

Introduction

Michael Schmitz and Gabriele M. Mras

0.0 The Frege-Geach Point and the Force-Content Distinction

The distinction between the force/mode of speech acts and intentional states and their propositional content has been a central feature of analytic philosophy since Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. In this introduction we present the distinction and its motivation and review some recent challenges to it that appeal to the problem of the unity of the proposition, in order to give the reader a sense of the current state of debate to which the contributions of this volume respond.

The force-content distinction (FCD) is commonly thought to be established through what is now known as the “Frege-Geach point” (FGP):

A thought may have just the same content whether you assent to its truth or not; a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition.

(Geach 1965: 449)

For example, the same proposition or thought – Frege’s term for proposition – may occur unasserted as the antecedent of a conditional like “If it rains, the streets get wet” and may then be asserted as the minor premise that detaches the antecedent in a modus ponens argument. But it has to have the same content in each occurrence, or else the inference would be invalidated through equivocation. So it seems that force – whether something is asserted or judged to be true – is fundamentally different from the (forceless) content that is asserted and that logical operations operate on forceless propositions rather than on forceful acts.

This point is most often made with the conditional but can also be made regarding disjunction or negation. However, note that the conjunction does not trigger the FGP intuition. When we consider a conjunction like “It rained and the streets got wet”, there is no intuitive resistance to saying that a subject who says this has both asserted that it rains and that the streets got wet. At the same time, there is conceptual

pressure to treat conditionals, conjunctions, disjunctions and negations in the same way. Proponents of the FCD therefore hold that all logical operations operate on forceless propositions and that all propositions, whether atomic or molecular, negated, disjunctive, conditional or conjunctive, require a separate, additional act in order to be judged or asserted to be true. In his notation, Frege expressed this committal act by the vertical stroke that he called the “judgment stroke”, but which we will call the Fregean assertion sign.

Fictional contexts are another important kind of FGP context. For example, the actor on stage does not usually assert anything, even when uttering assertoric sentences. Nor does the jokester. We will later discuss possible additional FGP contexts such as questions.

In the following, we characterize the FCD through 10 theses, beginning with its core idea and then looking at the broader philosophical context and the ideas to which it connects. Note that not all proponents of the FCD accept all of these ideas.

- (1) The proposition is forceless. Force must be added through an additional act.

Peter Hanks (2015) calls this the constitutive version of the FCD.

- (2) Forceful acts are subjective. Propositions are objective.

This idea is a constant in the history of the FCD but has been interpreted in different ways. Frege was a strong Platonist. He thought that propositions must have some mind-independent existence in a separate realm in order for us to make sense of different subjects sharing the same thought. As a sworn enemy of the psychologism about logic prevalent at his time, he also thought that logic discovers laws of being true – as opposed to laws of holding things to be true – and is thus engaged in investigating mind-independent reality (Frege 1918). Similarly, G.E. Moore and Russell rebelled against the subjectivism of British idealism, and this sometimes led them to identify propositions with states of affairs (SOAs) in the world.

- (3) There is a non-committal act of grasping or merely entertaining a proposition which is logically, and perhaps even temporally, prior to any committal act like asserting.

For example, Frege drew a tripartite distinction between grasping a thought, judging it to be true and manifesting this judgment in assertion.

- (4) Propositions are the contents, senses or meanings of (declarative) sentences or of acts.

Propositions are commonly thought of as meanings or contents. However, some, including Geach, have conceived of them as bits of language (Bronzo 2021), in the sense of symbols with certain meanings, and for most issues addressed in this volume, it does not really matter whether one thinks of them as pure meanings or as meanings manifest in language. Some will think that propositions are only the meanings of declarative sentences, while others hold they can also be the content of non-declarative sentences (see point (7) below).

- (5) Propositions are truth-value bearers – ultimate, constant truth-value bearers.

