Slightly rising declaratives[*]

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While feeding my daughters breakfast, I hear someone stirring upstairs. My daughters go up, and I hear talking. A typical day in our house: this is when my wife usually rises. My daughters come back down, and I say: "Mom's up", with intonation that I'll represent by "Mom's up →": nearly flat, with a *bit* of a rise at the end, unlike the falling tune of an assertion or the sharp rise of a question. (I might also have said: "So, Mom's up".) "Yup", my daughters reply.

What was I doing?

I clearly wasn't *asserting*. My intonation wasn't "Mom's up ↓"; my daughters knew better than I that my wife was awake; "Oh, I see" would have been an inappropriate response. But nor was I really *asking* whether my wife was awake. I already knew she was. My utterance didn't have the intonation of an interrogative, or of a rising declarative (Gunlogson, 2003) "Mom's up?", with a sharp rise at the end.[1] "Yup" was a better response than "yes, she is".

Utterances of declarative sentences with this distinctive intonation—*slightly rising declaratives*, let us call them—are commonplace. Talking on the phone with a friend who has a rowdy dog, and hearing barking and muffled curses in the background, I knowingly say: "Rover acting up again →". "Yup."

I leave to others the study of the conversational dynamics of slightly rising declaratives,[2] but I would like to make a suggestion about their epistemic role. In our examples I already know the proposition in question: that my wife is awake, that Rover has acted up again. Nevertheless, the exchanges do

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[1]Jeong (2018) distinguishes two subcategories of rising declaratives, neither of which fits my examples, though the "inquisitive" subcategory is closest. Rising declaratives with "positive bias" (Rudin, 2022, section 3.3.1) are closer, since in those cases as in mine, the speaker already has strong reason to believe the proposition in question. But rising declaratives with positive bias still seem seem intonationally distinct (sharper rise), explicitly ask a question, and call for a more active response (direct "yes she is" rather than offhand "yup").

[2]Some possibilities: 1. They "shore up" (in the sense introduced below) the common ground (Stalnaker, 2002), insuring that the conversational participants are on the same page. 2. They are akin to evidentials, signaling the speaker's mildly suboptimal evidential state and perhaps inviting correction. 3. They introduce a topic for future conversation (note that they tend to be discourse-initial). 4. They are just muted rising declaratives. Thanks to Kent Bach, Chris Barker, David Braun, and Jessica Rett for most of these thoughts.

improve my epistemic standing. There is, I hypothesize, a distinctive epistemic practice, with distinctive prosody and conversational mechanisms, of "shoring up" existing knowledge, of gently "tightening the bolts" of one's epistemic edifice. Perhaps it is a kind of double checking, but it isn't prompted by a special concern that the knowledge might be insecure. I don't call up the stairs and ask "Is mom up?", as I might if she has an early appointment. The shoring up is almost automatic.

To some extent, the exchanges I have described are just small talk. If my daughters hadn't come back downstairs just then, I wouldn't have made any special attempt to confirm that my wife was awake; but since they did, it was natural to fill the conversational space with the casual "Mom's up ↗". This isn't in tension with their being manifestations of distinctive epistemic and conversational mechanisms. Those mechanisms are opportunistic, taking advantage of conversational deadspace.

Jane Friedman distinguishes a sense of "checking" in which one is *inquiring* from a "thinner" sense that is operative in cases of "jiggling the lock a few extra times or tapping our pockets when something important is in there. In some of these cases, the behaviour is more like a tic than a genuine investigation." (2019, p. 85) The contrast with inquiry is useful here: in my examples I am neither inquiring nor investigating.[3] But nor am I exhibiting a tic. I'm doing something in between: manifesting a practice with a distinctive epistemic and conversational function. In fact, I think there is a question of whether habits like jiggling locks and tapping pockets are nonconversational ways of shoring up.

Friedman argues convincingly that "incessant checking" is epistemically irrational, even when it improves our epistemic position. When we irrationally check, we *open an inquiry*, which involves suspending judgment in a situation in which we shouldn't suspend—perhaps because we already know that we know the proposition on which we are checking. In my exchange with my daughters, not only do I know that my wife is awake, I also know that I know. Thus I shouldn't, and don't, open an inquiry; I don't flat-out *ask* whether she is is awake. Nevertheless my utterance of "Mom's up ↗"—not quite a question, not quite an assertion—was appropriate. We constantly, casually, automatically, shore up our epistemic state with slightly rising declaratives.

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[3]Thus I am not "seeking confirmation" in the sense of Millson (2020).

References

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