NYU talks *Acts, Objects, and Attitudes*

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Handout 2

Contemporary Act-Based Approaches to Propositional Content
Part 1: Propositions as Types of Acts

1. Act-based approaches

1.1. Characteristics of the approach

Making use of acts of predication instead of abstract propositions

Jubien (2001), Soames (2010, 2013), Hanks (2007), Moltmann (2003, 2013, Ch 4)

Acts of predication:

An agent predicating a property of an object / an n-place relation of n objects

(1) a. John thinks that Mary is happy

   b. John predicates happiness of Mary.

Acts of predication are

- cognitive acts, hence avoid the problem of the graspability of propositions

- acts 'aiming at truth' and thus ensure the truth-directedness and the unity of propositional content

- belong to a familiar ontological category and thus avoid the problem of arbitrary identification

Acts of predication as the primary truth bearers

Propositions **as** types of acts of predication: S. Soames, P. Hanks

A historical predecessor:

Husserl: *Logical investigations:* propositions as types of features of acts

Types of acts inherit relevant properties from their instances

In particular, truth conditions: types of acts are true or false in virtue of instances being true or false

Performing / understanding an act amounts to performing / understanding a type of act

Thus types of acts are not on a par with abstract propositions!

Types of acts playing the roles of propositions

- as the meanings of sentences

- as the contents/objects of attitudes

Even more problematically:

- as the things modal and other nonattitudinal predicates apply to

- as the things *that*-clauses stand for in nominal constructions (*the fact that* S etc))

1.2. General problems for act-based approaches

Problem 1

Are acts the sorts of things that can be true or false?

Propositions are meant to be the semantic values of *that*-clauses and special quantifiers and pronouns such as *something, that, what John claimed.*

Actions certainly are the semantic values of action terms such as *John's thinking*, *John's act of claiming*, *John's claiming that* S. But acts (and kinds of acts) and propositions display radically different properties, in the context of natural language -- and as such.

Acts in particular do not act as truth bearers:

(2) a. ??? John's mental act / speech act is true.

    b. ??? John's act of judging is true.

    c. ??? John's act of claiming that he would win turned out to be true.

What does act as truthbearers are things like 'claims', 'judgments':

(3) John's claim / judgment is true.

→ Twardowski's distinction between actions and their products (see Session 4)

Problem 2

Not all types of acts correspond to propositions; acts do not naturally form types that could be identified with propositions, e.g. etc done hesitatingly / quickly / nicely etc.

Acts do not enter similarity relations on the basis of sharing content:

(4) a. John's thinking was the same as Mary's.

b. John's act of thinking was the same as Mary's.

c. John's thought was the same as Mary's.

(5) a. John's (act of) deciding was the same as Mary's.

b. John's decision was the same as Mary's.

Acts of thinking of deciding do not enter similarity relations on the basis of being the same in content, only entities like 'thoughts' and 'decisions' do.

Problem 3

How can types of acts be as the objects of implicit attitudes or mental states?

Bearing an attitude to a type of act = performing an act of that type / being disposed to perform an act of that type (Soames, Hanks)

But what about implicit belief and knowledge, beliefs of animals and small children ?

The act-based approach that considers types of acts to play the role of propositions is forced to conceive of belief / knowledge as disposition to judge (see especially Soames).

Even more problematically, mental states of the sort of intentions must be attributed a content on the basis of acts, whereas some philosophers consider intentions (with their propositional content) to be prior to acts (Searle 1983)!

The more general point:

Semantics should if possible be neutral as regards different views in the philosophy of mind and should in any case not imply controversial views

Problem 4

What about types of acts that have never been performed?

Reflected in use of special quantifiers:

(6) There are things no one will ever know about / think about …

Types of merely possible acts? (Soames)

Semantic issues for the act-based approach

Can sentence meanings generally be understood in terms of predication?

Constructions that do not (obviously) involve predication:

- logical connectives, especially disjunction and negation

- quantifiers

- more generally syncategorematic expressions

- thetic (as opposed to categorical) sentences, presentational sentences, 'feature-placing' (Stawson) sentences

(7) a. Smoke arose from the chimney.

   b. There is John that could help us.

   c. It is raining.

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2. M. Jubien (2001)

<u>Russell's (1912, 1913, 1918) Multiple Relations Analysis of attitude reports</u>

Attitude verbs specify multiple relations in a given syntactic context, taking the propositional constituents as arguments that are given by the sentential complement in that context.

<u>The Neo-Russellian analysis of attitude reports (Jubien 2001, Moltmann 2003b, 2013 Chap 4)</u>

Reinterpret a multiple relation as predication: an agent predicates a property/relation of an object/of objects in a certain order

An attitude report describes an act of predication (in a particular attitudinal mode), rather than a relation to a type of act predication (as on the Soames/Hanks view).

(8) a. John thinks that Mary likes Bill

   b. think(John; LIKE, Mary, Bill))

Think is multigrade in its second argument place: its second argument place has an unlimited number of positions allowing for an unlimited number of propositional constituents as arguments (Oliver / Smiley 2004, Taylor/Hazen 1992).

The first position of the mutligrade place is a distinguished position to be filled in by property or relation to be predicated of the arguments in the other positions in the relevant order.

<u>General feature of the Neo-Russelian analysis</u>

Attitude verbs take an ordered plurality as an argument

Evidence for ordered pluralities in natural language

(9) John added two and two and four.

<u>Apparent evidence for plural arguments of attitude verbs (Moltmann 2013, Chap. 4)</u>

(10) a. Hans sagte diese Worte. Maria sagte sie auch.

     'John said those words. Mary said them too.'

   b. ??? Hans sagte diese Woerter.

' John said those words.

But:

(11) a. Hans schrie, dass es regnet / ??? diese Worte.

'John screamed that it is raining / those words.'

b. ??? Hans dachte diese Begriffe.

'John thought those notions.'

(12) a. Hans sprach diese Worte / * dass es seine letzte Stunde sei.

'John said those words / that it was his last hour.'

b. Hans benutzte diese Worte / diese Woerter.

'John used those words / those order.'

Issues with the neo-Russellian account

- Properties or concepts (predicate meanings) need to be treated as objects since they act as arguments

- No truthbearers / proposition-like objects provided

Combination of the Neo-Russellian account with attitudinal objects as truthbearers and semantic values of special quantifiers and pronouns: Moltmann 2003, 2013, Chapt. 4

Moltmann 2003: attitudinal objects as relational qua objects

Moltmann 2013a: attitudinal objects as higher-level relational tropes

Critique of that view: Moltmann (to appear), Appendix.

- Shares problems with structured-propositions approaches: no space for the treatment of syncategorematic expressions

- Too focused on predication

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3. *That*-clauses as predicates of speech acts or mental states or acts

M. Devitt (to appear)

(13) ∃e(think(e, John) & [*that Mary is happy*](e))

The attitude report partially describes an act – possibly of predication.

- solves the underspecification problem, the modes of presentation problem (?)

- No problem of the unity of propositions?

- How to account for shared content? What will be the truthbearer, and the semantic values of special quantifiers and pronouns?

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