



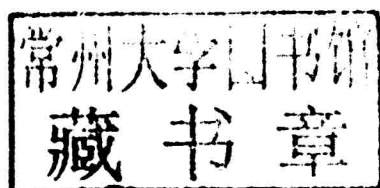
PETER HANKS

# PROPOSITIONAL CONTENT

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Peter Hanks



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## Propositional Content

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# Introduction

We use propositional contents, and contents more generally, to identify, classify, and individuate our mental states and speech acts. In the attitude report ‘Obama believes that Clinton is eloquent’ we attribute a certain belief to Obama. Which belief? The belief that Clinton is eloquent. The attitude report tells us not just that Obama has some belief or other, but that he has this particular belief. It does this by relating Obama to a certain entity, the proposition that Clinton is eloquent. This is how we single out and attribute beliefs—by relating ourselves to these entities.

Suppose Obama also believes that Clinton is persistent. We take this to be a different belief than the belief that Clinton is eloquent. Why is this a different belief? Because it has a different propositional content, and propositional contents individuate beliefs. In reporting these beliefs we relate Obama to different propositions. The fact that these propositions are different shows that we regard the attributed beliefs as different. When we want to distinguish between different beliefs we do so by relating ourselves to different propositions. Propositions are the entities we use for individuating our beliefs.

The fact that this is how we individuate our mental states and speech acts is an instance of a wider strategy in natural language for describing and classifying objects. In a large range of cases we attribute properties to objects by relating those objects to abstract objects that fit together into structured systems. This is how we talk about height, weight, temperature, and age:

Obama is 6 feet 1 inches tall.

Obama weighs 180 pounds

Obama has a temperature of 98.6 °F.

Obama is 51 years old.

In each case the property attributed to Obama occupies a position in a range of similar properties. Instead of assigning a unique predicate to each property in the range, as we do with colors, we graft a numerical scale onto the range of properties and then relate objects to nodes on the scale. Of course, we do not use a numerical scale for attributing mental states and speech acts. Rather, the “scale” we use consists of a multidimensional space of propositions.

What lesson should we draw from this analogy between attitude reports and sentences about properties like height and weight? One might try to use it to gain insight into the nature of our mental states and speech acts. But this won’t get us very far, for reasons that Wittgenstein nicely articulates in a remark about subject–predicate sentences:

Imagine two planes, with figures on plane *I* that we wish to map on to plane *II* by some method of projection. It is then open to us to fix on a method of projection (such as orthogonal projection) and then to interpret the images on plane *II* according to this method of mapping. But we could also adopt a quite different procedure: we might for some reason lay down that the images on plane *II* should all be circles no matter what the figures on plane *I* may be. That is, different figures on *I* are mapped on to *II* by different methods of projection. In order in this case to construe the circles in *II* as images, I shall have to say for each circle what method of projection belongs to it. But the mere fact that a figure is represented on *II* as a circle will say nothing. —It is like this with reality if we map it onto subject-predicate sentences. The fact that we use subject-predicate sentences is only a matter of our notation. (Wittgenstein 1975, 118–19)

Wittgenstein is surely right about this. The fact that a sentence is in subject-predicate form tells us next to nothing about the nature of the state of affairs that it represents. We gain no insight into what it is for an object to be green by observing that ‘*o* is green’ is in subject–predicate form. The subject–predicate form is an all-purpose linguistic tool we use for representing all sorts of disparate states of affairs.

There may be a little more to be gained from observing the relational form of attitude reports, but not much. The states of affairs we represent with attitude reports must be such as to allow us to represent them by relating people to propositions. This tells us something about the structure of our attitudes. Whatever beliefs really are, the totality of all possible belief-states must have a structure that lends itself to individuation by the multidimensional space of propositions (Matthews 2007). This is like saying: whatever the metaphysical or empirical nature of

weight, the totality of weight properties must have a structure that corresponds somehow to the numerical scales we use to measure weight. That may be true, but we do not learn much from this about what it is for Obama to weigh 180 pounds.

Are there any other lessons to be learned from the analogy between attitude reports and sentences about height and weight? I think there are. We put the analogy to better philosophical use by applying it to questions about the nature of propositions. The point of the analogy is to highlight the fact that we classify and individuate mental states and speech acts by relating people to propositions, in much the same way that we classify people according to height and weight by relating them to nodes on height and weight scales. How should we think about these entities that we use to classify and individuate our attitudes and speech acts? This is the guiding question of this book.

