Everybody Knows that There Is Something Odd About *Ad Populum* Arguments

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Abstract In the wake of research on linguistic resources of argumentation (Doury, 2018; van Eemeren Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007), this chapter considers the argumentative nature and rhetorical potential of the expression "everyone/everybody knows P", which is likely to be used to fulfil a justificatory purpose in appeals to majority in the form of ad populum arguments (Godden, 2008). In this contribution, we draw on a rhetoric-pragmatic framework (Oswald & Herman, 2016) to identify the linguistic and cognitive underpinnings of argumentative resources in order to account for a range of persuasive effects in argumentation. There is something argumentatively odd about the expression "everybody knows that P" under consideration here. Since the epistemic modality encoded by the verb "to know" and the universal quantifier highlight that P is already known and shared, one could indeed wonder about the relevance of P as an argument: can an argument with little (if no) informative relevance serve a justificatory purpose? Since this seems to be the case, as the argument is widely used, we will show that the oddity can be explained away by looking at the pragmatic and rhetorical import of the expression.

Keywords Ad populum · Pragmatics · Argumentation · Rhetoric · Majority appeal · Fallacy

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1 Introduction

In his (2008) paper on common knowledge arguments, David Godden discusses the traditional distinction between non-fallacious appeals to shared knowledge and fallacious *ad populum* appeals. He observes that the grounds of the distinction are rather shaky, so much so that according to him "appeals to common knowledge are no different than appeals to popular opinion" (Godden, 2008: 123). He is even led to conclude that "appeals to common knowledge provide no better evidence for a claim than appeals to popular opinion and, as such, that appeals to common knowledge ought to be just as successful—or unsuccessful—as appeals *ad populum*" (2008: 102). Interestingly, Godden targets common knowledge arguments of the form "everybody knows *P*". Without questioning his analysis, in our contribution we wish to consider the complex pragmatic import of this very expression, thereby exploring a largely understudied perspective on the argumentative and rhetorical implications of this particular argumentative resource. Specifically, we will show that linguistic pragmatic considerations on the meaning potential of this expression are necessary to assess its complex usage in argumentative settings.

While the "*ad populum* appeal" is certainly amongst the most well-known argumentative schemes and/or fallacies, we agree with Jansen that "it has not yet received a great amount of attention in the literature" (Jansen, 2018: 425). It is telling in this respect that even though there is some debate on the fallaciousness of this scheme (Godden, 2008; Jansen, 2018), there is wide agreement around Walton's rendition of the scheme's structure: "everybody (in a particular reference group G) accepts A. Therefore, A is true (or you should accept A)" (see Jansen & van Leeuwen, 2019 for a synthesis; Walton, 1999: 200). This consensus may perhaps explain why informal logicians, who mainly regard this argument as normatively problematic, if not outright fallacious, have not paid extensive attention to it and why, as Jansen and van Leeuwen observe, "there has been hardly any research, however, addressing the question of how *ad populum* arguments do occur in actual discourses" (Jansen & van Leeuwen, 2019: 573–574). More recently, however, scholars coming from linguistics (such as Jansen, van Leeuwen and ourselves), who ground their analyses in actual examples of language in context, find that *ad populum* appeals are far more complex than the classical argument scheme approach might suggest.

Our inquiry into argumentative discourse draws on a rhetoric-pragmatic framework. That is, we seek to explain how the use of linguistic devices may trigger persuasive effects in argumentative contexts, by formulating our explanations within a post-Gricean framework that was developed to account for the interpretative cognitive processes at play in communication (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). This framework is not a *normative* framework in the argumentative sense, since it is not meant to help us judge a priori the fallaciousness of a scheme; it is neither a merely *descriptive* framework, as it does not assist us in drawing a typology of different linguistic forms of the *ad populum* scheme. It is predominantly an *explanatory* framework, which we use to account for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of discursive moves, stylistic designs or, in the present case, argumentative schemes. In terms of methodology,

therefore, our research questions have to do with explaining rhetorical effectiveness—and, crucially, not fallaciousness. For this, we (i) observe the specific interpretative procedures triggered by different pragmatic phenomena in their context of occurrence and (ii) attempt to account for their rhetorical impact by formulating explanatory hypotheses (which are in turn available for experimental testing). While this analysis is not designed to determine whether a given argument is fallacious or not, it may however reveal a posteriori whether the move is to be considered as contextually misleading, fallacious or deceptive.

This paper reports on the theoretical underpinnings of our approach,[1] which consists in offering explanatory insights about the different ways in which "everybody knows *P*" may be an effective rhetorical move, with the help of naturally occurring examples used for illustrative purposes. We will accordingly show that different usages of "everybody knows *P*" trigger clear differences in meaning that should be relevant to argumentation scholarship on common knowledge arguments—also known as *majority arguments*. In particular, this preliminary investigation yielded two crucial observations. The first relates to an issue of reference. We will show that it is necessary to address the issue of whether the universal quantifier "everybody" is actually used to denote everybody—i.e., the totality of people. We will defend that this is not usually the case in public discourse (media and political discourse) and assess the rhetorical implications of this feature, while remaining prudent about the possibility of a universal usage in more private contexts. The second observation is that different types of propositional contents are likely to fill the variable *P*, in the expression "everybody knows *P*". In principle, the verb "to know" introduces issues related to knowledge and should, *ipso facto*, only scope over facts/states of affairs. Therefore, in "everybody knows (fact) *P*", we should infer that the corresponding state of affairs is already known and that the expression is there only to remind us of it, at the time of utterance. Nevertheless, we will see many examples in which the expression is used to introduce a personal opinion, which, by definition, cannot be a piece of widespread knowledge, as in the following example:

