What are Propositions? Do We Have 'Attitudes' Toward Them?

Abstract: Propositions are thought to differ from sentences in the following ways: (1) Propositions are declarative sentences that in context, present the 'content' of S's thought. (2) A proposition is (metaphorically) 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. (3) Different sentences may be used to express the same proposition (relative to context). In other words, different sentences in context can mean 'the same thing' or have 'the same meaning.' (4) Sentences (and descriptive propositions) are true or false in context. From my perspective, all four of these intuitions are satisfactory. In addition to these, it is also thought that a proposition is (6) essentially true or false, and (7) that persons have attitudes towards propositions as the 'object' of a propositional 'attitude.' In this essay I argue that both of these metaphysical intuitions are false. I argue that (1) speakers can assert propositions that are 'truth' or 'non-truth' apt and (2) that persons don't really have a psychological-mental 'attitude' relationship to propositions. A series of twenty case studies about plausible linguistic intuitions, is primary evidence for a conceptual analysis.

Introduction

The term 'proposition' has a broad and diverse use in philosophy. 'Propositions' are generally postulated in order to explain how different sentences can have the same meaning. Propositions are associated with the concepts of 'sentence' and 'truth' where different sentences may be expressed to 'say the same thing,' and thus, have the same truth value. A proposition is often characterized as the 'content' or 'meaning' of a declarative sentence. Metaphorically, a proposition is characterized as 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. Many metaphysicians believe that propositions objectively exist and are theoretically identifiable within a network of associated concepts: persons,
sentences, meaning, truth, and attitudes. A 'proposition' is understood as not being a form of words, nor a linguistic entity of any kind. Michael Loux (2006) states that metaphysical realists believe that propositions "are language-independent and mind-independent abstract entities that function as the objects of acts of assertion/denial and acts of thinking; they are also the referents of that-clauses; and they are the primary bearers of the truth values and, hence, the things that, in the first instance, enter into logical relations" (p. 121). E.J. Lowe (2000) states "Most philosophers would say that propositions are abstract entities and thus akin ontologically to the objects of mathematics, such as numbers and sets" (p. 71).

**The Descriptive-Prescriptive Distinction as a 'Speaker Meaning' Hypothesis**

It is my hypothesis that there is a basic distinction between 'descriptions' and 'prescriptions' where sentence meaning is determined by its use (i.e. function, motive) in a given context as intended by a speaker. I maintain that speakers are capable of asserting (i.e. declaring, saying, uttering, communicating) sentences that are intended to be either a 'description' or 'prescription' in a given context. I argue that there are two kinds of speaker meaning that sentences can have:

A *description* is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a reflection) of some state of affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is independent of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A *prescription* is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is dependent upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.
Not all declarative sentences, when asserted in context, express truth or falsity, nor are they intended to. Prescriptions are meaningful declarative sentences.

'Linguistic Theories' of Meaning are a 'Computational Representation' of Language

Contemporary 'semantics' is understood as the study of the 'meaning' of words and sentences. It is taken for granted that words, phrases, and sentences have meaning and that for each meaningful expression there are correct answers to the question 'What does it mean?' Various forms of linguistic expression (e.g. proper names, predicates, verbs) are thought to have 'semantic functions' and possess 'semantic values' that can mean this or refer to that. Linguistic expressions in context are said to acquire meaning and have semantic properties that allows linguistic reference. By studying how meaningful words are combined according to syntactic rules into larger expressions, this creates a systematic theoretical mode for studying the 'meaning of sentences.'

The problems typically generated within formal linguistic reference theories are questions about the proper semantic representation of parts of speech. Historically there have been problems involving representing (1) 'identity sentences' as opposed to 'tautologies.' (2) the syntax and reference relations of 'proper names' and 'definite descriptions,' and (3) sentential assertions of 'existence' and 'truth.'

