

PROPOSITIONS and *Propositions*

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The analysis of so-called “taste-discourse” reveals both the relativist and contextualist presuppositions of meaningful discourse as well as its public scope and ambitions. Such can be taken to show the inherent limitations of both objectivist formal semantics and subjectivist conceptual semantics as well as the need of a public domain where meaning can be situated and negotiated.

1 Propositions

Capital PROPOSITIONS There is this idea of a world we live in, which is the object of our inquiries, of science, of knowledge, of our thoughts, theories, and assertions. Our findings about this world, scientific as well as empirical, are **STATED** in what can no better be called than **PROPOSITIONS**. (In the spoken version of this paper I refer to these as “capital propositions”.) **PROPOSITIONS** typically are **TRUE** or **FALSE** (possibly neither, but impossibly both), depending on whether the world is or is not as it is stated to be.

We use declarative sentences to **STATE** these **PROPOSITIONS**, to present what the world is like, the obtaining of states of affairs, objects having or not having properties, and standing or not standing in relations, and logical constructions out of those. The possibility to do so is all relative, of course, to the language we speak, its concepts, logic and ontology.¹ On the assumption, on a given occasion, that there is such a shared language, we can, on that occasion, assume it to be objectively clear — and that means: contextually but publicly determinate — what a particular **PROPOSITION** is, that is, what situation is said to obtain, or what objects are said to have what properties, etc.²

*I would like to thank Liz Coppock and Max Kölbel for substantial inspiration.

¹The concept of “the language we speak” should be taken literally. It is almost entirely contextually determined, and it is not, just, “German”, or “Italian”, or “Turbo”, or “the medium of scientific discourse,” or whichever officially recorded language we are using. It is perhaps just that part of a vocabulary and a set of construction rules, the meanings of which we on a given occasion assume we agree upon.

²Propositions can be of all kinds. We have, of course, mathematical **PROPOSITIONS** (like, e.g., “the Pythagorean Theorem”), and we have the **PROPOSITIONS** of the natural sciences. But there is also the **PROPOSITION** that Saddam Hoessein disposed of weapons of mass destruction, that nepotism caused the decline of the Roman Empire, or the **PROPOSITION** that there are good accommodation facilities near the Octogon in Budapest, or the **PROPOSITION** that Simon and me wouldn’t have hit that deer if we had left earlier that morning.

Philosophers of language and science can be called “invariantists” if they are interested in PROPOSITIONS, in truths about this world, in a language that is established and agreed upon, and, therefore, not in, e.g., talk of tastes, impressions, and representations. That’s why Aristotle, Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, to name a few, have, in their claimed capacity as a scientist, shunned vague and ambiguous and other such discourse to begin with. To understand a PROPOSITION is to know how things are if it is true. So not knowing how things are if it’s true, is not understanding a PROPOSITION. I believe this makes sense.

Emphatic Propositions There is also this idea of the world we live in as it is present to us, a *Lebenswelt*, the yield and shared product of our senses, culture and thought. We articulate this world, both privately and socially, in what I do not know a better general term for than the colloquial *propositions*. (In spoken language I refer to these as “emphatic propositions”.)

We also use declarative sentences to *stage* these *propositions*, to *determine* the way the world is, to *declare* how things are, how things are *defined*, *viewed*, *handled* and *classified*. They may consist in *categorizations*, *characterizations*, or *evaluations* of things, but also in *declarations* of plans or prospects, the *presentation* of procedures, rules and regulations, or in the *definition* of terms used in a subsequent legal document.³ In *staging propositions* we use our language to define this world and we may, thereby, also dictate the use of our language itself.⁴

Propositions invite us to attune to a world as staged, both in our verbal as well as our non-verbal proceedings. To understand a *proposition* is to know how to adapt to it, how to align with its implications, which are public, and social, by nature. It consists in joining a *Lebensform*. *Propositions* typically are *agreed* or *disagreed with* (possibly neither, but impossibly both), depending on whether our experiences and interests, our guts, plans and feelings align with a world as it is staged to be.

Philosophers of language and mind may be called “relativists,” if they have an interest in men being (or not even being) the measure of things. There is no way of finding truth beyond *agreement to truth*. (Herakleitos, Husserl, Sapir, among many others.) Of course you cannot sincerely believe that the earth is flat, but not because it is not true but because you have been properly taught that you cannot maintain that belief. I believe that this makes sense, too.

