EXPRESSING PROPOSITIONS

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As I use the term a proposition is anything that can be
asserted, assumed, conjectured, stated, believed, etc. It is
not something that can be asked, ordered, requested, etc.

On certain occasions of its use a given sentence expresses
a proposition, on other occasions it does not do so. For example,
if an assertion, report, conjecture, etc. is made by uttering "It
is raining," then that sentence would have expressed a proposi-
tion. If it is uttered as part of a joke, or in quoting, or by a
parrot, no proposition would have been expressed. (One might ob-
ject to applying "expresses a proposition" to sentences on the
grounds that sentences cannot literally express anything. This is
true, but it does not pose any significant problem. Simply regard
"The sentence x expresses a proposition" as shorthand for "The
speaker S expresses a proposition by producing the sentence x.")

I hope these preliminary remarks make clear what I understand
by the terms "proposition" and "expresses a proposition." In this
paper I examine the concept of expressing a proposition, confining
my attention just to those cases where x is produced as a complete
sentence (not as part of another sentence). I do not try to give
an analysis of the concept here; but I do try to provide some
groundwork for a successful analysis by making distinctions and
clarifying problems.

Suppositions and Truth-Claims. The ways in which proposi-
tions are expressed can be divided into two mutually exclusive and
exhaustive classes. The distinction I have in mind holds between
(a) producing a sentence to make an assumption, or conjecture,
etc., and (b) producing a sentence to make an assertion, or state-
ment, etc. I shall label the distinction by saying that in a case
falling under (a) the speaker made a supposition, while in a case
falling under (b) the speaker made a truth-claim.

I think that this distinction can be best explained by point-
ing out that it never makes sense to say that a speaker spoke
honestly or dishonestly in a case in which he made a supposition.
These terms are only applicable to truth-claims.

This is especially clear in the case of assumptions. Suppose
for example, that S produces, "Smith was in Chicago at the time of
the murder," and then adds, "For the time being I shall simply
accept this for the sake of the argument." Clearly it would be

senseless to ask if S lied or spoke honestly when he produced his premise. The same is true of conjectures. Suppose S produces, "My guess is that the book cost five dollars" in response to H's request that S guess how much the book cost. Now I do not deny that S might have lied in saying he was guessing. But if he was honest in saying this, then he did make a conjecture that the book cost five dollars. And it would be senseless to call this conjecture a lie or an honest conjecture. In other words, if S was honest in saying that he was guessing, then there are two different speech-acts he performed by uttering his sentence. He made a conjecture that the book cost five dollars, and an honest truth-claim that he was guessing that this was the case. If he lied in making the truth-claim, he made no conjecture at all.

I do not know how I can prove that the terms "honest" and "dishonest" are not applicable to suppositions, but there is an objection to this claim which I wish to consider. Suppose that in response to H's question "Who called last night?" S replies "It was Smith" while only guessing that it was Smith who called. Let us suppose that S neither believes nor disbelieves this. He realizes that it could have been Smith or any one of ten other people, but in order that H will not bother him about the matter he produces his reply. Now S made a conjecture in saying that it was Smith who called, but there is clearly a sense in which this conjecture was dishonest. For in producing his words in a normal tone of voice he indicated to H that he believed it was Smith while believing nothing of the kind.

In reply to this objection I wish to deny that S made a conjecture. He made a truth-claim. To make a conjecture that P it is not enough that one merely say that P while guessing that P is the case. The speaker must also be entitled to believe that his audience understands that he is merely guessing. That is, he must either say he is guessing or there must be other factors concerning the context which entitle the speaker to take his audience to understand that he is guessing.

Honest truth-claims. The existence of suppositions shows that it is not the case that on every occasion upon which a proposition is expressed the speaker speaks honestly or dishonestly. The question naturally arises as to whether every truth-claim is either honest or dishonest. I shall approach this question by considering some problems which face any attempt to give an adequate explanation of what it is to make an honest truth-claim.

A necessary condition for a speaker S to make an honest truth-claim P by producing a sentence x is that S believe P when he utters x. This is not a sufficient condition, however. For suppose it is raining at time t in the general vicinity of 1. At this time and place S, while reading aloud to someone from a novel, produces "It is raining." Now S may well have believed that it was raining when he uttered the sentence, but he made no truth-claim at all.

Notice, however, that in this case the speaker $\underline{S}$ could not be said to have intended to get the hearer $\underline{H}$ to believe that it was raining by uttering his sentence (or if he had such an intention this would be a reason for saying that he did make an honest truth-claim.) This fact might lead one to say that $\underline{S}$ produces $\underline{x}$ to make an honest truth-claim $\underline{P}$ if, and only if, $\underline{S}$ believes $\underline{P}$ when he produces $\underline{x}$, and produces $\underline{x}$ with the intention of getting $\underline{H}$ to believe $\underline{P}$. This equivalence, however, does not hold. Suppose a child asks $\underline{S}$ to explain why the world is round. $\underline{S}$ replies, "The reason that the world is round is that the differential of the absolute value of the length of the equator is zero." $\underline{S}$'s purpose in replying to this question with a nonsense sentence is to get the child to believe $\underline{S}$ is an intelligent person. $\underline{S}$ might also believe this, but he made no truth-claim.

Grice proposes an analysis of what he calls "nonnatural meaning": "'A meant something by $\underline{x}$' is (roughly) equivalent to 'A intended the utterance of $\underline{x}$ to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention.'" (Grice, 1957:385). I think it is partially because of examples like the one just described that Grice employs "by means of the recognition of this intention" in formulating his analysis. Perhaps something similar can be done in this case. Suppose we say that $\underline{S}$ makes an honest truth-claim $\underline{P}$ by producing $\underline{x}$ if, and only if, $\underline{S}$ believes $\underline{P}$ when he produces $\underline{x}$, and produces $\underline{x}$ with the intention of getting $\underline{H}$ to believe $\underline{P}$ by means of $\underline{H}$'s recognition of this intention. This analysis, I believe, is immune to the previous counterexamples. But it still is inadequate since there are other cases which do not satisfy it.