The 'semantic theory' of 'truth' that assumes sentences have truth value follows from the thought of Gottlob Frege (1879, 1892) and Alfred Tarski's "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics" (1944). Following the logic of Frege, Tarski sought to make the correspondence theory of truth more precise by defining how 'a sentence in a language can be true.' With Tarski's semantic conception of truth,
'truth' is a *property* of sentences (in a given formal model) and sentences are truth bearers. Tarski's wanted to understand how object language sentences can have the extensional property of 'truth' within a system of well-formed sentences using a meta-language. Tarski's semantic conception of truth is the standard of truth-theoretic models.

Semantic theories about natural language are models built and often explained in terms of 'identity,' 'properties,' 'relations,' 'concrete objects,' and 'abstract objects'. These concepts involve the implicit acceptance of a number of traditional metaphysical axioms, as well as the adoption of first-order symbolic logic. Simplifying a bit, the ontology and axiomatization of a traditional hierarchal *a priori* metaphysics is as follows. (1) Entities exist (assumes a non-empty universe), (2) All entities are either 'universal' or 'particular,' (3) Universals can be divided into 'properties' or 'relations.' (4) Particulars can be divided into 'objects' or 'tropes.' Objects can be divided into 'concrete objects' or 'abstract objects.' Examples of 'concrete objects' include atoms, people, buildings, goats, planets, stamps, and so on; 'Abstract objects' are defined as objects that do not exist in space or time and are therefore entirely non-physical and non-mental.

Propositions as well as mathematical objects such as sets, geometrical figures, properties, relations, and events, are often thought to be examples of *abstract objects*.

In previous essays have questioned the philosophical value of formal semantic theories. I have argued that the concept of 'linguistic reference' *doesn't exist* outside of

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1 In effect, Tarski offers a definition of 'truth in language L' of a stipulative form. Tarski's intention of constructing a precise definition for the correspondence theory of 'truth' failed, but his definition of 'true in language L' is appreciated as a (formal) success.
definitional stipulations made by semanticists and logicians in artificial languages. Model theories (involving reference, meaning, and modality) are valuable for creating structures that explain the structure of well-formed sentences (that are meaningful or intelligible to persons in context) and the validity of deductive arguments. But they are of little relevance in solving most perennial problems of philosophy.

Instead of a formal translation (or computational representation) of natural language, as sought by semantic theories, I seek 'conceptual analyses' of philosophically important terms. A conceptual analysis will construct informative definitions to explicitly explain our ordinary beliefs and intentions. With a *speaker theory* of meaning and reference (as opposed to a semantic theory) I argue that it is only with *particular employments* by persons in concrete contexts, that words (phrases, sentences) are used so as to allow *persons to refer* to things. A speaker theory of reference and meaning explains natural language use and intentions, while formal linguistic theories seek to computationally 'map' sentences and their parts into a model.

**A Characterization of a Theory of Speaker Reference**

A theory of 'speaker reference' maintains that it is *persons* that refer using words. What a speaker's referent is, on occasion of use, depends upon the speaker's intentions. It is *persons* who use linguistic expressions to refer to various objects (or entities) in a context. It is *persons* who intend that their utterance to be asserted as 'truth-apt' or not.

(1) According to a theory of speaker reference, sentences *don't* literally possess meaning, instead, it is persons who can understand *sentence meaning* (i.e. propositional content) when using a sentence. With a speaker theory, a *well-formed sentence* is the
basic unit of meaning; not the words that it is built out of. Personal intentions and context allow a speaker (and audience) to identify the referents (and aboutness) of linguistic entities. While semantic reference theories explain (or eliminate) sentential ambiguity by using formal models, a speaker theory asks, 'What does S mean when asserting p?'