Verbal Propositions The two sorts of propositions are not systematically differentiated, and their distinction is not rigid either. After all, it’s one and the same world we live in, or so we assume. Typically, *propositions*, once *agreed upon*, turn into PROPOSITIONS, judged TRUE.⁵ Typically, too, *propositions* can be motivated by presenting them as PROPOSITIONS, about a public good for instance.⁶ Typically, too, a purported PROPOSITION can be declassified as a *proposition* to classify our evidence.⁷ Typically, too, we cannot even STATE a PROPOSITION without assuming *agreement* on the meanings of the terms employed.⁸

³So we have very mundane *propositions* like “That is a cow,” “This is your desk,” and “You turn left at the next corner,” or “We are going to sleep early tonight.” But also *propositions* like “This is queer,” “That music is funky,” and “These papers are state of the art” and more general *propositions* like that one loves one’s neighbour, that a king is generous, or that penguins don’t fly. And we have the *propositions* of social and cultural behavior, including statements of (some) rules of our grammar and of course, moral and constitutional *propositions* (such as, e.g., *the Eighth Commandment*, or *the First Amendment*).

⁴The languages we speak, cf., a previous footnote, differ widely in the extent to which they do not at all, or very discriminatively and even obligatorily, mark the various uses that could be distinguished.

⁵After a general has declared the *proposition* that we are going to attack tomorrow, an obedient soldier may report this to his mates as the PROPOSITION that we are going to attack tomorrow.

⁶“I tell you, this just IS THE RIGHT WAY to solve this problem / to reach this place / to behave in this society.”

⁷Empirical hypotheses (PROPOSITIONS) can be construed, alternatively, as *propositions* for viewing nature.

⁸In order to even assert a PROPOSITION that Saddam Hoessein disposed of weapons of mass destruction, it has to be assumed to be clear who Saddam Hoessein is, and what it means, in the context of the assertion, to

PROPOSITIONS and *propositions* can thus be exchanged and are often mistaken for each other. Aristotle's empirical generalizations (PROPOSITIONS) about classical Greek tragedies have later been construed as constitutive definitions (*propositions*). The definition of, say, a "validity" in a logical textbook can be seen as either a DEFINITION of what a validity truly is, or as a *definition* of what, henceforth, and for the time being, will count as such. The general's statement that "We will attack tomorrow." can be construed as either a STATEMENT OF FACT, or a *proposal for action*, or perhaps even indifferently. Generic sentences can generally be read as providing DESCRIPTIVE GENERALIZATIONS as well as expressing *rules of thumb or thought*. A confusion of the two may also be observed in certain relativist philosophical discussions.

2 Relativism

If something is called "a dinosaur" this is normally recognized as a PROPOSITION, even though the thing referred to may be a collection of bones, a description of a genome, or a digital reconstruction created by the producers of *Jurassic Park*. If someone is said to be "queer" or "an expert", or "funky", or if a piece or reasoning is called "valid", it is not directly clear that we face a PROPOSITION. If asked whether someone really is queer, an expert, funky, or valid, people may resort to locutions like "that qualifies as something we call 'queer', or 'expert', or 'funky', or 'valid'." Things become even more opaque when stuff is qualified as "good", or "bad", or "ugly". Such predications belong to evaluative discourse, which has become a subject of lively discussion in recent philosophical and linguistic literature.

Faultless Disagreement "Evaluative language", like personal-taste talk, moral speech, and aesthetic discourse raises the challenge of what Max Kölbel has dubbed "faultless disagreement" (Kölbel 2004). A couple of world-mates may entertain contradictory propositions without any one of them being at fault. The two may literally contradict each other—"The cake is tasty."/"No, it is not."/"Yes, it is."—while perhaps no one can be blamed for being wrong. The puzzle is that, of course, neither do we want to simply agree that both are right.

Various kinds of relativism, or other sorts of indexicalism or contextualism have arisen.⁹ It is no uncommon assumption in the discussions about such discourse that the disagreements really concern propositions or propositional contents, that their truth is at stake, but that, apparently, their truth is perspective-, or judge-, or assessment-relative.¹⁰

There is, of course, nothing formally wrong with such parametrization, which is familiar in model-theoretic semantics in general.¹¹ However, there is a marked difference between the usual types of parametrization and the current one. Semantic parameters can be properly conceived of as instantiating the kinds of objects, world, time, events, . . . , that are being described or characterized, or even as contributing proper constituents of the propositions that are expressed. Judges, perspectives, etc., do nothing likewise. They are not, usually, to be taken to

"dispose of" and to be "a weapon of mass destruction." Some such *agreement* is presupposed.

⁹It will not do here to try and give an overview of the field of possible positions and takes on the issue, but I may have to mention the following prominent actors: Coppock 2018; Glanzberg 2007; Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005; MacFarlane 2014; Moltmann 2010; Stephenson 2007; Stojanovic 2007.

