

NYU talks *Acts, Objects, and Attitudes*

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Handout 2b

Contemporary Act-Based Approaches to Propositional Content

Part 2: Acts of Neutral Predication (Soames) vs Acts of Non-Neutral Predication (Hanks)

1. Scott Soames: propositions as types of cognitive acts of ‘neutral’ predication

1.1. The view

Agent represents a being P → act of predicating P of a represents a being P

Primary truth bearers: particular acts of predication in the entertaining way

Derivative truth bearers: types of acts of predication in the entertaining way

Propositions composed of acts of predication and referential / identificational acts and possibly acts of cognizing objects (modes of presentation)

Other attitudes (judgment, belief, knowledge): relations to types of acts of predication in the entertaining way, need to be understood in terms of acts of predication / dispositions to predicate.

1.2. Problems for Soames

- Problems for the presupposed relational analysis of attitude reports
- General difficulties with the identification of the meaning of a sentence with the content of a propositional attitude
- Requires analysis of attitude in terms of acts of predication
- difficulties with clauses embedded under nonattitudinal predicates: Embedded contexts that do not involve acts of predication
- No way of analyzing modal sentences

Application to other non-attitudinal sentential predicates: *imply, is probable, is possible* etc.

- the underspecification of the content of attitudes by *that*-clauses

Propositions may be composed both of acts of predication and acts of cognizing objects.

Different acts of cognizing individuate different propositions, though those propositions may be representationally identical.

Alternative

Make acts of cognizing not part of the semantic value of the *that*-clause, but part of the object that *that*-clause partially characterize, see Devitt (to appear), my own approach.

1.3. Hanks' (2015) critique of Soames

The motivation of the act-based approach is to link truth to the correctness of acts

correctness of acts = truth of acts

Soames cannot get that link:

No notion of correctness applicable to acts of mere entertaining.

Acts or mere entertaining, not being associated with a norm of correctness are not truth-evaluable.

The problem with Hanks' argument

Correctness does not apply to acts in the way Hanks wishes:

Correctness of an act (of asserting or judging) does not amount to the truth of the act of asserting or judging, only the correctness of the product of such an act, the assertion, does.

2. Peter Hanks: propositions as types of acts of predication with a particular force

2.1. The view

Like Soames, propositions are identified with types of acts of predication

Differences

No neutral predication; no content-force distinction

Linking a property to an object is always truth- or satisfaction-directed:

Three types of acts of linking an object to a property

- the assertion-way (predication)
- in the question-way
- in the command-way

In all three cases: act of expressing a property (using a predicate

The three types of acts correspond to the three types of independent sentences

in the assertion way / predication: declarative sentences

in the question way: interrogatives

in the command way: imperatives

Hanks' claim:

The three types of acts also correspond to three types of embedded sentences:

That-clauses (word/mind to world direction of fit):

(1) a. John claims / judges that S.

Infinitival clauses(world-to mind/word direction of fit):

(1) b. John asked Bill to leave.

c. John wants to leave.

Interrogative clauses:

(1) d. John asked whether Mary is happy.

e. John wondered Mary is happy.

Attitude reports

describe relations between agents and types of acts of one of the three types, depending on the clausal complement.

Quantification: predication of higher-order property of first-order property

An obvious problem for Hank's view:

No assertive force in contexts of negation, disjunction, conditionals etc.

Hank's proposal: these contexts cancellation contexts, they cancel the assertive force of predication

Acts of predication with cancelled force are still truth-evaluable, comparable to pretend acts of assertion

Other philosophers arguing for non-neutral force of propositional content: Boghossian (2003)

2.2. Evidence from natural language for non-neutral predication

[1] Data about sharing of contents (Session 1)

(2) ??? John thought what Mary demanded, that Bill should open the window.

[2] ‘Neutral’ attitude verbs with *that*-clauses and with questions:

That-clauses appear to set up a positive force with verbs that are candidates for expressing neutral predication, in contrast to interrogatives.