This is another central property of propositions. The FCD embodies a truth-centric view of mind, language and logic. Philosophers typically only have truth-value bearers in mind when they talk about propositions, although in ordinary language the word “proposition” can also refer to things like proposals or plans. For Frege truth (rather than validity) is the guiding concept of logic, and logical operations are standardly considered to be truth-functional.

- (6) There is a process-product ambiguity for such terms as “statement”, which can either mean the act of making a statement or the statement made, and the proposition is on the product rather than the process side of things.

This distinction and related ideas have also often been appealed to in drawing the FCD, for example, by Searle (1968). The intuition here is that an act is not the right entity to be a truth value bearer; something more substantial and enduring is needed. This point is closely related to point (2).

- (7) Propositions can be the shared content of various kinds of acts. A proposition can not only be asserted, but one can also hope or wish that it is true, intend or promise to make it true or direct somebody to make it true.

Hanks (2015) calls this the “taxonomic” version of the FCD. This extension of the notion of a proposition goes beyond Frege, who thought that imperative or optative sentences contain orders and wishes rather than thoughts. But Russell started extending the application of the notion to include “propositional attitudes” such as believing that a proposition is true or desiring it to be true, and some versions of speech act theory such as John Searle’s (1969) have also hypothesized that propositional contents can be shared between such acts as asserting that Frank has closed the door, promising to close it, directing him to close it and asking whether he did.

- (8) Force is not part of literal, conventional meaning, while propositional meanings can be.

Searle (1968) also argued (against John L. Austin's (1962) notion of a locutionary act) that all sentences contain at least a generic indication of force as part of their meaning. However, this "literal force hypothesis" has remained a minority position.

- (9) The propositional and the representational content of an act are identical. Force indicators do not contribute to content.

This aspect of the FCD is so deeply entrenched that it is often taken for granted and not even discussed (but see Green (2000) and Recanati (2019)).

- (10) Force and content are the subject matters of different disciplines.

On a perspective widespread in philosophy and linguistic semantics, the study of conventional meaning and of truth, reference and logical form converge into a unified field of (truth-conditional) semantics. Speech acts and illocutionary force, together with non-conventional aspects of meaning, belong to the separate field of pragmatics, which is sometimes half-jokingly, half-seriously referred to as the "wastebasket" of semantics. That they are thought to belong to different fields shows how deep the division between force and propositional content goes.

0.1 The Unity Challenge against the FCD

Though naturalistically inclined philosophers were of course never sympathetic to Frege's platonism about propositions, this typically only led to attempts to replace propositions with declarative sentences or classes of such sentences. Other aspects of the FCD were left unchallenged, and until very recently the FCD retained a firm grip on philosophy of mind and, in particular, language. The current wave of challenges to the received understanding of propositions and the FCD began with the works of Stephen Barker (2007), Peter Hanks (2007, 2015, 2019), Jeffrey King (2009), Scott Soames (2010, 2015), François Recanati (2013, 2019) and others. Lately, the FCD has also been attacked by philosophers such as Irad Kimhi (2018) and Sebastian Rödl (2018). A complete overview of this literature is beyond the scope of this introduction. We will restrict ourselves to tracing a line of thought that reaches from Soames to Hanks and Recanati, as this is the line most contributors to this volume respond to.

The lowest common denominator of this critique is an attack on the objectification of propositions. Are objects, particularly objects commonly thought to be abstract like sets of possible worlds, or functions

from possible words to truth values, really suitable as the primary bearers of truth values? The critics reject “theories according to which propositions have truth conditions and so represent the world as being a certain way by their very natures and independently of minds and languages” and hold “that an adequate theory of propositions must *explain* how/why propositions have truth conditions” and that representation through propositions “must derive from and be explained by the representational capacities of thinking agents” (King 2017).

The alternative proposed by both Soames and Hanks is an act-theoretic conception of propositions. Soames puts his version as follows: “*Propositions are repeatable, purely representational, cognitive acts or operations; to entertain one is not to cognize it but to perform it*” (2019: 1370; his italics). Both also think that acts of predicating properties of objects are the basic representational acts, and both reject arguments to the effect that acts are not suitable as truth value bearers (cf. point (6)), pointing out that we do speak of people truly or falsely stating things (cf. Hanks 2015).