(1) "[…] Everybody knows that the fall is the best freaking season of the year."[2]

Jansen discusses a similar idea when she distinguishes descriptive from prescriptive standpoints to conclude that "*ad populum* arguments supporting a descriptive standpoint are always fallacious", while adding that "this judgement does not hold for a prescriptive standpoint" (Jansen 2018: 435). While example (1) does not defend a prescriptive standpoint but an evaluative one, both would count as *opinions* from

[1]The exploratory nature of this contribution, which aims to illustrate how a rhetoric-pragmatic framework may be instrumental to mapping and accounting for existing usages of the expression "everybody knows *P*", explains that we set out to collect different argumentative usages instead of constituting a large and systematically organized corpus around this particular expression. In other words, in this phase we are not aiming for a quantitative analysis, but for a qualitative illustration of usages in different communicative situations or genres. This in turn establishes a preliminary frame for further empirical and experimental investigations. To this end, we thus collected 28 examples from Internet websites, Twitter accounts and online newspapers.

[2]https://thestir.cafemom.com/being_a_mom/215294/thoughts-every-mom-about-fall.

our point of view. Hence, it is particularly relevant to recall Jansen's conclusions on the difference between appeals in our investigation. From this possibility, and against this background, a simple question emerges: does the use of the expression "everybody knows *P*" generate different rhetorical and argumentative effects depending on whether *P* represents an opinion or a state of affairs? Answering this question would require us to be able to assess whether the speaker who asserts "everybody knows fact *P*" sincerely considers that the fact is known—and thus only reminds her audience of it through the expression—or knows that the fact is actually not well-known or even unknown.[3] A similar requirement would hold for an assessment of the expression in cases where *P* denotes an opinion: does the speaker put forward any grounds, like a *doxa*, or can we legitimately consider that she knows that *P* is likely to be controversial? The problem with these questions is that we obviously do not have access to a speaker's private mental states. However, we do have access to the utterance as well as to the contextual assumptions needed to interpret it and the immediately adjacent co-text. If we go back to example (1), for instance, we see that its co-text clears any doubt we might entertain about the presence of disagreement, and therefore about the nature of *P*. What the complete example, reproduced in (2) below, indeed shows, is that processes of intensification such as calling people who mourn the summer "suckers" or qualifying fall as a "the best freaking season" visibly indicate the speaker's awareness that *P* is controversial:

(2) "Now, I know some people will mourn the loss of long summer days with bright sunshine tanning their shoulders. These people are suckers, because everybody knows that fall is the best freaking season of the year."[4]

This small observation shows that the scope of quantification and the nature of *P* are definitely relevant dimensions to be addressed by any account of majority arguments, and that furthering our knowledge of this particular linguistic resource of argumentation requires a deeper examination of its pragmatic specificities.

Through the examination of some important pragmatic features of (and constraints bearing on) the use of the expression "everybody knows *P*", we will thus illustrate the usefulness and relevance of considerations on meaning construction and interpretation for the study of argumentation. Our paper will be articulated around a discussion of the two abovementioned features, namely the denotational scope of the quantifier on one hand and the nature of *P* on the other. Section 2 will discuss processes of pragmatic enrichment, reference assignment and denotational scope in terms of their rhetorical impact on the use of the expression "everybody knows *P*". Section 3 will in turn discuss central issues regarding the propositional content *P* that the expression features, and show that depending on its nature, different rhetorical effects can be generated. In our conclusion (Sect. 4), we take stock of our findings and insist on the

[3] In this paper we take the terms "speaker" and "writer" to be interchangeable in the sense that both are responsible for a (respectively spoken and written) utterance, that is, an act of enunciation. We therefore ask the reader for some indulgence when we refer to authors of written statements as speakers throughout the paper.

[4] https://thestir.cafemom.com/being_a_mom/215294/thoughts-every-mom-about-fall.

usefulness of linguistic pragmatics in the study of argumentation, as an entry point into the rhetorical impact of linguistic choices.

2 Issues of Reference Assignment and Denotational Scope

In this section, we discuss issues of reference assignment and quantification scope regarding the interpretation of the expression "everyone/everybody knows *P*". These considerations lay the grounds for an assessment of its strategic and rhetorical usages, building on the idea that since it rarely denotes what it literally refers to, it must be used for alternative purposes—and presumably rhetorical ones.

2.1 Is "Everybody" Really Everybody? Pragmatic Enrichment in Processes of Reference Assignment

The expression "everybody knows *P*" is somewhat odd, as, in most cases, it precisely does *not* denote everybody. Let us illustrate this with a fact that can be taken to correspond to a universal piece of knowledge:

(3) Everybody knows that the Earth is round.

The universal quantifier "everybody", barring any particular context, cannot possibly denote the entire set of people living on the planet, if only because the proposition "the Earth is round" is in fact doubted by some, among which, most famously, members of the Flat Earth society, and some four-year-olds.[5] However, few people would object to the acceptability of (3) on these grounds. It appears, therefore, that the expression "everybody knows *P*" is a form of rhetorical amplification or intensification.

With this in mind, and in order to describe its rhetorical role(s), we nevertheless need to consider whether the expression always bears this intensifying feature. It turns out that there are particular contexts of use in which the piece of knowledge denoted by *P* is indeed known by everybody (more specifically, by all the members of the set of people denoted by "everybody"). These are thus contexts in which no intensification is taking place. Take the following (forged) example:

(4) As everybody knows, I have resigned last week. I want to stress here how lucky I consider myself to have been able to count on all of you in these last years.