Example from German:

(3) a. Ich habe mir ueberlegt, ob es besser ist, ob wir zu Hause bleiben.

‘ I thought about whether it is better we stay home.’

b. Ich habe mir ueberlegt, dass es besser ist, wenn wir zu Hause bleiben.

‘I thought / decided that it is better if we stay home.’

c. Ich habe mir ueberlegt dass wir besser zuhause bleiben sollten.

‘ I thought /decided that we should better stay home.’

Hypothesis:

There is no verb ‘to entertain’ in natural languages triggering neutral predication with a non-interrogative complement.

The case of *think*:

Observation:

The attitudinal objects specified by *think* do not go well with truth-predicates:

(4) a. ?? John’s thought is true / false.

b. What John thought ?? is true / ? is wrong.

2.3. Problems for suspension of predicative force in conditionals and disjunctions

[1] How can suspension be understood?

Antecedent and consequent of conditionals need to be truth-evaluable in order to contribute to the truth conditions of the conditional. How is this possible if assertive force of predication is suspended and assertive force goes with correctness/truth? Truth-evaluability of cancelled force of predication is mere stipulation.

Moreover, nothing is said of how to understand the assertive force of the entire disjunction or conditional. How should that be derived if disjunctions and conditionals involve no assertive predication at all?

[2] How to characterize contexts triggering suspension?

If, or, negation

Other conditional constructions with *in that case, provided that, conditional mood / would*:

(5) a. Mary might come. In that case, John would come too.

b. John will come provided Mary comes.

Conditional complements of attitude verbs:

() Mary would be happy if Bill came to the party.

Suspension because of conditional, no suspension because clausal complement specifies content of attitude.

What about modals? Do they involve suspension or perhaps only modals of possibility?

[3] Other readings of suspension-triggering expressions

The function of *or* in interrogatives: reinforces interrogative force, rather than suspending it:

(6) a. John knows whether or not he will come.

b. Will John come or not?

Conditional speech acts:

(7) a. In case you do not know, John won the race.

b. In case you hear me, please help!

[4] Constituent coordination

(8) Almost every man or woman had to leave.

Alternative:

Predication in conditional, disjunctive, and negative contexts involves weaker force than assertion: weak acceptance

Same thing for thoughts: are constituted by weaker positive force, not permitting truth predicates.

2.4. Problems with the distinction among three forces of predication

Motivating the three forces

Searle's directions of fit:

word/mind to world, world to word/mind, questions

or perhaps:

assertions: truth conditions;

directives: satisfaction conditions;

questions: answerhood conditions

Three types of independent sentences across languages acknowledged in linguistics:
 declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives

The problem of embedded sentences

That-clauses, infinitives, embedded interrogatives?

Hard to apply the same distinction to propositional attitudes:

Desire: satisfaction condition

Intention, decisions: realization or implementation conditions

Hope, expectation, prediction: fulfillment conditions

That-clauses: can be complements of *desire* and *believe*

Infinitival clauses: can be complements of *claim*, *intend* and *decide*

Distinguish as many types of acts of predication as there are attitude verbs?

But then how to account for sharing of propositional content and inferences among propositions?

2.5. Challenges for directive acts and questions as types of property-object linking

Connections between acts of different types that need to be accounted for

[1] Connection of imperatives and modals in declarative sentences

Valid inferences:

(9) a. Clean the kitchen!

Mary must clean the kitchen.

b. Take an apple!

Mary may take an apple.

[2] Connection of questions to answers

(11) a. John knows whether Mary won the race.

Mary won the race.

John knows that Mary won the race.

b. John knows who won the race.

Mary won the race.

John knows that Mary won the race.

3. Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts

Locutionary acts consist of acts of referring to objects and saying something about them (

Acts of reference and predication: rhetic acts

Say: specifies locutionary act

Assert: specifies illocutionary act

By performing locutionary acts an agent can perform an illocutionary act.

Locutionary acts are force-neutral.

Searle (1968): propositional acts instead of locutionary acts: acts of conveying a propositional content

Session 4: linguistic support for locutionary acts

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