

# Appeals to Popularity: Roles and Functions of ‘Everyone knows X’

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What is the rhetorical effectiveness of arguing with an expression like “Everyone knows X”, which is a literally wrong hyperbole? Is “everyone knows X” a good example of a premise used for an appeal to popular opinion? I will argue here that studying more closely this expression in its pragmatic context reveals that “appeal to popularity” may not be the main scheme: “everybody knows X” can ridicule those who don’t know X, or just recall a shared fact or opinion. A typology of different cases is drawn to cover the rhetorical effects of this expression.

KEYWORDS: appeal to popularity or to popular opinion, appeal to common knowledge, everybody knows X, rhetoric and pragmatics, rhetorical effects, facts and opinions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The “*ad populum* appeal” “has not yet received a great amount of attention in the literature” (Jansen, 2018, p. 425). This scheme seems to be quite obvious, and easy to teach to students, for example. There is some debate on the fallaciousness of this scheme (Goddén, 2008; Jansen, 2018), but I will not tackle this issue here. Yet, I will argue as Jansen (2018) and van Leeuwen (Jansen & van Leeuwen 2019), grounding their analyses in actual examples of language in context, that *ad populum* appeals are far more complex than expected<sup>1</sup>. It seems that there is a 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, p. 200). Three observations need to be made, though: 1. Walton uses “everybody” and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an abridged and modified version of Herman & Oswald’s paper (to appear in 2020). I thank Steve Oswald for letting me rewrite some parts of this article for these proceedings.

not “most people” for example, while the latter expression seems to be a more exemplary mean to express appeals to popularity; 2. “accept A” is not really the same as knowing A; 3. Walton considers “A is true” as synonymous with “you should accept A”. These points raise some questions which are crucially relevant for this investigation.

It should first be noted that “everybody” bears, more often than not, an intensifying feature. In an open context, like in public discourses, it is literally wrong that everybody knows X; even an obvious truth might not be known by some persons in an audience. Now, if indeed this expression is used in a closed context, which is the case of example (1) where the exclusive audience is set by “here”, “Everyone knows X” could be considered, *prima facie*, as a not relevant expression in argumentation. In this case, its role seems to be to remind the audience of a state of affairs:

- (1) OK so as everyone knows here, I'm waiting to hear back from my welding test to see if I got certified.<sup>2</sup>

If “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. “Everybody knows X” must find its own relevance compared to “as many of you know”. It is astonishing that Walton uses “Everybody knows X” as a paragon of an “appeal to popularity”. Indeed, it may exemplify the fallacy of “begging the question”:

- (2) (...) We need Border Security, and as EVERYONE knows, you can't have Border Security without a Wall. (...) (Donald Trump, on Twitter, 23 December 2018)

In this example, the premise “Everyone knows that you can't have a border security without a wall” implies the truth of the conclusion “you can't have a border security without a wall”. Since everyone knows X, it is theoretically not necessary and not relevant to convince anyone about the truth of X. I will elaborate on this point in the first section below.

But Walton's quote raises another topic of interest. Different types of propositional contents are likely to fill the variable X, in the expression “everybody knows X”. 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

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<sup>2</sup> <https://scitexas.edu/welding/woman-welder-sci-spotlight/>

time of utterance. Then, it can be concluded by “X is true”. Nevertheless, the expression is often used to introduce a personal opinion, which, by definition, cannot be a piece of widespread knowledge, as in the following example, where a prediction is said as already known:

- (3) This isn't about the Wall, *everybody knows that a Wall will work perfectly* (In Israel the Wall works 99.9%). This is only about the Dems not letting Donald Trump & the Republicans have a win. (Donald Trump, on Twitter, 28 December 2018, 14:10; italics are mine)

Moreover, it cannot be concluded anything about the truth of a future event: it is more a matter of agreement/disagreement. The use of the verb “to know” rather than “to agree” could be considered as a strategy for concealing an opinion, which is by nature open to discussion and counter-argument, in a proclaimed knowledge that says its own, and indisputable, obviousness. Of course, “everybody knows X” is not an indicator of general agreement. For example, one of the replies of the above-mentioned Trump's Tweet says: “So many wrong things. 1. Israel is the size of Rhode Island; 2. *A wall will not work perfectly (...)*” (Even Lieberman, on Twitter, Dec 28 2018, italics are mine).

I will try to observe in the second section whether appeals to popularity have differences of forms and functions if X is a fact or an evaluative opinion. For example, 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, p. 435).

