ESSLLI 2014

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**‘Act-Based Conceptions of Propositional Content’**

**Course Outline**

**Session 1**

The philosophical and linguistic motivations for the notion of a proposition and its problem

**Session 2**

Contemporary act-based conceptions of propositional content (Jubien, Hanks, Soames), their applications, potential developments and problems

**Session 3**

Attitudinal objects and Twardowski’s distinction between actions and products

**Session 4**

The semantics of sentences and embedded clauses based on attitudinal and modal objects

**Session 5**

A new semantics of quotation based on attitudinal objects

**Motivation and Description (original description)**

Propositions play a central role in linguistic semantics and philosophy of language. The motivations for propositions comes from the particular semantic roles they are meant to play, namely as the meanings of sentences (and the meanings of embedded *that*-clauses in particular), as the ‘objects’ of propositional attitudes, as the (primary) bearers of truth and falsehood, and as the semantic values of ‘propositional’ anaphora and quantifiers, such as English *something, nothing*, and *that*. As such, propositions are generally conceived as mind- and language-independent entities that have their truth conditions essentially (Schiffer 2003). The two main conceptions of propositions are as set of circumstances (possible worlds or situations) and as structured propositions, such as n-tuples of a property or relation and n-1 arguments Making use of propositions for those roles has become standard in both philosophy of language and in linguistic semantics. But propositions are also associated with a range of conceptual and empirical problems, some of which have received significant attention in the recent philosophical literature (Moore 1999, Jubien 2001, Iacona 2003, Soames 2010, Hanks 2009, 2011). Thus, it is very unclear how an abstract proposition can act as the content of a cognitive act or state, how a structured proposition can have the particular truth conditions it has on the basis of its constituents and their order (the problem of the ‘unity of propositions’), and moreover why an abstract proposition can be truth-directed in the first place. Abstract propositions in fact cannot have truth conditions inherently, but only by stipulation.

Propositions as the objects of propositional attitudes go along with a relational analysis of attitude reports according to which *John thinks that* S has the logical form think(John, [*that* S]), where p is the proposition that that S stands for. This analysis faces serious empirical problems, though, in that *that*-clauses simply do not behave like singular terms standing for a proposition: a *that*-clause generally is not replaceable by an explicit proposition referring terms (Prior 1971, Bach 1997, King 2002,2007, Moltmann 2003a,b, 2013, Chapt. 4)

In order to account for the conceptual problems for propositions, a number of philosophers have more recently proposed act-based conceptions of the notion of a propositional content, pursuing the idea that cognitive acts of predication provide the ‘glue’ that constitutes the unity among the propositional constituents and give the truth-directedness of a propositional content (Jubien 2001, Hanks 2009, 2011, Soames 2010). Such approaches have significant historical predecessors in phenomenology and early analytic philosophy (Husserl, Twardowski, Meinong among others). The course will discuss the various act-based approaches, how they may or may not account for the conceptual and empirical problems for propositions, and how they could deal with a range of challenging constructions, such as sentences with quantifiers, negation, and coordination. The course will moreover present a novel act-based approach, partly based on Moltmann (2003a, b, and 2013, Chapter 4). This account centers on the notion of an ‘attitudinal object’ and involves a distinction between what the Polish philosopher Twardowski (1912) called ‘actions’ and ‘products’, a distinction that played a prominent role also in the work of Bolzano and Ingarden. Whereas acts or states of thinking, judging and desiring are actions, attitudinal objects such as a thought, a judgment, and a desire are (nonenduring) products -- or abstract artifacts in Thomasson’s (1999) sense. Unlike acts and states, attitudinal objects have truth conditions or more generally satisfaction conditions inherently and display conditions of similarity strictly driven by the sharing of propositional contents. Moreover, they carry relevant normative and evaluative properties in the way artifacts (such as laws or objects of art) generally do. Unlike abstract propositions, attitudinal objects, like artifacts in general, are mind- and agent-dependent and thus cognitively accessible.

The Attitudinal-Objects Theory goes along with a particular non-relational view attitude reports according to which *that*-clauses embedded under attitude verbs do not stand for propositions, but rather specify sequences of proposal constituents (the neo-Russellian account of Moltmann 2013b, 2013, Chapter 4, cf. Russell 1913, 1918) or else serve to characterize parts of the action or state described by the embedding verb (the Davidsonian event argument). Only by the use of a nominalization or a nominalizing quantifier such as *something* (Moltmann 2003a, b) is reference to an attitudinal object permitted.

The act-based approach to propositional content allows for a new account of quotation which promises a unified account of various phenomena of quotation based on a novel view of its syntactic basis. On that account, the interpretation of pure, direct, and mixed quotation involves what I call ‘lower-level linguistic act types’, making use of Austin’s (1965) distinction between linguistic acts of increasingly higher levels: phonetic acts - phatic acts - rhetic acts - locutionary acts - illocutionary acts – perlocutionary acts. Ordinarily, such acts are ordered by the ‘by’-relation or what Goldman (1970) calls ‘level-generation’: a speaker performs a phatic act by performing a phonetic act etc. The crucial idea of the act-based account of quotation is that quotation consists in that lower-level linguistic acts are performed not or not only in order to perform higher-level linguistic acts. Thus, the interpretation of *‘Marie’* in *John called Mary ‘Marie’* is, let’s say, a phonological act type, which will in turn serve to characterize the Davidsonian event argument of *called*. The interpretation of *‘extraordinary’* in the mixed-quotation sentence *John said that Mary is an ‘extraordinary’ woman* consists both in a predicative act type and a morphological act type both of which serve to partially characterize the event argument of *said*.

This account will be combined with a particular view of the syntactic structure of sentences with quotation. Most theories of quotation take pure quotation to consist in the formation of an expression-referring term (while theories differ as to how such expression-reference is achieved). Such a view faces difficulties, though, such as substitution problems and questionable syntactic assumptions. On the act-based account, the syntactic contexts allowing for quotation simply accept expressions that are not syntactic units, but may just be morphological, phonological, or phonetic units. The syntactic structure of the overall sentence will then include a part that involves a phonetic, phonological, morphological, or even graphical categorical specification, rather than a syntactic one. Crucially, the act-based account allows for interpretations of such parts as well, namely as lower-level linguistic act types: phonetic units will be interpreted as phonetic act types, phonological units and morphological units as phatic act types (phonological act types and morphological act types), and lexical items as rhetic act types. Only independent sentences with their syntactic structure at ‘Logical Form’ will be interpreted as locutionary or perhaps illocutionary act types (which themselves are composed of referential and predicational act types).

The act-based account of quotation arguably is compositional, but in a rather novel sort of way, involving the composition of form-related and meaning related linguistic act types. The interpretation of quotation is systematically tied to the syntactic structure involved in quotation and the semantic contribution of quotation as lower level act types is systematically integrated into the meaning of the overall sentence in virtue of the syntactic and lexical context in which the quoted expressions occur.

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