ABSTRACT. Burge’s thesis is the thesis that certain second-order self-ascriptions are self-verifying in virtue of their self-referential form. The thesis has recently come under attack on the grounds that it does not yield a theory of self-knowledge consistent with semantic externalism, and also on the grounds that it is false. In this paper I defend Burge’s thesis against both charges, in particular against the arguments of Bernecker, Gallois and Goldberg. The alleged counterexamples they provide are merely apparent counterexamples, and the thesis is adequate to its proper task. To think otherwise is simply to misunderstand the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Burge’s thesis is the thesis that instances of a certain class of second-order judgement are self-verifying in virtue of their self-referential form. As such, the judgements concerned are immune to error. This thesis was originally presented by Tyler Burge (1988) in partial response to the allegation that semantic externalism is unable to account for the authoritative nature of self-attributions of thoughts. Since then, the thesis has been the subject of attack on three grounds. First, because it deals only with the content of thoughts and says nothing of the attitudinal component of those thoughts. Second, because it deals with the contents of the members of only a small subset of second-order thoughts. Third, it has been claimed outright to be false. In this paper I will defend Burge’s thesis against all three charges. In particular I will focus on the criticisms presented by Sven Bernecker (1996), André Gallois (1996), and Sanford Goldberg (2000).

The defence falls into two parts. First, I will defend Burge’s thesis against putative counterexamples. Second, I will argue that while critics are right to maintain that Burge’s thesis cannot provide an adequate account of the authoritative nature of self-ascriptions in general, neither Burge nor so-called “Burgean compatibilists”
maintain that it can. Compatibilists do not typically derive their compatibilism from Burge’s thesis; but the thesis is adequate to its proper task.

1. THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPATIBILITY AND BURGE’S THESIS IN BRIEF

The emergence of semantic externalism, according to which a subject’s set of actual and possible thoughts is dependent upon, and restricted by, relations that subject bears to her environment, has been taken to threaten the claim that a subject can be authoritative about which thoughts she has. This can be most clearly illustrated by considering a “travelling case” in which a hypothetical subject is unknowingly switched between different environments. The environments are assumed to differ in imperceptible ways, ways which nevertheless suffice to cause a change in the concepts that subject possesses and hence in the thoughts it is possible for her to entertain. The differences between the environments, then, are semantically relevant. The question is how a subject could be authoritative about the contents of her thoughts given that she would be ignorant of a change in her body of concepts were she to be switched between such. It would seem that a subject is, as Gallois puts it, “subject to facsimile-based error”\[1\] If one’s thoughts depend essentially on one’s relations to particular environmental conditions, and knowledge of those environmental conditions is available only through empirical investigation, knowledge of one’s thoughts can likewise be available only through empirical investigation. So the argument goes.\[2\]

In his (1988), Burge draws our attention to instances of what he terms “cogito-like judgements”. Even though the contents of such judgements may be determined by relations the subject bears to her environment, such judgements are, Burge maintains, self-referential, and self-verifying in virtue of being so. The existence of such judgements demonstrates that semantic externalism need not threaten authoritative self-knowledge. He offers as examples of cogito-like judgements those such as I am now thinking that writing requires concentration, and I hereby judge that examples need elaboration. Burge writes,