I can’t believe it!
Expressive meaning in belief reports

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1 A puzzle about belief reports

Received wisdom about interpretation of believe, think, know

(1) Sam believes/thinks that it’s raining.
   a. Entails: In the worlds consistent with Sam’s beliefs, it’s raining.

(2) Sam knows that it’s raining.
   a. Presupposes: In the actual world, it’s raining.
   b. Entails: In the worlds consistent with Sam’s beliefs, it’s raining.

[α believes/thinks ϕ]w = 1 iff ∀w′ ∈ Doxα,w: ϕ(w′) = 1.

[α knows ϕ]w: defined iff ϕ(w) = 1.
If defined, true iff ∀w′ ∈ Doxα,w: ϕ(w′) = 1.

Prediction 1: believe/think, know form a scale and should induce scalar implicatures.

(5) I believe that John is coming to the party.
   a. Implicates: I’m not taking it for granted that it is true that John is coming to the party.

(6) I don’t just BELIEVE that John is coming to the party – I KNOW it.

• Prediction 1 borne out.

Prediction 2: α knows ϕ ∧ ¬[α believes/thinks ϕ] is a contradiction.

(7) a. #I know that it’s already 2008, but I don’t think it.
   b. I know that it’s already 2008, but I don’t believe it.

• Prediction 2 not borne out for believe.

• I don’t believe it in (7-b) suggests something about the speaker’s emotional state. I will call this the AFFECTIVE IMPLICATION, contrasting with the more familiar EPISTEMIC IMPLICATION.

Overview

Q: How widespread is the affective implication and how does it arise?
A: The affective implication is generally available and can be understood as a natural extension of the lexical semantics of believe.

Q: What is the status of the affective implication?
A: The affective implication is an at-issue assertion (in spite of its inherently subjective meaning).

Q: Can we describe more precisely the content of the affective implication?
A: The affective implication entails that the subject is willing to accept the proposition expressed by the complement.

2 Uses of believe with an affective implication

2.1 I know it but I don’t believe it

(8) I know from flying in airplanes that the sun is shining up above all these clouds. I know it, but I don’t believe it.1

(9) I’ve had people tell me I’ve made them cry. To me that’s entertainment, because you know I’m a boy in a dress, but if you can say, “OK, I know it, but I don’t believe it,” and still feel something, I’ve entertained you.2

1“Winter Wind”, by Ellen Airgood, Sierra, July-August, 1994
2Donellis Jenkins, quoted in “Queen for a day: Behind the tucking, taping and lip-syncing at the Miss Gay Maryland Pageant” by Anna Ditkoff, 4/2/2003, Baltimore City Paper
“I know it’s true, but I can’t believe it. I really can’t,” said JC Martin, whose remarkable restraint may have been due to an advanced state of shock.3

“Lydia, do you love me, dear?”

“Love you! Oh, more than all the world! You know it, don’t you?”

“I know it, but I can’t believe it.” His arm tightened around Lydia...4

I know I’m carrying 3–5 pounds of water and that next week my weight will probably be back at 165ish. I know it, but I don’t believe it. On some level I think at any moment there’s going to be a sea change and I’m going to start gaining again.5

• Epistemic believe leads to contradiction.

• Infelicitous epistemic reading could cause meaning shift to affective reading, or could simply make affective interpretation more salient.

2.2 Believe the fact that

I also can’t believe the fact that Gundam Wing will be coined as another Pokemon anime, which shows the general stupidity of the crowd.6

I can’t believe the fact that Telstra wired a street, let alone a whole new estate with shared lines.7

I can’t believe that man and I can’t believe the fact that he’s sounding so anti-Quebec. This country is sick.8

i still can’t believe the fact that i’m a senior (or almost). i’ll probably be 35 and still not be able to believe it. life is just crazy like that.9

• Maybe fact has a special interpretation.

  – Why shouldn’t I say: “I believe the fact that the college is on fire”? It is just a clumsy expression for saying: “I believe that the college is on fire”. (Wittgenstein 1969:34)

  – Doesn’t account for the affective interpretation of believe elsewhere.

• The epistemic reading leads to an uninformative assertion.

• The uninformative epistemic reading could cause meaning shift to affective reading, or could simply make affective interpretation more salient.

2.3 Biased questions

Can you believe that Jones murdered Smith?

a. Affective reading: Speaker takes for granted that Jones murdered Smith, questions addressee’s attitude towards this fact.

b. Epistemic reading: Speaker asks whether the proposition Jones murdered Smith is compatible with the addressee’s current beliefs.

Can you think that Jones murdered Smith?

a. Only epistemic reading available

Can you believe that it’s already 2008?

b. #Can you think that it’s already 2008?