When we ask 'what does S mean' when asserting p, if there should be any question, the way to answer this question is obvious. If a listener has doubt about a speaker's reference (or intention) when uttering a complete sentence, an appropriate question should be asked for clarity. If I'm using the name 'Aristotle' and the listener didn't understand which 'Aristotle' I was talking about, I would report as appropriate: e.g. (1) the philosopher, or (2) the former husband of the late Jackie Kennedy. If I'm using 'Richard Feynman' in a situation, and the listener didn't understand who I was talking about I could reply that I was talking about a theoretical physicist. Similarly, if I said that 'there is a bat in the garage' and the listener didn't know if I was referring to a baseball bat or animal, I respond with a definition. By 'bat' I mean this sense of the word.

(2) For successful speaker reference of a proper name, there is no single or disjunction of descriptions that must be associated with the entity being referred to. Persons use proper names without having descriptions (or a definiens) that applies uniquely to one's referent. In most situations, the context of an assertion is enough for a listener to identify the entity being referred to by a speaker by the use of a proper name. Conversations are rarely impeded by a misunderstanding a speaker's use of proper names.

On the speaker theory, a proper name is used to refer to whatever properties the community generally attributes to the entity as contained in the reported definiens of the
name. On a personal level, the reported definiens may be vague, open-ended, and subject to factual error. For example, if a person defined "Bono" as 'the English lead singer of the band U2,' reference to would likely be successful, even if Bono was born Irish, and not English. It is neither the truth of the description(s), nor the uniqueness of the description(s) in the reported definiens of a proper name, that makes 'speaker reference' successful. With a speaker theory, it is recognized that reference is not always successful, because of cases of misunderstanding or miscommunication.

(3) Similar to proper names, a theory of speaker reference denies that definite descriptions, as linguistic expressions, literally refer to extralinguistic items. For example, it might be said that the description 'the first man on the moon' refers to Neil Armstrong. But it isn't true that this phrase literally refers. It is persons who use this definite description to refer to a person. It is more accurately said that 'the first man on the moon' designates Neil Armstrong in the English language and in the actual world. The linguistic expression, by itself, cannot 'pick out' its referent.

Also, similar to proper names, there may be descriptive errors associated with a definite description. For example, if someone says, 'I'm thinking of a poisonous red and green Christmas holiday plant,' we infer that the speaker is thinking of a 'poinsettia,' and successful speaker reference is achieved. But poinsettias are not poisonous! Instances of successful speaker reference are understood as (pragmatic) situational events. Keith Donnellan (1966) observed that using definite descriptions is a way to get one's audience to identify whatever is spoken of, even if the description is inaccurate.
(4) The theory of speaker reference is classifiable as a 'descriptivist theory,' but it isn't a descriptivist semantic theory of reference. 'Descriptivist theories of semantic reference' are false because it is (errantly) claimed that the x to whom a proper name (as a linguistic expression) refers (in context) is determined by definite description(s) (as linguistic expressions) associated with that proper name (as a linguistic expression).²

In contrast, with a theory of speaker reference, it is claimed that the x to whom a proper name (as a linguistic expression) refers (in context) is determined by descriptions (i.e. a definiens) associated with the proper name, when stated by a speaker as a reportive (lexical) definition in context. The use of a proper name in a context neither functions as being equivalent (or abbreviation) to a cluster of mostly true definite descriptions about the referent nor is the referent of a proper name achieved solely through a historical chain. Both theories falsely assume that there exists a 'reference relation' between 'words' and 'objects.' But this relation doesn't exist. Instead of seeking systematic word reference, philosophers should seek to analyze the concepts and intentions in context(s) and describe how sentences are used by speakers to communicate various intentions.

Speaker Meaning: What is a Proposition? Are there Prescriptive Propositions?

What is a proposition? In its most neutral characterization, a 'proposition' can be defined as a complete sentence asserted in a context that presents the contents of one's thought. Let us examine twenty conceptual case studies to defend this simple definition:

(1) The sentence 'It is now raining' (as a linguistic expression) is not by itself literally true or false. The sentence needs to be asserted in an environment and at a certain time to be true or false. It is the proposition expressed (in a context) by the sentence 'It is now raining' that is true when it is raining, and false when it is not raining. Sentences are not literally true or false, but it is their assertion as a 'proposition' in a context that is either true or false.

