

Discovering the factivity of *know*

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Think and *know* both express beliefs, but differ in “factivity”: (i) *think* can report false beliefs (1a); (ii) *know*’s complement is presupposed to be true (1b) [1]. How do children figure out that *know* is factive but *think* isn’t? We use corpus methods to examine input with the verbs and determine which distributional cues might signal factivity. We find that direct cues to factivity are sparse: (i) *think* is rarely used in contexts where the complement is false; (ii) *know* is rarely used in contexts where its complement is presupposed. However, we find that *think* and *know* differ greatly in how speakers use them in conversation: (iii) *know* is used to ask (2a) or answer questions (2b), whereas *think* is used to make weak assertions (3) [2,3]. This suggests that noticing the goals of speakers who use the verbs might provide a less noisy signal than observing what speakers presuppose in using the verbs.

Figures and examples

- (1) a. John thinks that Mary is home, but she’s actually at work (think = non-factive)
b. # John knows that Mary is home, but she’s actually at work (know = factive)
- (2) *Know* is used for indirect requests for information (a) or to answer questions (b):
 - a. Do you know what time is it? (intending: What time is it?)
 - b. Q: When is bedtime? A: I don’t know (intending: I don’t have an answer)
- (3) *Think* used for indirect, or weak, assertions:
 - a. I think it’s 3 o’clock (intending: It is 3 o’clock.)
 - b. I think it’s time for bed (intending: It’s bedtime)

Selected References:

[1] Stalnaker 1974. Pragmatic presuppositions. *Sem & Phil*. [2] Searle 1975. Indirect speech acts. *Syn & Sem* 3. [3] Simons 2007. Observations on embedding verbs, evidentiality, and presupposition. *Lingua* 117.