To make their case, both also appeal to the traditional problem of the unity of the proposition: why is a proposition such as *that Frank closed the door* not a mere list of items such as “Frank, closing, door”? What can give it the unity of something that has truth conditions, bears a truth value and represents the world as being a certain way? Soames, who refers to the unity problem as the problem of “*how propositions are representational*” (2019: 1375; his italics), thinks that in order to solve it, it is enough to explain the representational properties of propositions in terms of the representational acts of subjects.

However, Soames’s account still respects the traditional FCD in the following sense. He thinks that the basic occurrences of propositions are forceless, non-assertoric and non-committal. Assertoric force is only added through a separate act of judging or asserting a proposition to be true (point (1)). Such a view we can call a “plus account”. Soames’s view is like a naturalized version of Frege’s plus account. He rejects Frege’s platonism, but his notion of forceless predication is still functionally similar to Frege’s notion of merely grasping or entertaining a proposition (point (3)). To both a committal act of assertion or judgment has to be added.

Hanks (2015) strongly objects to the plus account. His argument is simple but powerful: a truth-value bearer must take a position with regard to how things are. It cannot leave open how they are, because otherwise it could not succeed or fail in representing them as they are. In other words, it could not be true or false. So a truth-evaluable act must in that sense be assertoric and committal. If, as Soames assumes, an act of predicating a property of an object is truth-evaluable, it cannot, Hanks charges, be neutral and non-committal on pain of incoherence. Such a neutral act therefore also cannot unify the proposition since being a

truth-value bearer is an essential feature of propositions (point (5)). Only a committal, forceful act can tie the proposition together.

With this argument, Hanks strikes at the heart of the FCD because he asserts a conflict between truth-evaluability and the separation of content and force. If he is right, truth-evaluable entities must be not only subjective but also forceful, committal acts. Both (2) and (1) would have to be given up to hold onto (5).

In this way, however, Hanks seems to expose himself to the FGP. If propositions are forceful, how can they e.g. occur in conditionals, where the subject is not committed to them and does not assert them? Hanks responds in two ways. First, he distinguishes between “pure” and “impure” acts of predication, where pure acts are standalone acts, and impure acts are those that occur in an FGP context. Second, he appeals to the notion of cancellation, proposing that force gets canceled in FGP contexts. This could be called a “minus account”, as it at least appears to say that cancellation removes force in FGP or cancellation contexts.

For Hanks, cancellation is not an act but a context created by acts such as using a conditional marker like “if”. He introduces a cancellation sign to mark such contexts. He further distinguishes predicative acts from acts of assertion: predicative acts only count as assertions when their force is not canceled.

Can the cancellation account really solve the unity problem Hanks has raised? If force is essential to unifying propositions, how can they still be unified in FGP/cancellation contexts? This objection has been raised by a large number of critics (e.g. Reiland (2012), Hom and Schwartz (2013), Green (2018), Recanati (2019), Bronzo (2021)). One could also put the difficulty as follows: why does it matter whether we think of the occurrences in FGP contexts as inherently forceless as on the traditional plus account or as arrived at by the subtraction from inherently forceful ones as on the minus account? Shouldn’t the end result be the same in either case?

In a recent response to his critics, Hanks concedes that terminologically talk of cancellation may be misleading: cancellation does not remove anything. FGP contexts actually contain more, not less, than other contexts (2019: 1389). He also says that they only extrinsically differ from non-cancellation contexts (2019: 1393). But he holds onto the substance of his view, insisting that predicative acts can unify propositions even when they occur in cancellation contexts.