• Epistemic reading is coherent and the possible answers are informative: therefore, affective reading does not arise only under duress.

2.4 Believing passionately

Sam {passionately, strongly, happily, reluctantly, faithfully, seriously} believes that the subprime mortgage crisis will cause a recession.

#Sam {passionately, strongly, happily, reluctantly, faithfully, seriously} thinks that the subprime mortgage crisis will cause a recession.

• Believe, but not think, is compatible with adverbs giving information about the emotional state of the subject.

• This suggests that believe in general may convey something about the emotional state of the believer.
2.5 Believe +NP/PP

(22) Pat believes in {humanity, the power of mathematics, . . .}
   a. \(\approx\) Pat has faith in the existence/worth of humanity/mathematics/
   . . .

(23) Pat believes Sam.
   a. \(\approx\) Pat has faith in Sam/what Sam says.

- \textit{Believe} +NP/PP describes an emotional state.
- Affective \textit{believe} could have developed out of other uses of \textit{believe} that describe emotional states.

3 The status of the affective implication

Reminiscent of items whose interpretation depends on a subjective judgment.

(24) \textbf{Predicates of Personal Taste}
   a. Ice cream is \textit{delicious}.
   b. Roller coasters are \textit{fun}.

(25) a. John: Roller coasters are fun.
    b. Mary: No, roller coasters are not fun.

(26) a. John: I can’t believe that it’s 2008 already.
    b. Mary: #No, you can’t. / #No, I can’t.

- Predicates of personal taste interpreted relative to a contextually provided \textit{Judge} parameter (Lasersohn 2005).
- Affective \textit{believe} depends on individual perspectives, not on a single judge parameter.

(27) \textbf{Expressives}
   a. That \textit{bastard} Kresge was late again.
   b. My \textit{damn} car broke down.

- Expressives convey meaning that is performative in nature and independent of the main assertion (Potts 2007).

3.1 Similarities between expressives and affective \textit{believe}

\textbf{Ineffability} Expressive meanings resist descriptive paraphrasing, as does “expressive” \textit{believe}.

(28) \textit{bastard} \(\approx\) “vile contemptible person”?  
    a. “Here’s To You, Ya Bastard!”
    b. So my story begins with my X-Box . . . Unfortunately, the bastard won’t open. This is a problem. (Potts 2007: ex. (22))

(29) I can’t believe that it’s 2008 already.
    a. I’m surprised that it’s 2008 already.
    b. I don’t want it to be true that it’s 2008 already.
    c. I’m reluctant to accept that it’s 2008 already.

\textbf{Speaker orientation} Expressive meanings are normally anchored to the speaker’s perspective but can undergo perspective shifts under some circumstances.

(30) Sue believes that that bastard Kresge should be fired. (#I think he’s a good guy.) (Potts 2007)

(31) My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that bastard Webster. (Kratzer 1999)

Affective implication of \textit{believe} speaker-oriented to some degree: \textit{Know but not believe} is overwhelmingly attested in first person. But constructed third person uses of \textit{know not believe} are acceptable.

(32) John knows that Lydia loves him but he just can’t believe it.

And adverbs of emotional state co-occur with \textit{believe} in the third person.

- The content of expressives and affective \textit{believe} has the same flavor.
- Expressives and affective \textit{believe} may or may not be speaker-oriented to the same degree.
3.2 Differences between expressives and affective believe

Immediacy Like performatives and speech acts, utterance of an expressive brings about its effect.

(33) a. A: Is it raining?
   b. B: #You didn’t ask a question.

(34) a. A: I promise to do the dishes later.
   b. B: #You haven’t made any promises.

(35) A hapless new school superintendent attempts to “make his stand against racism clear” by saying, in a speech, “Niggers come in all colors. To me, a nigger is someone who doesn’t respect himself or others.” His intentions are good, but the community is outraged. He is lucky to keep his job. (Potts 2007: ex. (1))

(36) a. A: My father screamed that he would never allow me to marry that bastard Webster.
   b. ??B: No, your father thinks Webster is a nice guy.

First person affective believe appears to have the same quality... 

(37) a. A: I can’t believe that it’s 2008 already.
   b. B: #No, you don’t have strong feelings about what year it is.

...but third person affective believe does not.

(38) a. A: Sam passionately believes that the subprime mortgage crisis will cause a recession.
   b. B: No, Sam doesn’t have strong feelings about that.

(39) a. A: Sam can’t believe that it’s 2008 already.
   b. B: No, Sam doesn’t have strong feelings about that.

- Unlike expressives, affective believe is not performative in nature. Some utterances appear to be performative in nature simply because they have to do with the speaker’s emotional state, and are thus hard to deny.