As it may appear by the preceding words, I'm a linguist and a discourse analyst who is interested by the philosophical realm of argumentation. As such, I am driven by the duty to recall how important and relevant micro-observations of linguistic details can be in an argumentative dialogue or in a rhetorical situation. I consider my researches in a rhetoric-pragmatic framework: I want to explain how the use of linguistic devices may trigger persuasive effects in argumentative contexts, taking into account stylistic and rhetoric traits of a linguistic form and the 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 in order to account for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of discursive moves, stylistic designs or argumentative schemes.

## 2. WHO IS “EVERYBODY”, AFTER ALL?

As shown in Herman & Oswald (2020) and briefly recalled here, “everybody” only rarely refers to the whole audience. It appears, therefore, that the expression “everybody knows *P*” is a form of rhetorical amplification or intensification. Even in a closed context, like example 1, where “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 instead of “as you know”, “as many of you know”, etc. In (1), the possible existence of a minority who was unaware of the depicted fact seems to be excluded from the denotation, which is not completely the case with “as you know”. In other words, “everybody knows *X*” makes the fact that *X* could not be ignored salient. An ignorant member in the audience should quickly accommodate this information. 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. I contend that it could very well compete with the role played by the inherent intensification of the expression, while used in public contexts where “everybody knows” is false: a rhetorical strategy through which a speaker only pretends to recall a unanimously shared piece of knowledge when in fact she is distorting reality and going for an *ad populum* argument, like in examples (2) and (3).

As a discourse analyst who is interested in the socio-historical context of an utterance and its background knowledge, I would like to measure the gap, to assess the degree of amplification, between the probable denoted referent and the totality expressed by the universal quantifier. For me, there are three possibilities: (1) the gap is not large at all and “everybody knows *X*” is an amplification of “the large majority of people knows *X*”; (2) The gap cannot be assessed: the addressee cannot be sure whether *X* is true or false; (3) The gap is obviously large: everybody refers to a minority of people. In this case, the rhetorical gap is far too big to bridge to hope to be persuasive.

In the following example (4), even if “deadly” is a hyperbole, the gap seems relatively small, especially because “everybody knows” is used to recall a fact that seems completely obvious and already known in order to highlight a lesser-known corollary fact:

- (4) Another strategy is to speed up — or slow down — the pace of your remarks. Everyone knows that speaking in a monotone voice is deadly. But a corollary mistake is that, even if your voice has plenty of range, speakers often use the same rate of speech all the time. (Dorie Clark, Harvard Business Review, 19

September 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/09/what-to-do-when-youre-losing-your-audience-during-a-presentation>)

Measuring the width of the gap between what is said as known and what is actually known can pose a number of problems for the analyst, of course. This is why, in the preceding example, I have first used linguistic clues that instruct the addressee to interpret an utterance as obvious. Then, background knowledge may also be used to help measure the width of the gap.

In example (5), the gap cannot be assessed, in particular since Orrin Hatch did not attend to the hearing. Moreover, in the background knowledge, the Russian interference in the US election is still under investigation.

- (5) Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, didn't attend the hearing, but said in an interview that everyone knows that Russia interfered in the election and it has admitted as much.  
(<https://tinyurl.com/y35royub>)

This case seems to be the only one which truly conveys a *standard ad populum* argument. 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.

Finally, example (6), a Donald Trump's tweet, I'm not sure that the *ad populum* effect is at the core of the rhetorical strategy. Trump plays on the already obvious character of the state of affairs he mentions, which is by nature completely unknown (a prediction) and in which "everybody knows" should be pragmatically enriched to "everybody with good sense". "Everybody knows" amplifies the gap between the ingroup (Trump's allies) and the outgroup.

- (6) The Fake News Media is doing everything they can to crash the economy because they think that will be bad for me and my re-election. The problem they have is that the economy is way too strong and we will soon be winning big on Trade, and everyone knows that, including China!  
<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/15/trump-economy-recession-stock-market-media-1464577>

### 3. WHAT DO WE KNOW?

With « everyone knows  $x$  », only factual claims are expected in principle. And these claims are either true or false. But *ad populum* schemes are not always dealing with facts, and even « everybody knows  $X$  » can perfectly be used with opinions, which are more assessed by agreement or disagreement rather than truth or untruth. For example, Jansen shows a strong difference between descriptive and prescriptive standpoints in *ad populum* schemes (2018). 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, pp. 106–107):

- (7) 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, I 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 (7)), further qualification seems to be in order.

