A Modest Proposal for Deep-Sixing Propositions in the Philosophy of Language

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Abstract : Hanks (2021) identifies three Frege-inspired commitments concerning propositions that are widely shared across the philosophy of language: (1) propositions are the primary, inherent bearers of representational properties and truth-conditions; (2) propositions are neutral representations possessing a 'content' that is devoid of 'force; (3) propositions can be entertained or expressed without being asserted. Hanks then argues that the postulate of neutral content must be abandoned, and the primary bearers of truth-evaluable representation must be identified as the token acts of assertoric predication that people perform when they are thinking or speaking about the world. Propositions are 'types of acts of predication, which derive their representational features from their tokens.' Their role is that of 'classificatory devices that we use for the purposes of identifying and individuating mental states and speech acts,' so that 'to say that Russell believes that Mont Blanc is over 4000 meters high is to classify Russell's mental state under a certain type, and thereby distinguish that mental state from others that Russell might possess.' It is argued in this paper that there is no need to classify an utterance of 'Russell believes that Mont Blanc is over 4000 meters high' as a token of some higher-order utterance-type in order to identify what Russell believes; the meanings of the words themselves and the syntactico-semantic relations between them are sufficient. In our view what Hanks has accomplished in effect is to build a convincing argument for dispensing with propositions completely in the philosophy of language. By divesting propositions of the role of being the primary bearers of representational properties and truth-conditions and fittingly transferring this role to the token acts of predication that people perform when they are thinking or speaking about the world, he has situated truth in its proper place and obviated any need for abstractions like propositions to explain how language can express things that are true. This leaves propositions with the extremely modest role of classifying mental states and speech acts for the purposes of identifying and individuating them. It is demonstrated here however that there is no need whatsoever to posit such abstract entities to explain how people identify and individuate such states/acts. We therefore make the modest proposal that the term 'proposition' be stricken from the vocabulary of philosophers of language.

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