Independence Expressive meanings are not at issue and are independent of the main assertion.

(40) That bastard Kresge is famous.
   a. True iff Kresge is famous.
   b. False iff Kresge is not famous.
   c. Expressive content: In the speaker’s opinion, Kresge is a bastard.

(41) Ty ulibaes’
you-fam. smile-2fam.-pres.
‘You are smiling’ (Russian)
   a. True iff the addressee is smiling.
   b. False iff the addressee is smiling.
   c. Expressive content: The interlocutors are on informal terms.

The affective implication of believe is an at issue entailment.

(42) I know that it’s 2008 but I can’t believe it.
   b. Entails: In the speaker’s belief worlds, it’s 2008; the speaker cannot experience a certain emotion in regard to the proposition that it’s 2008.

(43) a. A: John knows that Lydia loves him but he just can’t believe it.
   b. B: No, you’re wrong. John is completely unsurprised that Lydia loves him.

(44) a. A: That bastard Kresge is famous.
   b. B: No, you’re wrong. #Kresge is famous, but he’s a nice guy.

- Although expressives and affective believe have a similar flavor, their content has different status: expressives are independent of truth-conditional asserted content, and affective believe is not.
- Dependence on emotion or other subjective judgments is independent of the mode of composition.
4 The content of the affective implication

Many uses of affective believe suggest that the speaker is surprised or unsurprised by the sentential complement:

(45) ...if you can say, “OK, I know it, but I don’t believe it,” and still feel something, I’ve entertained you.
   a. ≈ ... I know it, but I’m surprised by it...
   b. ≈ I know it, but I’m surprised by it...

(46) i still can’t believe the fact that i’m a senior (or almost).
   a. ≈ I’m surprised by the fact that I’m a senior (or almost).

(47) Can you believe that it’s already 2008?
   a. ≈ Are you as surprised as me that it’s already 2008?

Take 1: Surprisal reading of affective believe

(48) α believes φ
   a. Epistemic Implication: φ is true in α’s belief worlds.
      \( \forall w' \in \text{Dox}_{\alpha,w}: \phi(w') = 1. \)
   b. Affective Implication: Updating α’s belief worlds with φ required no belief revision.
      (i) Let \( \text{Dox}_{\alpha,w} \) be the set of worlds consistent with α’s beliefs immediately before α accepted φ.
      (ii) \( \text{Dox}_{\alpha,w} \cap \phi \neq \emptyset \)

Other uses of affective believe instead suggest something about speaker’s desires:

(49) I can’t believe that Kresge is late again. I know he would be. I don’t know why I bothered to come to work early for our meeting.
   a. ≈ I don’t want it to be true that Kresge is late again.
   b. ≈ I’m surprised that Kresge is late again.

(50) Chicago Cubs fan: The Cubs lost again! I can’t believe it! Maybe it’s time for a new coach.
   a. ≈ I don’t want it to be true that the Cubs lost again.
   b. ≈ I’m surprised that the Cubs lost again.

(51) Sam passionately believes that the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series in 2008.
   a. ≈ Sam thinks that the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series and he passionately hopes that this will be the case.
   b. ≈ Sam thinks that the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series and he is passionate in his lack of surprise that this will be the case.

Take 2: Bouletic reading of affective believe

(52) α believes φ:
   a. Epistemic Implication: φ is true in α’s belief worlds.
      \( \forall w' \in \text{Dox}_{\alpha,w}: \phi(w') = 1. \)
   b. Affective Implication: φ is true in those of α’s belief worlds that α considers to be most desirable.

An intractable case:

(53) I know I’m carrying 3–5 pounds of water and that next week my weight will probably be back at 165ish. I know it, but I don’t believe it. On some level I think at any moment there’s going to be a sea change and I’m going to start gaining again.
   a. ≈ I’m surprised that my weight will probably be back at 165ish.
   b. ≈ I don’t want it to be true that my weight will probably be back at 165ish.

- Data suggest affective believe does not specify exact content of subject’s emotional state, merely willingness to accept proposition expressed by content.
- The context may allow us to draw inferences about the reasons α is or is not willing to accept φ.

Affective believe, final version

(54) α believes φ
   a. Epistemic Implication: φ is true in α’s belief worlds.
      \( \forall w' \in \text{Dox}_{\alpha,w}: \phi(w') = 1. \)
   b. Affective Implication: α is willing to accept φ.
5 Conclusion

What have we learned from affective believe?

- *Believe* is different from *think* in that it can express information about the subject’s emotional state.

- Although the affective implication of *believe* has the flavor of expressive meaning, it is part of the ordinary truth-conditional content.

- The most promising characterization of the affective implication entails that the subject is willing to accept a proposition, for unspecified reasons.

References


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