafter, BSW) strategy, (ii) review some extant criticisms of BSW and show that they fail to make contact with BSW's argument, and (iii) compare the debate over know-how with several hypothetical debates to draw a general methodological moral: there is no in-principle problem with using linguistics to identify type/sub-type relationships among phenomena, provided those phenomena can be characterised in a certain way.

The central parts of the paper revolve around the following reconstruction of BSW's linguistic argument:

1. The correct syntax and formal semantics for 'knows how to swim' is whatever results from the composition of the correct syntax and formal semantics for its elements.

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[1]This was perhaps more often in discussion than in print. See (Noë 2005), (Devitt 2011), (Abbott 2006), (Johnson 2006).

2. Its elements are simply the elements 'knows' and 'how' as occur in 'knows how Bill swims', and an infinitival clause 'to swim' as occurs in 'knows where to swim'.

3. The correct syntax and formal semantics for those elements is such that their combination results in a locution that attributes propositional knowledge.

4. So the correct syntax and formal semantics for 'knows how to swim' construes it as attributing propositional knowledge.

5. So 'knows how to swim' attributes propositional knowledge.

6. 'Knows how to swim' attributes knowledge how to swim.

7. So knowledge how to swim is propositional knowledge.

The main question I aim to answer is whether there is a methodological problem with the above argument. Alva Noë (2005) says that we end up with Stanley and Williamson's theory of know-how by "following the grammar blindly". He asks:

> Why should linguistic analysis be regarded as dispositive in matters like this? Is it not a home truth of analytic philosophy that grammar can mislead? What does the grammar have to do with what we are talking about or thinking about or studying when we study practical knowledge?

And later Noë writes that "Ryle's distinction is not a thesis about the sentences used to attribute propositional and practical knowledge respectively. It is a thesis about the nature of practical and propositional knowledge." It appears that according to Noë, there's something inherently wrong with studying phenomena by studying the way we talk about them. But why?

I argue that challenging (1)-(3) is not a way of challenging the general linguistic strategy. It is rather a response that allows that one can infer substantive philosophical conclusions from syntactic and formal semantic premises, if only one can get the latter right. But if critics such as Noë grant premises (1), (2), and (3), it seems uncontroversial that (4) should follow. From this point, I argue, there is no plausible way to block the argument's conclusion. Premise (6) is uncontroversial, the inference from (5) and (6) to (7) is very plausible, and

it is very hard to see how the inference from (4) to (5) could fail. How could (5) be false if the *correct* linguistic theory says that it's true?

After spelling out this line of thought in more detail, I turn to another attempt at finding a methodological problem with BSW's argument. I consider several claims that resemble Intellectualism in being claims about the obtaining of a type/sub-type relationship between two phenomena. None of these claims could plausibly be established or refuted by syntactic or formal semantic considerations. If the reasons for this are reasons that also apply to the thesis of Intellectualism, then we will have given some support to critics of the use of linguistics in the debate. However, I argue that none of the relevant features of these other type/sub-type claims are shared by the thesis of Intellectualism. Instead, we see that the thesis of Intellectualism has a somewhat distinctive property that explains how considerations from linguistics manage to lend it support so directly.

# References

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