ESSLLI 2015

*Act-Based Conceptions of Propositional Content*

Handout 2

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**Contemporary Act-Based Approaches to Propositional Content**

**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

- constitutive of the truth-directedness and the unity of propositional content

- ensure that propositional content can be grasped

- 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*

Types of acts inherit relevant properties from their instances

In particular, 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 3)

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)**

Russell’s (1912, 1913, 1918) Multiple Relations Analysis of attitude reports

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.

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

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.

General feature of the Neo-Russelian analysis

Attitude verbs take an ordered plurality as an argument

Evidence for ordered pluralities in natural language

(9) John added two and two and four.

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

(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. Scott Soames: propositions as types of Cognitive Acts of ‘Neutral’ Predication**

**3.1. 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

Other attitudes (judgment, belief, knowledge): relations to 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)

**3.2. Problems with the presupposed relational analysis of attitude reports**

Need for entertainment as the neutral predicative act type involved in all attitudes?

Limits of the approach:

Embedded contexts that do not involve acts of predication

Application to modal sentences

Application to other non-attitudinal sentential predicates

**3.3. Propositions as types of acts and ‘modes of presentation’**

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 described event and have *that-*clause partially characterizes that event (cf. Devitt, to appear).

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

**4.1. The view**

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

Differences

No neutral predication; predication is always truth- or satisfaction-directed

No content-force distinction

Three types of acts of predication

- predication in the assertion-way

- predication in question-way

- predication in the command-way

Independent sentences

express types of predication

in the assertion way (declarative sentences),

in the question way (interrogatives),

in the command way (imperatives)

Attitude reports

describe relations between agents and types of acts predication, in one of the three ways

Suspension of predicative force in conditionals and disjunctions

**4.2. Evidence from natural language for non-neutral predication**

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

(12) ??? 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:

(13) 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 that it is better if we stay home.

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

I thought that we should better stay home.

Hypothesis:

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

**4.3. 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 truth-directed predication is suspended? Only truth-directed predication sets up truth bearers.

[2] How to characterize contexts triggering suspension?

*If, or,* negation

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

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

b. John will come provided Mary comes.

[3] Other readings of suspension-triggering expressions

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

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

b. Will John come or not?

Conditional speech acts:

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

b. In case you hear me, please help!

[4] Constituent coordination

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

Alternative:

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

**4.4. Problems with the distinction among three forces of predication**

Motivating the three forces:

Direction of fit: word to world, world to word, questions

Assertions: truth conditions;

directives: satisfaction conditions;

questions: answerhood conditions

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

The problem of embedded sentence:

*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?

How to account for sharing of propositional content and inferences among propositions?

**4.5. Challenges for directive acts and questions as types of predication**

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

[1] Connection of imperatives to modals in declarative sentences:

(18) a. Clean the kitchen!

b. Mary must clean the kitchen.

(19) a. Take an apple!

b. Mary may take an apple.

[2] Connection of questions to answers

(20) 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.

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

M. Devitt (to appear)

(21) ∃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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