¹⁰E.g., "The relativism I am considering does not claim that the content expressed varies with context of utterance, but rather that the truth-value of the content itself is relative. (...) [T]he same proposition can be evaluated differently in different perspectives." (Kölbel 2004, p. 72)

¹¹Such parameterization yields mathematically speaking impeccable objects, viz., functions from a type of contexts (indices, judges, perspectives, assessments, standards, . . .) to whatever constitutes the formal semantic renderings of contents (sets of possible worlds, structured meanings, representations perhaps, . . .).

belong to the things characterized, or to figure as a constituent of the propositions expressed.¹² Neither should they be taken to provide for the denotations of the (evaluative) predicates involved, because in the cases under discussion precisely these denotations are at issue. Leaving (the determination of) these denotations to such judges would actually amount to handing out the determination of these contents to these judges, and trivialize their contents, as the following example may serve to illustrate.

Consider Alexis Ricksmann, whose taste for sushi ranges from Yech! in the morning to Yummie! late afternoon, and back again, every day. And consider the proposition that a specific specimen of sushi is tasty. Following the relativists, we can plot her assessment of the proposition as a sphere of perspectives on that proposition, orbiting around it and gradually rendering it from false, to true, and vice versa, as many days as Alexis is interested in sushi, and in a fashion as continuous as time is. But, one may wonder, what is, here, this so-called proposition that these perspectives are orbiting around? It is not the PROPOSITION that the sushi is tasty according to her own standards and judgements, i.e., it is not about the stuff she calls *tasty*, because these standards and judgements are all the time changing and so is the stuff so-called. The only thing that comes close enough really is just the sentence that “The sushi is tasty.” or the possible valuations of it: Alexis judges the sentence true when and only when she judges it true. This, however, seems to leave something out, but apparently it is not a PROPOSITION, which we do not know how to identify or define.¹³

Relative Propositions The case of Alexis seems to lead to triviality, because we do not find, besides a sentence, any PROPOSITION which she as a judge valued or judged differently through the parts of the day. John MacFarlane, in his handbook contribution on *Relativism*, already raised the issue: “How can we make philosophical sense of the idea that the accuracy of an assertion or belief is assessment-relative? Do we really understand what such proposals say?” (MacFarlane 2012, p. 133) One might ask even more specifically: “Do we really understand what such propositions are?” Peter Lasersohn wondered, in the same spirit: “[T]here is no fact of the matter (...) so the disagreement cannot be about that. Nor is the disagreement about the context, or the interpretation of the words (...). What, then, are the speakers disagreeing about?” (Lasersohn 2005, p. 683)

The first thing to observe then, about the cases at hand, is that if there is anything at issue, it is not a PROPOSITION that is under discussion. The predicate *tasty* being under discussion, there is no PROPOSITION that the sushi is or is not (that kind of) *tasty*. So it is actually not the TRUTH-VALUE of a PROPOSITION that changes with the judge, perspective, or context of assessment, but it is the PROPOSITION itself that the sushi is *tasty* that changes. The *tasty* that the sushi is, when it is *tasty*, is different from the *tasty* that the sushi isn't, when it is not. *Obviously*, one might add, because since the judged denotations of the predicate are different, so apparently are the associated properties. Observe as well that, in the cases at hand, there is no PROPOSITION that the sushi is both or neither of these kinds of *tasty*. There is simply no such PROPOSITION under discussion because, again, there is no *agreed upon* property that the sushi is stated to have.

TRUTH, we may say, is assessment relative, not because TRUTH is a relative predicate, but

¹²Cf., among various others, Lasersohn 2005, §2 for, obvious, arguments against this.

¹³This kind of relativism thus seems to be driven to the nominalist dictum that to be a ψ is to be called “a ψ .” Such a trivialization can be seen to result from thinking of the meaning of an expression, formally, as a function from the contexts in which it has a meaning, to the meaning that the expression in those contexts has. Formally, this is a so-called “lifting” function $(\lambda\alpha(\lambda c\ c\alpha))$, which can be seen to be vacuous because it is a permutation of the identity function $(\lambda c(\lambda\alpha\ c\alpha))$, which is $(\lambda c\ c)$.

because a PROPOSITION is assessment relative. And actually such may hold in principle for all PROPOSITIONS. If the standards change in terms of which a PROPOSITION is defined, then so does the PROPOSITION.¹⁴

3 Agreement

Faulty Disagreement Turning back to the issue of faultless disagreement, we can put things as follows. Assume that you state that “This piece of cake is tasty.” and suppose that I react with: “No, it is not.” Let us suppose we agree on the cake, and even on its taste.¹⁵ There are two *propositions* on the table: That the cake be categorized as belonging to the tasty things, and that it belong to the non-tasty things. My idea of *tasty* is such that the cake is tasty, whence my *proposition*. (The PROPOSITION that it is tasty_{according to my standards} is TRUE.) Your idea of *tasty* is such that it is not, whence your opposing *proposition*. (The PROPOSITION that it is tasty_{according to your standards} is FALSE.) (We can agree there is no agreed upon standard idea of *tasty*, so there is no PROPOSITION that it is tasty_{according to the standard}. As indicated, there is no PROPOSITION that we disagree about.¹⁶) We cannot, upon pain of contradiction, *agree* with both *propositions*. So what do we do? We can *agree to disagree*, and nobody will be wronged or hurt. We can also advance an *agreement*, if we succeed in synchronizing on a standard solid enough to yield a PROPOSITION that the cake is tasty_{according to that standard}.