François Recanati (2019) proposes a different account of cancellation to solve the unity problem, based on a set of distinctions between two kinds of force, two kinds of acts and two kinds of contexts. He draws on the insightful distinction between tropic and neustic force first made by Richard Hare (1971). The notion of tropic force is what we appeal to when we observe that the consequent of “If it rains, the streets get wet” is assertoric while the consequent of “If it rains, close the door!” is

imperative. Neustic force, on the other hand, is force in the sense of subscription or commitment and is absent from all FGP contexts including consequents and antecedents. And contra Searle and others, Recanati interprets Austin's notion of a locutionary act so that locutionary content is not force-neutral, but "includes a component corresponding to Hare's tropic" (Recanati 2019: 1408), and the locutionary act is "the act of conventionally indicating the performance of an illocutionary act", which "one may or may not actually perform" (1409). (In so doing, he also challenges point (9) above – that force is not representational.) Finally, the locutionary context is the context of the performance of the locutionary act, its subject is the actual speaker, its time the time of speech, etc., while the illocutionary context is the context of the act whose performance is indicated. It may, but need not, differ from the locutionary context. Usually these contexts coincide, but in cases like when, for example, the speaker ironically echoes and thereby mocks what somebody else has said, they come apart, and the speaker does not subscribe to the illocutionary act she has indicated. Such cases are cancellation contexts. Neustic force has been canceled. But tropic force can still unify the proposition.

Hanks rejects not only the constitutive but also the taxonomic version of the FCD (point (7)) and proposes to overcome the truth-centric character of the received view by taking into account directive and interrogative propositions in addition to assertoric ones. He argues that these are the three basic types of propositions. One reason for this is that these types exemplify what Hanks claims are the only three possible directions of fit.

He thus appeals to a concept first introduced by Elizabeth Anscombe (2000) with her famous example of a list of shopping items, which could be either a directive list of items *to* shop given to a shopper whose responsibility it would be to match or fit the world to the content of the list (world-to-word/mind direction of fit), or an assertoric list of items *that* the shopper has shopped recorded by an observer, whose responsibility it would be to match the content of the list to the world (word/mind-to-world direction of fit). Hanks proposes that there is a third direction of fit: word-to-word or mind-to-mind. This is the direction of fit of interrogatives, because "the kind of representation involved in asking a question is satisfied by another representation": its answer. These three are the only possible directions of fit because a world-to-world direction of fit is not possible: "If no representation is involved (no words or mind) – if it's just the world – then there is nothing that possesses satisfaction conditions and hence no direction of fit" (2019: 1401).

Accordingly, the three basic types of propositions can also be distinguished in terms of the kind of satisfaction conditions they possess: assertoric acts have truth conditions, directive acts have fulfillment conditions and interrogative acts have answerhood conditions. They can

further be differentiated in terms of how they are characteristically reported: assertoric acts through that-clauses, directive acts through to-clauses and interrogative acts through whether-clauses (Hanks 2015: 197). And last but not least, the three types also correspond to the three major types of sentence moods – declarative, imperative and interrogative – among the languages of the world (König and Siemund 2007).

How does the appeal to the unity problem in the current debate relate to earlier interpretations of this problem? Here is a classic quote from Russell:

Consider, for example, the proposition “A differs from B”. The constituents of this proposition, if we analyse it, appear to be only A, difference, B. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates A and B, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B.

(1903: section 54)

The traditional unity problem is the problem of how the constituents of a proposition can be so related that they constitute a representation of an SOA rather than a mere list. It is like a subjective counterpart to the ontological problem of how the constituents of an SOA hang together, or – if, like Russell, we identify the proposition with an SOA – may even be identical to it.

We believe that the unity problem as raised by Soames and in particular by Hanks and Recanati is best seen as a reinterpretation of this problem. As we have seen, the first and foremost point made against the tendency toward objectification exemplified by Russell and others is that all representation must be explained in terms of subjective acts. The second point, which is where Soames parts company with the others, is best interpreted as the claim that the basic occurrences of such acts must be committal and forceful: the subject must take a stance or position with regard to how the world is. Only through embedding in a more complex context can force be canceled or otherwise suspended. Third, if we follow Hanks and Recanati in abandoning the FCD, accepting that force indicators also make a contribution to content and taking non-assertoric propositions into account, then it becomes apparent that the proposition is not only a representation of an SOA but must in some way contain or reflect the theoretical, practical or inquisitive position that the subject takes up toward the reality of this SOA. This position is what unifies the relevant kind of proposition at its highest level of organization and makes it what it is: an assertoric, directive or interrogative act.