In posing the question this way I am putting one of the traditional roles for propositions on center stage, namely their role as the objects of the attitudes. Another traditional role for propositions is to be the original or primary bearers of truth conditions. To accept this role for propositions is to take on an explanatory commitment: the possession of truth conditions by anything other than a proposition, e.g. a belief, assertion, or sentence, is to be explained by its relation to a proposition with those truth conditions. Propositions are supposed to be the original or primary bearers of truth conditions in the sense that they have their truth conditions in an explanatorily basic way. Now, I think that propositions have truth conditions. (Or, at least, I think that one kind of proposition has truth conditions, the assertive kind. As we will see, I am going to argue that there are three different varieties of propositions, only one of which has truth conditions.) But I reject the idea that propositions are the *primary* bearers of truth conditions. This idea is a relic of a Fregean picture of content and thought that I think we must abandon. On this Fregean picture, propositions are out there, with their truth conditions intact, waiting to be judged and asserted. A subject latches onto one of these propositions—Frege calls this “grasping a thought”—and then goes on to endorse it in thought (judgment) and put it forward as true in speech (assertion). The truth conditions of the judgment and assertion then come from the proposition grasped by the subject. I believe we need to reverse the explanatory order. Propositions get their truth conditions from particular acts of judgment and assertion,

which are themselves the original or primary bearers of truth and falsity. The source of truth conditions is to be found in the acts of representation we perform when we make judgments and assertions, not in the propositional contents we use to classify and individuate these actions. More precisely, the source is to be found in acts of *predication* through which, in the simplest cases, people attribute properties and relations to objects. The explanation for why propositions have truth conditions must appeal to these acts of predication.

In broad strokes, this is how I propose to solve the problem of the unity of the proposition, which is best understood as the problem of explaining how propositions have truth conditions. The Fregean picture makes this problem intractable. This is not because of Frege's commitment to senses as the constituents of propositions. Russell's conception of propositions founders on the unity problem just as much as Frege's does. The source of the problem for both Frege and Russell was their acceptance of a picture of the relation between content and thought on which the contents of judgments have their representational features in a way that is explanatorily prior to the representational features of particular acts of judgment. This is what I am calling the Fregean picture of content and thought, and Russell (for a time, at least) accepted this picture as much as Frege. The picture bars us from appealing to the actions that people perform in thinking and speaking about the world when we want to understand how propositions have their truth conditions. This is hopeless. Representation and truth conditions begin with acts of predication, and propositions inherit their representational features from these acts. Expanding on this alternative to the Fregean picture, and using it to solve the problem of the unity of the proposition, is the primary aim of chapters 1–4.

The third traditional role for propositions is to be the contents of sentences. We characterize and classify our sentences by relating them to propositions in much the same way we do with mental states and speech acts. To say that 'Clinton is eloquent' and 'Clinton est éloquent' express the same proposition is to classify these sentences together according to a semantic scheme of classification. We divide up sentences along semantic lines by relating them to propositions. This allows us to pose an analog of the question I raised earlier. How should we think about these entities that we use to classify and individuate our sentences? I won't have much to say directly about this question in this book, although I will

have a lot to say about the contents of subsentential expressions, including proper names, indexicals, demonstratives, predicates, connectives, quantifiers, and *wh*-expressions. I am going to propose accounts of the semantic contents of all of these expressions, although I won't have anything directly to say about the semantic contents of sentences. Still, my aim is to indirectly answer this question about the contents of sentences by answering the corresponding question about the contents of mental states and speech acts. It should be clear that we use the same system of entities to classify our beliefs as we do our sentences. If this weren't the case then it would be mysterious how understanding the sentence someone uttered can tell us what she believes, or how we use sentences in the complement clauses of attitude reports to attribute beliefs. Beliefs and sentences must share the same contents, for otherwise we couldn't use sentences to express and attribute beliefs. A theory of the propositional contents of beliefs and assertions will therefore also be a theory of the propositional contents of sentences.

The central question of this book concerns the nature of the entities we use to classify and individuate our mental states and speech acts. This is how I would like to approach the issue of the nature of propositional content. But let's first ask a more general question. What sorts of entities in general do we use for classifying things? There is a tightly connected family of entities that serve this purpose: properties, relations, types, concepts, characteristic functions, sets. Each item on this list bears a special relationship to things that "fall under it". Objects instantiate properties and relations. Types have tokens. Concepts apply to things. Characteristic functions map some of their arguments to 1. Sets have members. These special relationships make these entities classificatory by nature. The property of being green, by its nature, classifies things into two groups, the things that instantiate it and those that don't.