(2) The English sentence 'Snow is white' expresses the same proposition as the German sentence 'Der Schnee ist weis.' Given that these sentences are different, it isn't the linguistic entities (i.e. sentences of different language) that make the assertions true, it is the proposition (i.e. meaningful content) that is true.

(3) The sentences 'Mark Twain wrote Huckleberry Finn' and 'Samuel Clemens wrote Huckleberry Finn' are different sentences but express the same true proposition, because Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens. It isn't the sentences that are true, it is the same proposition (expressed by different sentences) that is true.\(^3\)

(4) The sentences 'Here is the red book' and the 'The red book is here' when asserted in a context to a single book express the same proposition. It is not the

\(^3\) Another interpretation is that these sentences don't express the same proposition. Whether (or not) these sentences express the same content rests upon a person's background knowledge. If S doesn't know that the two proper names, 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' designate the same person (and are synonyms), these sentences will express two propositions (e.g. one proposition might be deemed true and the other false) for that S. For this uninformed S, these sentences express different propositions.
sentences (which differ in *syntax*) that is literally true or false, it is the proposition expressed by a sentence that is true or false.

(5) 'Sam is mad' and 'Sam is angry' are different sentences. 'Mad' and 'angry' are *synonyms*, so either sentence may be used in a context. The proposition is either true or false (about Sam) no matter which sentence is used.

(6) The sentence 'My name is George' when asserted by different persons, may be true, even though the same sentence is used to express different propositions.

(7) The sentence 'The present King of France is bald' expressed two different propositions when asserted (or used) during two consecutive time periods when Louis XIV and Louis XV continuously ruled.

(8) The proposition 'I am pale' is true or false, contingent upon the physical appearance of a person asserting the sentence. The proposition stated may be true or false depending on whom asserts the sentence.

(9) The sentences that 'today was fun' and 'yesterday was fun' when stated on consecutive days, are used to express the same proposition.

(10) The sentence 'Persons should not smoke tobacco' is understood by a metaethical cognitivist as a true or false proposition. For a non-cognitivist, this can be interpreted as a *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).

(11) The sentences 'It is permissible to feed the wolves' and 'It is allowable to feed the wolves' (by synonymy of 'permissible' and 'allowable') may be interpreted as the same *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).

(12) When a person yells 'Ow!' she is describing herself as being in a state of pain.
(13) An 'interrogative' (e.g. 'Do you know where a gas station is?') may be interpreted as the conjunction of a description and prescription: 'I do not know x' \textit{(description)} and 'please tell me x' \textit{(prescription)}.

(14) With a 'warning' (e.g. 'Watch out!') a \textit{prescription} is asserted, often accompanied by a \textit{description} ('You'll get hit') about probable consequences of not heeding a warning.

(15) In 'bequeathing' to assert 'I give and bequeath my wristwatch to my brother, after I die' is to \textit{describe} one's wishes and \textit{prescribe} to executors to abide by one's will.

(16) The concept of a 'promise' is to sincerely \textit{describe} one's intention to do something, and to \textit{prescribe} to oneself to perform appropriate follow-up actions.

(17) The 'solicitation of a bet' (e.g. 'I'll bet you $25 that the Green Bay Packers will win') \textit{describes} a bettor's willingness to bet money on his belief (prediction) about the outcome of a contest and \textit{prescribes} to the listener to accept the wager.

(18) A 'request' (e.g. 'Would you please close the door?') is a \textit{prescription} that a person should aid the speaker, and implicitly \textit{describes} that the speaker desires (or has value) that the door is closed.