The unity problem then is not only a problem of how a representation can properly relate the constituents of an SOA, but how it relates them from the particular position from which the subject represents the

relevant SOA. We believe that in this way, the unity problem has been renewed in a thought-provoking way that is worth discussing even if one does not agree with it.

0.2 Force, Unity, Cancellation and Content

Three areas of discussion raised by the unity challenge stand out in particular: first, of course, whether it is viable, or whether the FCD can be defended in one form or another; second, whether the cancellation account of FGP contexts or something similar can be made to work and defended against the objections that have been raised against it; and third, whether the critique of the FCD can open up space for an alternative to the received truth-centric view. Such an alternative view would need to give a unified account of the content of theoretical, practical and inquisitive acts and thus also of the meaning of force indicators. It would be based on notions such as satisfaction conditions, direction of fit and perhaps even the ascription of representational content to force indicators.

In one way or another, all contributions to this volume touch on all of these issues, but for purposes of rough orientation we find it useful to divide them into three groups. The first group is meant to have an introductory function. It contains texts that outline and discuss historical positions on the debate, particularly Frege's, and/or discuss the fundamentals of the unity challenge in order to either defend the FCD or propose alternatives to it. The second group of texts is focused on the problems raised by the notion of cancellation and on possible alternatives to it. The third group contains texts that deal with the project of giving a unified account of meaning and content applicable to the whole variety of speech acts and force indicators. In the following, we will briefly describe the texts and the issues under consideration in these groups while sometimes also highlighting connections to texts in other groups.

Does the new version of the unity problem force us to abandon or at least to fundamentally reconceptualize the FCD? Travis defends Frege against the very different criticisms of Peter Hanks and Sebastian Rödl. He argues that a thought has no structure, only its expression does. Consequently, a theory of language and meaning is very different from a theory of thoughts. If one neglects this difference, one is bound to misunderstand Frege. Gabriele Mras shows that Frege's view of concepts as 'unsaturated' is crucial for our understanding of predication and suggests that the significance of the question of "the unity (of the expression) of a proposition" lies in that it shows us that there can be no pre-predicational account of the possibility of having thoughts. After a critical discussion of the cancellation account, Maria van der Schaar develops a positive proposal on how force indication through

mood should be understood based on Hare's distinction between the tropic and the neustic and her notion of an assertion candidate. Michael Schmitz argues that the unity problem can be solved and the challenge of the FGP met by thinking of force indicators as representing the subject's theoretical or practical position toward the reality of SOAs and by thinking of interrogative, logical and fictional acts as creating higher-level units out of assertions and directions, while sometimes suspending commitment to them.

The texts in the second group focus on the problems raised by the notion of cancellation. One central issue of course is this: if the label of "cancellation" is at least terminologically infelicitous, as Hanks concedes, what might be a better label or even a better account? In his contribution, Recanati further develops his account of FGP contexts in terms of the notion of simulation. From this perspective, what we do in FGP contexts is to simulate performing the relevant acts. For example, in our conditionals we may simulate certain facts or goals by simulating performing the relevant assertoric or directive acts. Schmitz also embraces simulation talk but further emphasizes that higher-level acts transfer the meaning of force indicators into the new unities they create, while Manolakaki appeals to measurement theories of propositions. Recanati also discusses the sense in which the acts simulated in FGP contexts are dependent or parasitic on what they simulate.

Can a unified explanation of cancellation contexts be given? While Recanati seems committed to this idea by his appeal to the notion of simulation, Hanks – perhaps surprisingly for the champion of cancellation – takes a more deflationary point of view, arguing that cancellation contexts do not necessarily have a shared nature that can be given a unified explanation.