Uttered by an employee in a staff meeting, it is unlikely that (4) serves any intensifying purpose, since only her colleagues, close friends and family can reasonably be expected to know she has resigned. In fact, this non-intensifying reading is rendered possible through a mechanism of pragmatic enrichment (Carston 2002,

[5] https://theflatearthsociety.org/home/.

2010), whereby the extension of the referring expression is specified and narrowed down to a limited set of individuals following considerations of relevance. In the case of (4), this set would presumably consist of all of those who are being addressed by the speaker during the meeting. Because the scope of the quantifier in the expression is narrowed down to such a "countable" extent, it appears that no intensification can take place through the use of the quantifier in this context: "everybody", in this case, means "everybody who is listening to this utterance as it is being produced".

What this brief analysis shows is that the *interpretative relevance* of the utterance is crucially not to be found in the exact number of people denoted. The role that the expression "everybody knows *P*" can instead be taken to fulfil is the depiction of a reality that is *shared* by the set of employees who are being addressed on this occasion. In that sense, this short analysis of the pragmatic features of the expression reveals that it serves to reactivate and bring to the fore a piece of knowledge that is already shared.

Now, if what is left in the expressive potential of the expression "everybody knows *P*" is reduced to the reactivation of previously shared knowledge, one could then ask why a speaker would take the trouble of phrasing it with the universal quantifier. In particular, one could wonder how (4) would be any different from (5):

(5) As you know, I have resigned last week. I want to stress here how lucky I consider myself to have been able to count on all of you in these last years.

Even if (5) also functions as a way of reactivating a piece of already shared knowledge, the expression "as you know" is still relatively ambiguous in terms of its denotation. While it can of course denote the totality of people present, it does not exclude the possibility that a very small minority still ignores that the speaker has resigned, even though this unknowing minority might be quick to pragmatically accommodate the new piece of information at the time of utterance. By contrast, in "everybody knows *P*", the possible existence of a minority who was unaware of the speaker's resignation seems to be excluded from the denotation, since "everybody", by definition, selects, well, every member of the set denoted. In other words, we can consider that "everybody knows *P*" makes the fact that *P* could not be ignored salient—and in that sense, it alludes to the possibility that *P* was previously discussed or even the object of debate. With this expression, the speaker may thus signal that she has delivered a piece of *prominent* information, and this is where the rhetorical potential linked to the denotation of the expression may very well be taken to lie.

Now, since our investigation targets mostly public discourse, one could think that (4) is irrelevant to our purposes. Yet, we argue that the meaning potential just described (i.e., reactivation of already shared knowledge and presentation of said knowledge as prominent) could be preserved independently of the context of utterance. More to the point, we contend that it could very well compete with the role played by the inherent intensification of the expression in public contexts. This is perhaps even the core of a rhetorical strategy through which a speaker only pretends to recall an unanimously shared piece of knowledge when in fact she is distorting reality and going for an *ad populum* argument.

2.2 Rhetorical Advantages: Intensification Issues

Switching back to open contexts in which interpretative processes of pragmatic enrichment do not allow to clearly single out a well-defined set of denoted referents, it seems quite clear that the rhetorical advantages of the expression "everybody knows *P*" in those contexts have to do with the rather obvious fact that it is a form of exaggeration of reality.

If we now focus more deeply on the possible denotations of the expression, we need to distinguish three possibilities. The first is that the expression is used to denote occurrences in which "everybody", *ceteris paribus*, is very likely to represent a large majority of (if not all the) people in a given context. In such cases, this constraint on meaning would strategically amount to a form of excusable hyperbole. This is the case in (6), for instance, where the speaker's epistemic stance on the fact that the piece of knowledge she provides is widely shared approximates certainty. This is signalled by the use of a proverbial form, typically reserved to convey shared *doxas*:

(6) When you're at war, speaking to the enemy is strictly verboten because, as everybody knows, loose lips sink ships.[6]

The second denotational option is that "everybody" refers to a minority of people. In that case, the rhetorical gap is far too big to bridge to hope to be persuasive—and in that case, we need to question the rhetorical effect of an all-encompassing expression which patently fails to accurately represent reality. In example (7) below, concerning the Mueller investigation on the relationship between then-candidate Donald Trump and Russia in the 2016 election, it seems that this gap is particularly important:

(7) "I [Donald Trump] think that the probe is a disaster for our country," Trump told reporters in Helsinki on Monday. "There was no collusion at all. Everybody knows it."[7]

If indeed everybody knew that there was no collusion between Trump and Russia, Mueller's investigation would not only be pointless, but it would also not be, *tout court*. Moreover, not only does the majority of people ignore whether there was any collusion or not, but we can even imagine that no one, except perhaps the people concerned by the alleged facts, truly knows whether there was any collusion or not, since the investigation was still ongoing and had not reached any conclusions at the time of utterance. The fact that it is *obviously* and *demonstrably* unlikely that everybody knows that there was no collusion seems to be highly problematic if we want to consider that the appeal to common knowledge is to serve here, and in similar contexts, any kind of justificatory purpose regarding *P*.

The third possible denotational option concerns cases where the addressee cannot be sure whether *P* is true or false:

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[6] https://gvwire.com/2018/07/19/say-it-aint-so-devin-has-congress-turned-you-into-a-fat-cat/. Note that our interpretation would be different in a different context. The proverbial form, in this American example, comes from a well-known American propaganda slogan during World War II. The speaker makes it clear that this cultural background should in any case be shared by the whole community.