(19) Whether a sentence is being used to describe, prescribe, or both, is relative to a social context. For example, a cook at a restaurant may assert to a waiter that 'The sandwich is ready' which \textit{describes} the completion of the food order and \textit{prescribes} waiter pick-up for service to a patron.
The assertion 'In order to turn off the lights you must flip the switch' is ambiguous without context. The speaker may be informing the listener about how to turn off the lights in a room (i.e. describing) or the speaker may be requesting the listener to turn off the lights (i.e. prescribing).

The idea behind these examples is that in natural language it is not sentences that are true or false, but it is the expressed proposition that is apt for truth or falsity (or not apt for truth or falsity). Based upon these intuitions, I define a 'proposition' as a sentence that when asserted at a time and in a context, presents the content of one's thought, with 'content' (or 'significance,' 'meaning') being primitive (undefined) terms. Descriptive and prescriptive propositions, asserted in context, normally have content, significance, or meaning for a speaker. This definition of 'proposition' will be strongly resisted by metaphysicians and moral realists who maintain that all declarative sentences, statements, assertions, and propositions are either true or false, and some necessarily so. By consensus metaphysical definition, 'prescriptive propositions' cannot exist.\footnote{For Scott Soames (2015, p. 9), 'propositions' are "(i) the primary bearers of truth and falsity, (ii) the objects of belief, assertion, and other attitudes, (iii) the contents of perceptual and cognitive states, and (iv) the meanings of (some) sentences." This is a widely accepted definition and it is often a starting point for metaphysical analyses.}

**Core Intuitions About Propositions and Sentences.**

The above case examples and the proposed definition of 'proposition' are consistent with some of the widely accepted philosophical core intuitions about what a proposition is: (1) A proposition is a complete declarative sentence asserted in a context.
that presents the 'content' of S's thought. Propositions exist as the 'shared content' of sentences. A proposition is the 'content' or 'meaning' of a declarative sentence. (2) A proposition is 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. (3) Different sentences may be used to express the same proposition (relative to context). In other words, 'different sentences' relative to context can state 'the same thing' or have 'the same meaning.' (4) Sentences (and their corresponding descriptive propositions) are true or false relative to context.

The case examples show, from linguistic intuitions, that contrary to the popular metaphysical belief, propositions are not essentially true or false. Below I show that contrary to popular metaphysical belief, propositions are not the 'objects' of attitudes.'

**Are Propositions the Objects of Propositional Attitudes?**

A belief held among many philosophers is that persons have 'propositional attitudes' (i.e. psychological-mental attitude states) towards propositions. Propositional attitude terms are usually verbs but can include other word types, such as an adjective. 'Propositional attitudes' account for a person's psychological state towards a proposition:

2. S is certain that p. S is unsure that p.
5. S desires (or wishes) that p. S dislikes (or has aversion) that p.
7. S is proud that p. S is embarrassed that p.
With propositional attitude reports, 'propositions' are defined as referents of that-clauses. A proposition is whatever the that-clause refers to or denotes. On this theory, the word *that* (is used to) 'pick out' a proposition $p$. The proposition $p$ is understood as the 'content' of a belief, desire, value, and so on, and the 'referent' of S's attitude.

Let "Human-generated warming of the planet is presently occurring," and "Abortion should be legal (with certain restrictions)" be the proposition $p$ in the above sentences. These sentences illustrate the relationship between persons, propositions, and so-called propositional attitudes. The above 'attitude ascriptions' using attitude verbs, *report* what $S$ believes, desires, values, etc. as a *relation* of $S$ to these propositions.\(^5\)

Do persons have an 'attitude' towards 'global warming is real' and 'abortion should be legal' where $p$ is a (possible) state of affairs? The critical response argued here is that persons *do not* have relations (or attitudes) toward propositions as 'objects' of belief, desire, value, etc. Beliefs, values, and other attitude verbs aren't about 'something.' Propositions are not the objects of attitudes. The mistaken talk about 'propositional attitudes' emanates from the non-scientific language of metaphysics. Instead, it is more plausible and physically consistent with empirical evidence, that persons simply *believe $p$* or *value $p$* as existing *non-relational* functional mental states. A 'belief' is a non-relational

\(^5\) David Shier (2012) states that 'propositional attitude reports' (i.e. sentences reporting the propositional attitudes of individuals) are "central to our psychological discourse and to our understanding of the world, since in order to explain and predict behavior, we must appeal to information about the beliefs, desires, etc. of ourselves and others" (p. 795).
functional mental state involving affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to represent the world. A person believes a p as an existing (but changeable) mental state. There is no intervening relational 'attitude.'