What are the cancellation or FGP contexts? As we have noted, since Geach logical and fictional contexts have typically been considered to be the core FGP contexts. However, this view can be questioned in both historical and systematic respects. Mark Textor argues that for Frege the most important contexts for the FCD are attitude report contexts (this volume) and interrogative contexts (2020).

Questions have recently emerged as a new focal point the debate on the FCD. Hanks criticizes Textor's argument regarding yes-no questions and defends his view that questions form a separate category of propositions. At the same time Recanati and Schmitz argue against both Textor and Hanks that interrogative contexts can and should be treated like other FGP contexts. On this view, questions are higher-level acts that are dependent on assertoric and perhaps even, as Schmitz argues, on directive acts in the case of practical questions such as "Close the door?".

Is there a finite list of cancellation contexts, or are we perhaps dealing with an indefinitely extendible category? Eleni Manolakaki, who raises this issue, points to comparative constructions such as “Better to visit your grandma than to go to the movies!” and “It is more likely that John can walk than that he can run” as further examples of FGP contexts. She further critically engages with the notion of cancellation and invokes measurement accounts of propositions to “liberate” force and account for FGP contexts by appealing to “surrogates” of propositions.

Can non-assertoric, non-truth apt propositions be integrated into a unified account of meaning and content? And how in particular can the contribution – if any – that assertoric, directive, interrogative and other force indicators make to meaning be characterized? These are the sorts of questions the third group of contributions focuses on. One influential tradition of explaining non-assertoric or non-cognitive sentences and meanings is expressivism, according to which such meanings can be distinguished in terms of the kind of mental state that they express. In his contribution, Stephen Barker outlines his global brand of expressivism and argues that it provides an account of the distinction between truth-apt and non-truth apt sentences. Barker explains truth-apt sentences in terms of his concept of proto-assertion. Proto-assertions are neither assertions nor forceless sentences encoding propositions.

Another approach we have discussed already appeals to the notions of satisfaction conditions and direction of fit. On one version of this approach, the contribution that force indicators make to meaning and content can be entirely explained in these terms. Christopher Hom and Jeremy Schwartz’s account of imperatives is of this kind. They extend Hanks’s account of the content of assertoric propositions to imperatives, explaining the contribution to content made by the imperative mood through the direction of fit and the satisfaction conditions of directives. As we noted earlier, only Schmitz and Recanati go further than this and claim (against point (9)) that force indicators carry outright representational content. Another important issue here is whether grammatical mood and other markers such as intonation indeed conventionally indicate force (point (8)). Hom and Schwartz and others assume that they do, but the issue is explicitly discussed by Hanks, who responds to Recanati’s more skeptical position.

From the point of view of his defense of a version of the FCD, Mitch Green tackles a descendant of Austin’s famous problem of how performative utterances work: “Cohen’s problem” of how self-ascriptions of speech acts such as “I claim that p” should be understood. Though Green allows that force indicators may carry content, he proposes that such avowals are actually examples of a biologically more basic mode of signaling, which he terms “verbal signaling” and which does not involve the complex machinery of illocutionary force. He further argues that

they are translucent: we see through them in one sense, but in another they color what we see.

The last two contributions can be read as counterparts. Mark Textor gives an account of attitude reports as part of his project of a defense of a restricted version of the FCD. For him that-clauses are paradigm examples of propositions. Friederike Moltmann on the other hand argues that attitude reports are best understood in terms of an ontology of attitudinal objects like claims, promises, beliefs, desires, obligations, and so on, which she thinks contain a specification of mode/force and are neither propositions, nor acts, but rather their products. Support for this account comes from how various satisfaction predicates such as “correct”, “fulfilled” and “accepted” are applied in natural language. Moltmann proposes to understand the force component in terms of the types of entities that act as satisfiers, of causal relations between object and satisfier and of direction of fit.

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