I will study here a broad difference between facts and opinions (which combine evaluative and prescriptive standpoints). Broadly speaking, four (in fact six) types of examples can be specified. The criteria are the difference between facts and opinions (which I won't describe in detail here) and the previously depicted levels of amplification between what is presumably assumed as shared or known and what is acknowledged by the speaker as not universally known or shared. I let aside here facts that are not so known and opinions which are not universally shared, because those cases are classical examples of *ad populum* schemes with “everyone knows  $X$ ”. I will here focus on more extreme cases.

*Case I: widely known or shared facts*

- (8) "Obviously natural gas, as everybody knows, is very, very flammable. There's a quarter-mile radius evacuation zone as

safety, in case there was any fire or explosion that happened, we want to make sure everyone is safe and away from that," said Mike Ponticello, Broome County Emergency Services Coordinator. (<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/central-ny/news/2019/09/23/tractor-trailer-crash-on-i-88-prompts-evacuation-of-nearby-homes>)

When the expression "everybody knows *P*" targets the representation of 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 annihilate the appeal to shared knowledge, taken as an argumentative move of support. Indeed, in such a case we would not get the previously mentioned premise "it is widely known", but instead "it is known by everyone". That 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. In case I, one could 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 "natural gas is very flammable" is indeed widely known, the sentence becomes completely trivial; moreover, "obviously" in example (8) points to the same triviality. The expression "everybody knows" may here serve to weaken the triviality of the sentence and to acquit, in an anticipatory move, the speaker of recalling such trivialities.

#### *Case II: Doubtful or controversial facts*

- (9) 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.  
(<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/327077073380331525>)

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 (9) 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 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. It seems that in cases in which "everybody knows

X” blatantly fails to include “everybody”, in addition to appealing to popular opinion in order to increase belief in the truth of X, the speaker also attacks those who doubt X – as an *ad personam* attack of sorts.

*Case III: widely known or shared opinions*

- (10) Gastronomy in Spain is, as everybody knows, outstanding. We all love, paella and jamón, but there are other excellent gastronomic choices unknown to the general public that are equally exceptional and Madrid offers the possibility to discover them all. (<http://www.my-little-madrid.com/2016/07/find-murcia-region-in-madrid-restaurant.html>)

It appears that “everyone knows” is rather used to support premises, here a general one about gastronomy in Spain. However, the idea that x is reputedly shared is said as obviously shared. In this case, it seems that “everyone knows X” mostly serves to recall and perhaps stabilize some *doxa*. Of course, a speaker will also exert pressure on anyone in disagreement with x to adhere to X. The goal is presumably not to make the audience accept x, but to rely on X’s obviousness. It is therefore not obvious that “everybody knows opinion X” functions as a canonical appeal to popularity.

*Case IV: doubtful or controversial opinions*

- (11) “The fact is we need the wall. The Democrats know it. Everybody knows it. It’s only a game when they say you don’t need the wall” (Donald Trump, tweet, Dec 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018,

The obviousness effect introduced by Donald Trump with “ everybody knows it” 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, While the opinion introduced by “everybody knows” is manifestly controversial and does not trigger shared agreement, I argue that its rhetorical purpose resides in taking advantage of universal quantification to target potential adversaries who disagree with X by *ridiculing* them. It therefore seems that “everyone knows X” should be treated more like an *ad personam* attack targeting those who doubt x than like an appeal to popularity meant to reinforce the likelihood of X.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

While appeal to popular opinion seemed to be quite a straightforward argument scheme, which can be described by the use of the expression “everybody knows X” in its premises, it turns out that the rhetoric-pragmatic study (Oswald & Herman 2016) of this expression makes things more complex. In particular, the use of this expression when it is clear that it cannot cover all people, or even a majority, requires finding pragmatic effects other than those described by the appeal to popularity.

Then, the epistemological and evidential nature of the expression “everybody knows X” allowed us to ground a distinction between instances where X denotes a fact and instances where X denotes an opinion. When dealing with propositions denoting already shared or known states of affairs (or facts), “everybody knows X” seems to function as a device meant to recall widespread information. When it is used to denote opinions, it draws on the evidential and epistemic properties of widespread information to immunise X from being called into question. And when facts and opinions are overtly not shared, it seems that the *ad populum* appeal may combine with an *ad personam* attack or a threat against those who are not included in “everybody knows X”, ridiculing the people who are not sharing the “obvious fact or opinion”.

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