[7] https://www.vox.com/2018/7/16/17576624/trump-putin-meeting-russia-witch-hunt.

(8) "Everybody knows that Russia meddled in our elections".[8]

Let us imagine that we are in a position to suspect that *P* is true in (8). This brings us close to example (7), with the difference that in this case the events described in (8) are already present in the public sphere, because they have been relayed by several sources who appear to be in a position to know.[9] Let us further imagine that we have only heard about these allegations, but that we had neither the time nor the willingness to examine them in detail; instead, we only know that a non-negligible amount of people, or even a majority, stands for (8). We venture that in this case, the hyperbolic nature of "everybody knows *P*" is still active, but that it will additionally fulfil an *ad populum* role in case our lack of investment in the personal investigation of the issue pushed us to trust what many people—people who are likely to be well informed—are said to know. A side-effect of this scheme is that it allows the speaker to evade the burden of proof.[10] Indeed, if the vast majority, if not "everybody", thinks that *P* is the case, it becomes irrelevant to provide evidence for *P*. There is thus an "obviousness" effect, which might be considered as fallacious, but which could serve as a reasonable strategy we could adopt to admit facts that we cannot validate ourselves for lack of time or competence.

From this cursory discussion of the processes of pragmatic enrichment behind the use of the expression "everybody knows *P*", it appears that its rhetorical potential strongly depends on what we take the expression to denote (see Sect. 2) and on whether we take its intensifying nature to be relevant or not. Summing up, we have argued that:

(i) in usages in which the scope of denotation is clearly identifiable, the rhetorical advantage of the expression "everybody knows *P*" is to make *P* a piece of *prominent* information

(ii) in usages where the denotational scope is unclear or uncertain, it serves to intensify *P*

(iii) it might appear to be argumentatively weak—in terms of its justificatory power—when it is clear that a small minority, and crucially not *everybody*, despite what the speaker says, holds *P* to be true (but see our reinterpretation of the rhetorical advantages of example (7) in Sect. 3.2 below).

Accordingly, we have illustrated how properly pragmatic processes of meaning interpretation –specifically, here, those involved in reference assignment—are intimately linked with the rhetorical and argumentative potential of this expression. The results of this analysis testify to the usefulness of considering linguistic issues in the

[8] https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/08/politics/haley-on-putin-and-trump-meeting/index.html.

[9] The Joint Statement of the Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security, which represents 17 intelligence services, stated the following on October 7, 2016: "The U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations." Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national.

[10] We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out and for allowing us to clarify that establishing the truth of the conclusion of the *ad populum* argument might not always be its rhetorical purpose, even if it structurally does so.

identification of the rhetorical potential of argumentative moves. In what follows, we pursue this line of inquiry to support the idea that processes of denotation are not the only component of meaning that may influence such potential, as the epistemological and evidential nature of the proposition said to be commonly shared is also likely to contribute to rhetorical effectiveness.

3 What Is It, After All, that Everybody Knows?

In this section we reflect on the nature of *P* in the expression "everybody knows *P*". From an epistemological point of view, the possibility of expressing that everybody knows a state of affairs seems quite straightforward. Here we want to consider, further, whether it is possible for *P* to express an opinion, and, if so, whether this can have rhetorical impact. From an evidential perspective, we then wonder whether it is rhetorically significant to present *P* as a known fact or to attempt to present it as a known fact when it is actually unknown. And finally, from the perspective of disagreement, we investigate whether differences in terms of whether *P* is presented as an accepted or controversial opinion are rhetorically significant.

3.1 Is P *a Fact or an Opinion?*

The study of reasoning and argumentation, in our view, needs to take into account the epistemological nature of the information that is justified, as justifying an opinion is not the same as justifying a fact—which is incidentally part and parcel of any discussion meant to distinguish argument from explanation (Herman, 2015). However, things are not entirely straightforward when it comes to the expression "everybody knows *P*". There can indeed be a measure of confusion, owing to the ambiguity of the verb *to believe*, which can mean *to admit an opinion* as well as *to believe in the existence of a fact/state of affairs*. This is typically not an observation that has been made in the literature on arguments appealing to common knowledge. Godden, for instance, in relaying a widespread distinction between appeals to shared knowledge and appeals to popular opinion, does not make any such distinction since he takes the conclusion of both arguments to be identical (Godden, 2008: 106–107):

(9) *Basic form of appeal to popular opinion (bandwagon)*
It is widely held among S that *P*
Therefore, *P* is true
Basic form of appeal to common knowledge
It is widely known among S that P
Therefore, *P* is true

