

# Lexical Norms, Language Comprehension, and the Epistemology of Testimony

Endre Begby

Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN)

University of Oslo

[endre.begby@gmail.com](mailto:endre.begby@gmail.com)

In the burgeoning literature on the epistemology of testimony, it is remarkable how rarely focus is brought to bear on the role played by language in mediating our testimonial activity. Language comprehension raises many complex epistemological questions in its own right. And if language is our primary medium for giving and taking testimony, it would seem that a full account of the epistemology of testimony must depend on a prior clarification of the epistemology of language comprehension.

One integrated account of the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony is found in Sanford Goldberg (2007). Drawing on Burge (1993, 1999), Goldberg asserts that we are epistemically entitled (i) to rely on “intuitive comprehension” in communication (i.e., to take others’ words (modulo indexicals and demonstratives) to have the meaning they would have if we had uttered them ourselves), and (ii) to acquire beliefs on the basis of such communication (i.e., to take what I thus comprehend as embodying knowledge). Goldberg goes on to argue that “the only *remotely* plausible account” of these entitlements is that speakers and hearers share a set of semantic conventions taking the form of robust lexical norms. In brief, reflection on the twin epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony provides an abductive argument for the existence of lexical norms. Lexical norms offer an explanation – plausibly the only explanation – of our entitlements to intuitive comprehension and testimonial belief acquisition.

I believe Goldberg’s argument is flawed. First, lexical norms – whether or not they *exist* – cannot play the envisaged role in explaining actual patterns of language use. Second, the account’s attempt to integrate the epistemologies of testimony and language comprehension founders on the distinction between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. On Goldberg’s normativist account, our entitlement to language comprehension can only ever track sentence meaning. By contrast, I will argue, our entitlement to testimonial belief acquisition must track speaker meaning. I end with a speculative sketch of a different account of the connection between the epistemologies of language comprehension and testimony.