Overcoming the Curse of Knowledge: Help for the Student Writer

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Abstract:

Humans suffer from a bias called the *curse of knowledge*: once we know something, or think we do, we have a terrible time fully taking into account the possibility that other people don't know it too. The things that are highly salient in our own minds—the tune of a song we're tapping out on a table, our own beliefs about some topic of conversation—seep into our notions of what others know or have noticed. We think that what we notice is inherently obvious; we think that what we know is self-evidently true; we think that what we mean is what others understand.

Certain discourse circumstances seem particularly vulnerable to substantive misunderstandings caused by the curse of knowledge. Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, and Gilovich (2004) demonstrates that time pressure, for example, increases curse-of-knowledge biases. So too does the absence of paralinguistic cues such as intonation and gesture. This latter fact seems to make written discourse generally more vulnerable than face-to-face communication. Many people have observed that electronic communication seems even more vulnerable yet (Epley and Kruger 1994; Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng 2005). This all adds up to a substantial cognitive hurdle for student writers.

I discuss a number of common student writing errors that can be explained as consequences of the curse of knowledge, and novel strategies for evading the curse. For instance, several studies have confirmed that effects of the curse of knowledge are much stronger for speakers than they are for overhearers, even when the overhearer shares all of the relevant privileged information about the speaker's intentions. Teachers often suggest that student writers should read their papers aloud to reveal infelicities that they would never generate in speech. For problems that arise from the curse of knowledge, a much more helpful strategy is to ask another person to read the work aloud to a third party, while the writer listens in.