At the risk of weakening this account, we argue that while in cases in which *P* is presented as a state of affairs the conclusion drawn by Godden above is admissible, when *P* is an opinion (the bandwagon case in (9)), further qualification seems to be in order. Walton makes a distinction in his already mentioned "pop scheme" (Walton, 1999: 200): "Everybody (in a particular reference group G) accepts A. Therefore, A is true (or *you should accept A*)" (italics are ours). "You should accept *P*" is not as universal as "*P* is true" and it seems important to us to highlight the difference, somewhat in the spirit of Jansen's distinction between descriptive and prescriptive standpoints (2018, see Sect. 1 above). Indeed, it seems to us that when standpoints defend an opinion (i.e., evaluative or prescriptive standpoints), the conclusion should not be "*P* is true", but instead "you should accept P". The difference, in our view, comes from the difference of epistemological status between facts and opinions. The truth of facts can be objectively established with specific methods (measurements, scientific procedures, etc.) and is independent, as it were, of anyone's thoughts about it. The truth of opinions, however, cannot be established by objective procedures, because opinions rely on value judgements, which cannot be, by definition, universal. In other terms, while the reality denoted by an opinion may turn out to be acceptable, it is only so *for a given set of people*, whereas if the utterance of a fact happens to correspond to an actual state of affairs, it should be obvious to and accepted by everyone. Opinions, unlike states of affairs, are not assessed in terms of truth or falsity, but in terms of agreement or disagreement. The bandwagon appeal is therefore an invitation to consider that the opinion expressed by *P* needs to be included in an already shared *doxa* by virtue of the fact that "everybody" agrees with it. In this sense, when *P* is an opinion, "everybody knows *P*" invites the addressee to be part of the in-group by sharing an opinion. The alternative would instead involve being stigmatised as a member of an out-group who refuses to acknowledge an opinion that is shared by the majority, sometimes to the point of being considered to be universally shared.

Whereas the verb *to believe* syntactically requires (and is semantically compatible with) the selection, as grammatical arguments, of NPs which can both encode opinions and state of affairs, the verb *to know*, which we focus on, can only semantically select facts. Examples (3) to (8) are thus more compatible with true/false judgements about states of affairs than with evaluations formulated in terms of agreement/disagreement. However, this is not true of example (1) and of example (10), for instance:

(10) The 90th Academy Awards will take place Sunday, airing live on ABC from the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, California. But as everyone knows, the best part of the star-studded event is the pre-Oscars red-carpet coverage.[11]

Whether we seriously take the evaluative opinion about the "best part" of the event being the red-carpet coverage to be exaggerated or not, to hold that such is the case is presented in (10) as an opinion, and, what is more, an opinion that is

[11] https://www.newsweek.com/oscars-2018-red-carpet-live-stream-when-and-where-watch-celebrity-arrivals-825005.

strengthened by "everyone knows". We can reasonably expect, at the very least, the organisers of the event not to share this opinion and thus it is easy to recognise that the assertion is infelicitous because it fails to adequately cover the range of possible referents expressed by the universal quantifier. The appeal to popular opinion can therefore play a persuasive role by strengthening what is presented as a widespread *doxa*. Yet, we argue that the reporter's personal involvement with respect to the truth of the opinion, marked by the subjective adjective "best", reduces the power of the *ad populum* appeal. This is because the reporter openly discloses that she offers a personal view on the issue, which, as a result, allows us to expect her to defend it if challenged. We are therefore not in a situation where the speaker provokes potential readers, as in example (1), in which the speaker intensified the controversial nature of her utterance.

How speakers endorse the opinions they convey should thus also be part of our exploration of the rhetorical effects of majority arguments. Example (11) illustrates a different, but related, feature of "everybody/everyone knows *P*":

(11) And so the care package wrangle begins because, as everyone knows, the government has not made enough money available for this in successive budgets and the impact is always on the NHS.[12]

Here, the opinion seems to be less overtly endorsed by the speaker, given the absence of evaluative adjectives, among other indicators. The proposition expressed is nevertheless still akin to an opinion the speaker commits to and we can moreover suppose that general agreement with it is not given: the government, for one, would probably disagree with the journalist's description. That this is indeed an opinion can be justified by the insertion of the clause "I find that" before the proposition (Gosselin, 2015)[13]—and to resort to Freeman's classification, the evaluative nature of this proposition would make it an *interpretation* (Freeman, 2005). We note, however, that the absence of explicit commitment indicators, and, what is more, the explicit presence of an indicator of universal commitment ("everyone knows") encourage us to think (i) that the author considers that this opinion is uncontroversial, (ii) that we accordingly need to consider it as already shared and (iii) that its mention here fulfils a mere recalling function.

Through examples (1), (10) and (11), we see that an analysis of the expression "everyone/everybody knows *P*" and of the resulting *ad populum* appeal cannot do without the immediate co-text of the occurrence. Only by considering the latter can we identify its rhetorical potential. In (1), it realises an overtly endorsed polemical move, in (10) it functions as an appeal to share a belief to which the speaker overtly commits but that she knows to be controversial, and in (11) it seems to be used

[12] https://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/newS/16064612.meet-some-of-the-most-misunderstood-people-in-the-uk-why-the-nhs-needs-managers/.

[13] "I find that the government has not made enough money available for this in successive budgets and [that] the impact is always on the NHS" does indeed seem to correspond to an opinion. By contrast,??"I find that I am a human being" (barring stylistic or ornamental rhetorical effects) seems rather odd, and thus would suggest that "I am a human being" is not an opinion.

as an appeal to share a belief by obfuscating the fact that it is an opinion and by misrepresenting it as an already known and undisputable state of affairs.

What this brief discussion on the epistemological and discursive nature of *P* in the expression "everybody knows *P*" (i.e., whether *P* is an opinion or a state of affairs) shows, is that

(i) appeals to shared opinions and appeals to shared facts are not equivalent
(ii) the former may try to appear as the latter in an attempt to escape refutation
(iii) the co-text, and thus considerations on meaning, are fundamental to assess the rhetorical potential of the expression "everybody knows *P*".

It furthermore emerges, from a rhetorical viewpoint, that the advantage of illegitimate appeals to common knowledge, when they disguise an opinion as a fact, might be to increase the epistemic value of the proposition *P* by trying to mislead the addressee into considering that *P* is already known—when in fact it is not.