What is at stake here is not whether or not one judges some PROPOSITION to be TRUE, because there is nothing of the kind that can be TRUE. There is *disagreement* about a *proposition*, which, as we have outlined above, is a characteristic property of *propositions*. The sushi or cake is not so much STATED to be tasty, but it is *staged* to be so. The issue is whether or not one *agrees* it to be so. And while there may be various reasons for doing or not doing so, finding out the truth is not one of them.¹⁷

Faultless Agreement It should be emphasized here that no matter whether a predicate *P* is regularly classified as one of taste, or as an objective one, *agreement* on its application cannot merely be the arbitrary result of some ad hoc negotiation. Its uses have to eventually fit in with both the interlocutor’s individual pictures of the world, their findings, guts and feelings, as well with current and public practices, facts and expectations. Moreover, against

¹⁴So, while we may say that the solar system no longer hosts nine planets, this should not be meant to say that the system has changed, and lost some planets. Rather, it subtly says that the PROPOSITION that the solar system hosts nine planets according to the standards back then, is different from the PROPOSITION that the solar system hosts nine planets according to the current standards. The first is true and the second is not—which may serve to show that these are two different propositions indeed. Likewise, a logic teacher may observe in class that $\neg\neg p$ no longer implies p , after having introduced the students to intuitionist logic. But of course this should not be taken to say that the relation of logical implication has changed. A relation is what it is. The implication relation that does hold between $\neg\neg p$ and p is different from the one that doesn’t hold between them. Can it be more obvious?

¹⁵The reason and relevance for doing so may invite to a lengthy discussion, way beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁶There is surely no PROPOSITION that it is tasty_{according to no standard}.

¹⁷These observations apply to all kinds of discourse with some detectable evaluative component. In stead of “This piece of cake is tasty,” the opening-line might as well read: “This person is a star,” “This reviewer is an expert,” “This piece of furniture is Rococo,” “That type of behavior is rational,” or “This inference is valid.” Consider, e.g., the locution that “that $\neg\neg P$ implies P .” It is a *proposi t i o n* about (logical) implication and negation. If one already has a concept of implication and negation, the sentence expresses a PROPOSITION. In particular, if one’s (current) understanding is ‘classical’, the obtaining PROPOSITION is true, but if one’s (current) understanding is ‘intuitionist’, the obtaining PROPOSITION is false. If one has no fixed concept of the two, there is no PROPOSITION, but merely a *proposition*, and so if one is a student, one should better *agree*.

such conceptual and public backgrounds, there may be various practical, logical and social implications of *agreeing* to classify something as *P* (“tasty”, “expert”, “necessary”, ...).

Advertisements make us believe that the advertised cookies really are tasty, because that’s a good reason for buying them, while, surely, the cookies should at the same time not conflict too much with our initial concept of tasty. If one is successfully qualified as an ‘expert’, one’s opinion is taken more seriously, so congratulations, but take care. If a logical law qualifies as valid, it can be used to draw conclusions. It may need no comments that without the cognitive, practical and social implications of the terms employed, PROPOSITIONS would be entirely nominal or verbal, i.e., meaningless.

Formal Modeling The findings in this note may have some implications for the enterprise of semantics, the study of meaning. Traditional truth-conditional semantics can be said to be, deliberately, blind to the relativist, cognitive and conceptual, aspects of meaning. More dynamic approaches, including that of inquisitive semantics, and perhaps outlook semantics, relativize the core notion of TRUTH but thereby arguably invite the challenge of becoming entirely trivial, i.e., nominalist. Various versions of cognitive grammar and conceptual semantics, on the other hand, barring some promising but isolated exceptions, fail the public dimension of meaning, and its contribution to *the public good*.

It will not do, here, to even try and sketch an alternative, but I believe one can formalize the ideas presented in this paper by some suitable appropriation of Elizabeth Coppock’s “Outlook-based Semantics.” (Coppock 2018) Building on Max Kölbel’s philosophical conception of perspectives (Kölbel 2004), that system adequately formalizes a conception of *outlooks*, which are somewhat similar to our conception of *propositions*. However, following Kölbel it seems, Coppock apparently assumes that a rigid distinction can be made between worlds and outlooks, corresponding to one between objective predicates and predicates of taste. While such an assumption is most commonly made, it seems to me to be eventually untenable. While PROPOSITIONS and PREDICATIONS must be determinate, contextually that is, there seems to be no reason, ground nor need, for granting them independent objective existence.

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