A 'desire' is a non-relational functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions. A 'value' is a non-relational functional physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. A person possesses a value but doesn't have an attitude toward it. Beliefs, desires, and values lead us to action. An 'intention to act' is a determination to behave in a certain way. Not only do intentions (as functional physical brain states) often manifest themselves in overt actions; the 'intention to communicate' using language (i.e. to express one's thoughts) may be termed a 'speech act.'

Propositions about one's beliefs, desires, and values are attributes (i.e. properties) of a person's existing functional mental state; they aren't manifested as a binary relationship from S to an abstract proposition. In various contexts, persons assert (i.e. express, utter, communicate) thoughts (i.e. well-formed sentences) that are intended to be either descriptive or prescriptive. The traditional metaphysical schema designed for the measurement of what a proposition is, by identifying a 'proposition' as an entity about what attitudes are about is completely fallacious.

There are other false conceptions about what propositions are, and I consider them below.
(1) **Propositions have a 'metaphysical nature.'** Michael Loux (2006) characterizes a 'proposition' as a 'special category' of entities that:

…constitute the objects of acts of asserting and denying and acts of thinking. Although it is only a contingent fact about one of these entities that it actually get asserted or thought, it is a necessary truth that each proposition be something that is assertible or thinkable. Realists characterize these special entities as abstract entities that exist eternally and necessarily. They claim what they call propositions are intersubjectively available and, hence, constitute the materials for the public communication of a shared conception of the world (p. 129).

Loux states that propositions are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood and are the things that enter into the various logical relations. These entities are the referents of that-clauses. A proposition is a unique representation of the world.

Jeffrey C. King is a leading theorist about 'propositions' and in *The Nature and Structure of Content* (2007) he seeks to provide a clear metaphysical account of the nature of propositions. King, Soames, and Jeff Speaks, in *New Thinking About Propositions* (2014) admit that their (competing) individual theories about 'proposition,' are not committed to an account of propositions that respects commonsense or folk intuitions (p. 2). The concept of 'proposition' is deemed a technical semantic notion.

Among the metaphysical claims found in the literature, similar or equivalent to the above: (a) A proposition is an abstract object explained in terms of a set of truth conditions. (b) Possible worlds can be constructed out of propositions. Propositions are structured sets of propositional worlds. (c) Propositions possess modal attributes (d) A
proposition is a structure that represents a recursive procedure for determining a set of truth conditions. (e) Propositions are the semantic values of expressions that occur in a variety of constructions (and are quantifiable over). (f) Possible worlds can be constructed out of propositions. (g) Propositions are structured sets of possible worlds. (h) Propositions possess modal properties of being impossible, possible, and necessary.

**Response:** Many theorists studying 'propositions' are strong advocates of metaphysical realism and the investigation of abstract logical structures. The truth of metaphysical realism, despite its contemporary popularity, can be questioned.

(2) **Propositions are the information that sentences encode relative to context.**

In other words, different sentences may encode the same information. Soames (2015) states that "Up to now, theorists have identified the semantic content of a sentence with information that represents the world being a certain way, but they haven't yet given a plausible story about what such a piece of information is, whether linguistically encoded or not. This is our most urgent task, and the one on which I will concentrate most" (p. 9).