3.2 Is P *Presented as a Known Fact or as an Unknown Fact?*

When the expression "everybody knows *P*" is used to represent a state of affairs, one could imagine, a priori, that the function of the utterance is merely to recall said state of affairs; this would in turn obliterate the argumentative nature of the expression, since in that case it is not used to provide any support to the claim. The difference between merely recalling shared knowledge and a case where a more or less widely shared fact is used in a premise to infer the truth of the conclusion changes everything: as such, this premise, presumably supporting the conclusion "it is true", could be described as a *petitio principii* whose conclusion fails to carry any informational import.

As previously mentioned, we need to analyse the co-text of the expression in order to find out whether the speaker excludes specific members from the set of recipients of said shared knowledge. Going back to example (7), the expression "everybody knows it" is blatantly false and plays no recalling function whatsoever. Instead, it is used to discredit the Mueller investigation as well as the means deployed to carry it out by suggesting that its outcome is reputedly already known. Here, the lack of referential relevance of the universal quantification in the argument acts as a trigger to seek its relevance elsewhere. We contend that the path to establishing the argument's relevance transits through the reconstruction of a specific argumentative inference and we thus interpret this example as follows: an investigation, whose result is already known by everyone, is carried out; a known fact does not require an investigation; therefore, this investigation is useless. In that sense, "everybody knows" is not so much used to increase the certainty of what the investigation will surely show, according to Trump, namely the absence of collusion, but instead seeks to discredit a ridiculous investigation whose conclusion will only state the obvious.

There is actually more to example (7), since such a conclusion about the absurdity of the world does not seem to be relevant enough, given the political context and

Trump's sustained presence in (online) media. It would in fact be quite easy to draw on the strong intertextual potential of Trump's message to identify an argument by analogy along the following lines: we continue to carry out investigations about non-existent facts; in a witch-hunt, people investigate non-existent facts; therefore, I [Donald Trump] am the victim of a witch-hunt.[14] By conveying that he finds it ridiculous to maintain a pointless and useless investigation, Trump thus indirectly argues that there is a witch-hunt targeting him. In this case, "everybody knows *P*" should be pragmatically enriched as "everybody with good sense"—i.e., those who think that Donald Trump is innocent—(see Sect. 3.1 above).[15] Even if this refers to a statistical minority, and even if the facts have not yet been established, Trump plays on the already obvious character of the state of affairs he mentions, which is reinforced by the use of "everybody knows".

Trump's tweet, reproduced in example (12), seems to implement a similar strategy:

(12) As everybody knows, but the haters & losers refuse to acknowledge, I do not wear a "wig". My hair may not be perfect but it's mine.[16]

If wearing a wig is subject to debate, that means that the referring expression "everybody knows" manifestly fails to denote the totality of people, and thus that it fails to appropriately describe reality. It would indeed be completely irrelevant to utter (12) or to simply talk about the wig issue if, in the first place, it was obvious to everyone that Trump does not wear a wig.

Interestingly, the effect of the appeal to popularity seems to us twofold in this example. Not only does it attempt to present as true something that many people could legitimately doubt, but it also reinforces the obviousness of a state of affairs that is presumably known, thereby ridiculing the hating minority who would refuse to admit an obvious fact. We are thus led to venture that in cases in which "everybody knows *P*" blatantly fails to include "everybody", in addition to appealing to popular opinion in order to increase belief in the truth of *P*, the speaker also attacks those who doubt *P*—as an *ad personam* attack of sorts.

Example (13) highlights another feature of the expression "everybody knows *P*":

(13) But as everybody knows, the name Cristiano Ronaldo brings plenty of marketing, sponsorship and merchandise opportunities—and Juventus are already reaping the early rewards.[17]

In this case, the state of affairs is reputedly shared by everyone and, moreover, a personal attack on those who would doubt it nevertheless seems out of the picture. Here, the speaker recalls a known premise to inform us that Juventus is already reaping the benefits of their latest addition to the team, despite the cost of the transfer.

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[14]Trump repeatedly used the expression "witch-hunt" to denote the Mueller investigation in his tweets.

[15]Note here as well how the pragmatic enrichment of the referring quantifier is crucial for the success of the rhetorical strategy.

[16]https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/327077073380331525.

[17]https://www.fourfourtwo.com/features/juventus-sold-over-half-a-million-cristiano-ronaldo-shirts-first-24-hours.

One could thus wonder about the relevance of mentioning that "everybody knows" it. But an interesting observation emerges from the deletion of the expression: if we delete it, and assuming that *P* is indeed widely known, the sentence becomes completely trivial. This makes us hypothesise that the expression "everybody knows *P*" serves to weaken the triviality of the sentence and to acquit, in an anticipatory move, the speaker of recalling such trivialities. Of course, such a move reinforces the fact that *P* is shared evidence through presupposition; if we assume the speaker knows this, then there is no *ad populum* appeal regarding the truth of *P*. The *ad populum* effect, instead, would be to prevent doubt regarding *P*. We will come back to this shortly in our discussion about whether opinions are inherently more open to disagreement than facts.