Propositions have their own special relationship to the things they classify. Beliefs and assertions have propositions as their contents. This is the sense in which beliefs and assertions "fall under" a proposition. The proposition that Clinton is eloquent, by its nature, sorts things into two groups, those things that have it as content and those that don't. Obama's belief that Clinton is eloquent falls into the first group, his belief that Clinton is persistent falls into the other (along with lots of other things that don't have content at all, like my desk). In the case of sentences we have a term for this special relationship to propositions. We say that a

sentence *expresses* a proposition. Propositions sort sentences into those that express them and those that don't.

My point here is that propositions fit neatly into this family of classificatory entities. This raises a question about whether we can profitably think about propositions by assimilating them to another member of this family. I think we can. We make headway in understanding our practices of identifying and reporting attitudes and speech acts by identifying propositions with types. More precisely, types of actions—the types of actions we engage in when we form mental states or perform speech acts. The tokens of these types are the mental and spoken actions that we classify with propositions, as well as the states that result from these actions. Propositions identify, classify, and individuate our mental states and speech acts in the same way that types identify, classify, and individuate their tokens. A judgment or assertion has a propositional content in the sense that it is a token of the type that is that propositional content.

Let's return for a moment to the analogy between propositional content and attributes like height and weight. How should we think about the entities that we use to classify height and weight? Philosophers who have noticed the analogy tend to hold that measurement sentences report relations between people and numbers. According to Stalnaker, for example, "height in inches, weight in pounds, age in years, are all nonintentional relations between persons, or other physical objects, and numbers" (Stalnaker 1987, 8).<sup>1</sup> On this view, when we say that Obama is 73 inches tall we relate Obama to the number 73. For this to make sense, the relation involved must be something like the two-place relation *x-has-height-in-inches-y*. This builds the units into the relations, not into the entities to which we are relating Obama. The sentence 'Obama is 73 inches tall' would be written semi-formally as 'Height-in-inches (Obama, 73)'. 'Obama is 185.42 cm tall' would be 'Height-in-centimeters (Obama, 185.42)'. Weight and temperature reports will also have to fit this model. On this way of viewing measurement sentences, we use these relations to report heights, weights, temperatures, and ages by attributing them to objects and nodes on a single, all-purpose scale—the number line.

<sup>1</sup> See also (Matthews 2007, 124) and (Davidson 1989, 59; 1997, 83).

This departs in substantial ways from how we intuitively think about measurement. Inches and centimeters give us different scales for measuring height. Switching from Imperial/American to Metric is to change from one system of entities for measurement to another. This should be obvious for temperatures. It is a truism to say that Fahrenheit and Celsius are different temperature scales. Philosophers who think that measurement reports relate objects to numbers have to deny this. These philosophers hold that there is a single numerical scale used for all measurement sentences, and the differences between these sentences are just a matter of the different relations attributed to objects and numbers on the single all-purpose scale. The obvious alternative is to take the varieties of measurement reports to involve different scales. This amounts to building the units into the entities to which we relate objects in making measurement reports. When we say that Obama has a temperature of  $98.6^{\circ}\text{F}$  we relate Obama to a temperature,  $98.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ , which is a node on the Fahrenheit temperature scale. When we say that he has a temperature of  $37^{\circ}\text{C}$  we relate him to  $37^{\circ}\text{C}$ , a different node on a different scale. Measurement sentences report relations between objects and things like lengths, weights, and temperatures, not between objects and numbers.

But what are entities like  $98.6^{\circ}\text{F}$  or  $37^{\circ}\text{C}$ ? What is a temperature or a length or a weight? It makes intuitive sense to identify these entities with types. 180 pounds is a type whose tokens all have the same weight. To say that Obama weighs 180 pounds is to say that he is a token of this type. The relation expressed by 'weighs' is a tokening relation, and similarly for the other measurement relations. To say that Obama is 51 years old is to say that he is a token of the type 51 years old.

The same goes for the relations we bear to propositions. Judgment and assertion are tokening relations. To say that Obama judged that Clinton is eloquent is to relate Obama to a certain type of action, the proposition that Clinton is eloquent. Obama bears the judgment relation to this type in the sense that he performed a judgment that is a token of this type. Propositions are types of actions, and propositional attitude relations are tokening relations. I develop this idea further in chapter 7, where I explain how this view applies to mental states like belief, as well as some obvious problem cases, such as the attitude of denial.

Here then are some of the central theses of this book. Propositions are types of actions we use to identify, classify, and individuate our mental