**Response:** The popular idea that semantic content, perceptual, and other thought processes are a mechanistic input of non-interpreted 'information' is similar to the discredited idea that there is a 'given' perceptual environment that is free from interpretation. Sentences don't encode information. The concept of information has no place in explaining propositions or concepts. Jerry Fodor's theory of *Concepts* (1998) as 'informational atomism' isn't conceptual analysis. Fred Dretske's *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (1981) is a failed (and discarded) epistemic theory. Any semantic theory involving the concept of information, can similarly be dismissed as irrelevant.
Propositions are structured entities with individuals, properties, and relations as constituents. Compositional semantics assigns functions to each syntactic unit, so that well-formed sentences are assigned propositions—construed as functions from (e.g.) worlds (or 'circumstances') to truth-values. Furthermore, accounts of belief, knowledge, and metaphysical necessity typically assume that these operators all operate on propositions. Like well-formed sentences, propositions are compositional in character.

Response: Propositions are more accurately conceived and treated as unified (i.e. non-structured) entities. Propositions can be understood as 'simple symbols' such as, for example, the same as the symbols involved in ordinary road signs. For example, a curved arrow is a simple symbol that represents an existing curve in the road ahead (i.e. a description). A road sign with the image of a walking person with a circle and diagonal cross over the image, indicates that one shouldn't walk at that location (i.e. a prescription). The propositional symbols (i.e. curve ahead, don't walk) have no compositional constituents. Similarly, a car parking lot attendant when using various hand gestures (e.g. pointing with a finger or moving both hands in a downward direction upon a space) to signal where a driver should park, represents the proposition 'park here.' The content of the hand symbols implies the same prescriptive proposition 'park here.'

Sentences, propositions, and symbols can have 'speaker meaning' without implicit (or explicit) attention to, or knowledge of, compositional structure. A sentence or proposition can have a discernible 'meaning' (in context) or possess a 'sameness of meaning' for a person, as a simple unified entity expressible with different sentences or different representational symbols.
Conclusion

Consider the following definition of 'proposition' found in The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd edition (1999):

A 'proposition' is an abstract object to which a person is related by a belief, desire, or other psychological attitude, typically expressed in a language containing a psychological verb ("think," "deny," "doubt," etc.) followed by a that-clause. The psychological states in question are called propositional attitudes.

On the basis of the conceptual analyses presented here, the definiens of this definition should be rejected. A proposition is not some metaphysical abstract object; its definition is predicated upon our linguistic intuitions about its core use and fruitfulness for explanation. A better definition of 'proposition' is suggested here:

A 'proposition' is a sentence (or symbol) that when asserted (or displayed) at a time and in a context, presents the 'content' of a person's thought, with 'content' (or 'significance,' 'meaning') being a primitive (or undefined) term where content applies to speaker meaning (i.e. interpretation of significance). Different sentences and different symbols may express the same proposition. The same sentence (as a linguistic entity) may be used to express different propositions.

It has been argued that propositions are not essentially true or false, nor are they the objects of propositional attitudes. Both descriptive and prescriptive propositions, asserted in context, normally have content, significance, or meaning for a speaker.

Of course, this essay alone will not change the definition of 'proposition' in The Cambridge Dictionary. As a dictionary, it reports the standard use of the term (and
associated concepts). Instead a substantial number of philosophers are needed to adopt this worldview about propositions to merit its mention in the entry. This will take time.

In the final paragraph of the above entry for 'proposition' in *The Cambridge Dictionary*, contributor Steven J. Wegner asks:

…how does the use of words in a certain context associate them with a particular proposition? Lacking this answer, we cannot explain why a given sentence is true… a satisfactory doctrine of propositions remains elusive. (p. 754).

The debate about what 'propositions' are continues to this day. We have used a conceptual analysis to define what a 'proposition' is. A 'speaker theory' of meaning and reference (after being completely explained) constitutes a challenge to 'linguistic theories of reference' and the technical explanations of 'proposition' as offered by metaphysicians.
References


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