Let us now consider a last pair of examples in our exploration of the way *P* is presented (as known vs. unknown):

(14) At first, the first-person voice appeared to read as the Palace's social media monitor's voice as everybody knows Royals don't have Instagram accounts.[18]

Since we are not familiar with the British context behind the occurrence of this utterance, it is hard for us to ascertain whether the mentioned state of affairs ("Royals don't have Instagram accounts") is obvious or not. What we observe, however, is that the expression "everybody knows" recalls a fact that seems to be known—and that is easy to accommodate in case it is not. Indirectly, this furthermore takes part in the construction of an ideological group representation according to which no addressee is supposed to ignore the fact that Royals do not have Instagram accounts. Reliance on in-group membership, used for rhetorical purposes, is present in many examples, and so is the counterpart construction of out-group membership. In this sense, when the appeal to popularity expressed in "everybody knows *P*" is not likely to increase belief in *P*, it still serves to exert some pressure on those members of the audience who ignore or doubt *P* by giving rise to the possibility that they are out-group members. This is also the rhetorical strategy deployed in example (15), in which those who would doubt the importance of digital money would be negatively categorised as ignorant on such important financial matters:

(15) As everybody knows, digital money is now receiving a lot of attention in the financial world, and this is something that definitely has a repercussion on trading markets and such.[19]

To sum up, our analysis of whether *P* is presented as known or not shows a range of rhetorical possibilities. When "everybody knows *P*" introduces a widely known state of affairs, it serves

(i) to recall it
(ii) to make its obviousness or its trivial nature manifest
(iii) to construct a piece of knowledge as shared among in-group members

[18] https://grazia.com.au/articles/proof-the-young-royals-need-their-own-instagram-accounts/.
[19] https://globalcoinreport.com/ripple-xrp-tron-trx-others-on-yahoo-finance/.

(iv) to trigger some threat towards those members of the audience who would ignore the fact and thus would be counted among members of the out-group. And no one wants to be in the out-group.

3.3 Is P Presented as a Manifestly Shared Opinion or as a Manifestly Controversial Opinion?

Recall that in example (1), which establishes fall as the "best freaking" season, the opinion expressed by *P* was clearly controversial. In (16), something related seems to be happening, since the referring expressions ("mysterious creatures") and the allusion to Faust contribute to the expression of a sarcastic attitude:

(16) Getting more from these mysterious creatures [the celebrities] can be difficult, but, as everyone knows, offering them publicity in exchange for tiny little bits of their souls is a trade-off that works time and time again.[20]

Here, "as everyone knows" preserves all the features of hyperbole; however, this appears to be so obvious that the expression, to us, struggles to fully integrate the argumentative dimension typical of appeals to popularity. The point of the argument here is probably thus not to persuade the audience, since, in any case, *P* is presented as already shared and known. (16) differs from (1) in that it remains silent about the possible presence of disagreeing addressees, or of people with a different opinion. It therefore seems that the point of the rhetorical strategy is not to "increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent", in Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca's words (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969: 4), and that a separate explanation should provide reasons for the presence of the expression in this example. Our hypothesis is that it has to do with irony (or sarcasm): the speaker seems to criticise the vanity of celebrities that are willing to do just about anything to gain media exposure. Under this view, "as everyone knows" increases the pathetic, yet obvious, behaviour of celebrities. In a nutshell, the appeal to popularity in (16) is meant to reduce the likelihood of *P* being disputed more than to increase the likelihood of *P* being accepted.

We take considerations such as these to be decisive if we are to resolve the oddness of the expression "everybody knows *P*" in a given argumentation. Recall here the issue we set out to explore at the beginning of this contribution: since both the epistemic modality encoded by the verb *to know* and the universal quantifier converge in highlighting that *P* is already known and shared, what is the argumentative relevance of *P*? Can an argument with little (if no) informative relevance serve any justificatory purpose? At this point we would like to answer these two questions with two new challenging questions: what if this particular type of argument was not always meant to justify *P*? What if, instead, it was meant to reduce the likelihood that the audience calls *P* into question in order to dissipate doubt?

[20] https://www.avclub.com/jennifer-lawrence-finally-subjects-herself-to-a-lie-det-1823459567.

Let us have a look at example (17), where an ironic usage of the expression aptly illustrates this particular rhetorical effect:

(17) And as everybody knows, all those anti-gun rallies and marches are phoney and paid for by the two Georges (Soros and Clooney) who want the American people disarmed in order to…you know, something.[21]

Here the speaker is calling out adversarial opinions by highlighting their unshakeable certainties and suggesting (with the use of *something*) that these are vague, if at all sensible. To be clear, the speaker embodies a liberal viewpoint and, through irony, denounces a conservative one. In the example, the speaker is thus obviously not suggesting that *P* is true—quite the contrary. We observe that the use of "everyone knows", perhaps by virtue of its hyperbolic dimension, seems to be particularly fitting in such an ironic context, and that the appeal to popularity, given its propensity to make *P* indisputable, can precisely be used to ground the dissociative attitude that is one of the necessary conditions of irony (Wilson & Sperber 2012).

While in (17) the ironic speaker does not seem to commit to *P*, such is not the case of British TV host Graham Norton in the following example:

(18) "There's a bloody mindedness about it. Some sort of Brexit is going to happen even though at this point everyone knows it's a bad idea. I do think there's something very British and just well, 'I said I was hungry enough to eat my foot so I'm going to eat my foot'."[22]

Again, the obviousness effect introduced by Graham Norton here seems to be meant to mock any attempt to refute his opinion—which is certainly an indirect way of increasing the adherence to the—main claim, namely, that Brexit is a bad idea. But while the opinion introduced by "everybody knows" is manifestly controversial and does not trigger shared agreement, we contend that its rhetorical purpose resides in taking advantage of universal quantification to target potential adversaries who disagree with *P* by ridiculing them. It therefore seems that "everyone knows *P*" should be treated more like an *ad personam* attack targeting those who doubt *P* than like an appeal to popularity meant to reinforce the likelihood of *P*.

Donald Trump's frequent use of the expression is also symptomatic of this strategy:

(19) I am totally opposed to domestic violence, and everybody here knows that. I am totally opposed to domestic violence of any kind, everyone knows that, and it almost wouldn't even have to be said. So, now you hear it, and you all know it.

Through the repetition of "opposed to domestic violence" and of the universal quantifier, Trump underlines the uncontroversial nature of both his opinion and the debate around it. Yet, we think it is unlikely that Trump will persuade anyone that he is opposed to domestic violence *through this argument*: rather, we contend that

[21] https://gregfallis.com/category/stupid-fucking-people/.

[22] https://inews.co.uk/culture/television/graham-nortons-brexit-britain-everyone-knows-its-a-bad-idea/.

what the argument performs is an immunising move meant to prevent doubt and to ridicule anyone who would call what he says into question.

Do we get a similar effect when the opinion introduced by "everyone knows" is not openly controversial? It seems we do not. In the examples below, it appears that "everyone knows" is rather used to support premises than to truly give weight to the conclusion. We do, however, find again the idea that *P* is reputedly shared:

(20) As everyone knows, beer is a staple of neighborhood bars, and Small Change doesn't disappoint, regardless of your personal poison.[23]

(21) You know, I wish it would be [done] today but as everybody knows, federal government moves slow, the state government moves slow, but the federal government moves slower.[24]

In these cases, it seems that "everyone knows *P*" mostly serves to recall and perhaps stabilise some *doxa.* Of course, by the mere utterance of (20) and (21), a speaker will exert pressure on anyone in disagreement with *P* to adhere to *P*, but we cannot determine with any certainty that this possibility is seriously entertained by the speakers in these examples. Their goal is presumably not to make the audience accept *P*, but to rely on *P*'s obviousness to justify that the bar Small Change does not disappoint beer lovers (in (20)) and that it was not possible to go faster in any way in (21). In other words, it is far from obvious that "everybody knows opinion *P*" functions as a canonical appeal to popularity.

4 Everybody Knows/Should Know that This Investigation Is not Over

To sum up our investigation devoted to appeals to common knowledge formulated with the expression "everybody knows *P*", it is time to take stock of our different observations and to delineate how they fit in the current landscape of the study of argumentation.

We started this exploration by first discussing the referring potential of the expression, as language users work it out through the pragmatic enrichment of reference assignment and denotational scope. In case the set denoted by "everybody" is clearly identifiable, it turns out that the rhetorical import of the expression is to reactivate a shared piece of information, which is therefore presented as *prominent*—and thus as epistemically advantageous. In case "everybody" in the extensional set cannot be reasonably expected to know *P*, we get illegitimate uses of this argumentation scheme. This allows the speaker to make *P* appear to be uncontroversial, even in cases in which she is unable to ascertain that. The rhetorical advantage of an *ad populum* appeal of this kind, thus, is to take advantage of the expression's propensity

[23] https://www.riverfronttimes.com/foodblog/2018/03/01/small-change-brings-that-planters-house-magic-to-a-benton-park-dive.

[24] https://www.wtok.com/content/news/Plans-to--488313741.html.

to apply to already shared information to, quite simply, propagate bullshit (Frankfurt 2009). Therefore, by examining who "everybody" can reasonably be taken to refer to, we have shown that linguistic processes as basic as reference assignment are of rhetorical significance.

We then tackled the epistemological and evidential nature of the expression "everybody knows *P*" in order to gain descriptive power over its usages. The examples we analysed indeed allowed us to ground a distinction between instances where *P* denotes a fact and instances where *P* denotes an opinion and thus to highlight that co-textual and contextual considerations are crucial when it comes to assessing the rhetorical workings of the expression. When dealing with propositions denoting states of affairs (or facts), our analysis shows that "everybody knows *P*" seems to function as a device meant to recall widespread information and as a polarising device meant to exploit mechanisms of in-group and out-group membership construction, with resulting pressure to accept *P*. When it is used to denote opinions, we submit that "everybody knows *P*" draws on the evidential and epistemic properties of widespread information to immunise *P* from being called into question. In other words, in these cases the expression is used as a defensive strategy: instead of giving us reason to accept *P*, it gives us reason not to doubt *P*.

We hope to have shown that a pragmatic investigation of the meaning potential of "everybody knows *P*" can significantly contribute to our knowledge of appeals to common knowledge, and in particular to our knowledge of their rhetorical features. Of course, many other directions of research devoted to the relationship between argumentation and language remain open for this type of argument: we are thinking in particular of the nature of the verb that the speaker chooses to formulate her appeal to common knowledge. Saying that everybody knows something might be quite different from stating that everyone agrees with something, in evidential terms, since the latter might suggest the existence of a poll, while the former typically might not.

More broadly, we hope to have illustrated the usefulness of a linguistic viewpoint (and starting point) in the study of argumentative phenomena. Argumentation scholarship, in recent years, has witnessed a sustained interest in the relationship between argumentation and language (see Oswald, Herman, & Jacquin, 2018 for an overview). For nearly two decades now, efforts coming from within mainstream approaches to argumentation have contributed linguistic and stylistic investigations that have indeed allowed the discipline to grow, notably through the development of the pragma-dialectical concept of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren, 2010; van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2006; van Haaften, 2017; van Haaften & van Leeuwen, 2018). We like to think of the work presented here as an attempt at contributing to the study of the rhetorical dimension of argumentation with the tools of linguistic pragmatics.

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