Let us suppose that Smith has great contempt for political and ethical discussions. He walks into a room where some friends are having a heated discussion over Kissinger's policy toward Vietnam. Jones asks Smith, "Tell us Smith, what is your attitude toward Kissinger's policy?" To this Smith retorts, "I think that policy demonstrates the falsity of Goldbach's conjecture." Smith may well have intended his utterance to induce a belief in his audience that he has great contempt for such questions by means of his audience's recognition of this intention. Also, of course, Smith could himself have this belief when he uttered the sentence. Here is another counterexample. Suppose Smith makes a sincere and nondefective promise by uttering "I promise to be at the meeting." Smith would have intended to induce a belief that he will be at the meeting in his audience by means of his audience's recognition of this intention. And he also would have this belief. But he did not make any truth-claim at all. Similar remarks hold in the case of a man who issues a sincere and nondefective warning by uttering "I warn you that I shall be at the meeting."

Suppose that the notion of a sentence which is conventionally used to produce the belief that $\underline{P}$ could be defined in such a way that the last three sentences cited would not be sentences which are conventionally used to produce the beliefs that these sentences

were used to produce. We could then amend the analysis by adding a third condition to the effect that the sentence the speaker uttered must be one which is conventionally used to produce the belief which the speaker intended to induce in his audience. Since the sentences cited in the preceding three cases would not satisfy this condition, these cases would no longer be counter-examples.

However, there is a problem with this approach. I ask Smith, "What does 'Es regnet' mean?" Smith replies, "It is raining." Clearly Smith made an honest truth-claim that "E s regnet" means "It is raining." But would "It is raining" be a sentence which is conventionally used to produce such a belief? This, of course, depends upon how one is to define "x is conventionally used to produce the belief that P." The point is that I do not know how this concept can be defined so as to (i) prevent "I promise to be at the meeting" from being a sentence which is conventionally used to produce the belief that the speaker will be at the meeting, while (ii) allowing "It is raining" to be a sentence which is con-ventionally used to produce the belief that "Es regnet" means "It is raining."

Logical priority. Complications of this sort do not show that any attempt to define "x is used to make an honest truth-claim P" in terms of "intends to induce the belief that P" is futile. But they do show that in order for such an attempt to be successful some restrictions must be made with respect to assign-ing values to x and P.

I shall say that a sentence x is logically prior to a sen-tence y with respect to a proposition P if and only if (i) one can understand how x can be used to make the truth-claim that P with-out understanding how y can be used to make the same claim, but (ii) to understand how y can be used to make the truth-claim that P one must understand how x can be used to make the same claim. For example, "'Es regnet" means 'It is raining'" is logically prior to "It is raining" with respect to the proposition that "Es regnet" means "It is raining." "He is intelligent" is logically prior to "He has a head on his shoulders" with respect to the proposition that the man singled out is intelligent. I shall say that a sentence x is standard with respect to a proposition P if, and only if, x is logically prior to some other sentence y with respect to this proposition and no other sentence z is logically prior to x with respect to the proposition P. For example, "It is raining" is standard with respect to the proposition that it is raining now. But the sentence is not standard with respect to the proposition that "Es regnet" means "It is raining."

My proposal for dealing with the counterexamples is to employ the concept that has just been introduced so as to restrict the ranges of x and P in the formula "S uses x to make an honest and primary truth-claim P." What I have in mind is the following emendation: In a case in which a speaker S produces a sentence x

which is standard with respect to the proposition P, S uses x to
make an honest and primary truth-claim P if, and only if S be-
lieves P when he produces x, and S utters x with the intention of
getting H to believe P.

One cannot argue that the cases in which "I think that policy
demonstrates the falsity of Goldbach's conjecture," "I promise to
be at the meeting" and "I warn you that I shall be at the meeting"
were produced are counterexamples to the present analysis since
none of these sentences are standard with respect to any proposi-
tion at all. Notice also that the phrase "by means of H's recog-
nition of this intention" has been dropped. Without the restric-
tions on x and P it was necessary to add this condition because it
is possible to utter a nonsense sentence to get someone to believe,
say, that the speaker is intelligent. But since a nonsense sen-
tence is not standard with respect to any proposition, this possi-
bility poses no problem for the restricted analysis.

A final emendation. Of course, a complete account of what it
is to make an honest truth-claim would require an account of cases
in which an honest truth-claim P is made by the production of a
sentence which is not standard with respect to P. But before this
problem can be considered the account just given of standard cases
needs revision.

Consider the following counterexample. A suspect is being
interrogated by a detective. After a few hours the suspect comes
to believe that the detective is convinced of his guilt, and that
nothing he can say is going to change the detective's mind. None-
theless, in response to a certain line of questioning the suspect
utters "I'm innocent" assertively. Suppose that in fact the sus-
pect is innocent. Then he would have made an honest truth-claim
that he was innocent of the crime in question. But he could not
be construed as having intended to induce this belief in the de-
tective, since he did not think that there was any chance of the
detective believing him.

It is not difficult to construct other counterexamples which
are perhaps less unusual than the one just described. It is, for
example, quite possible for a speaker to give an honest answer to
a question without in the least bit caring if the person who asked
the question believes him. And if a man does not care if he is
believed, he does not have the requisite intention.

The problems raised by such cases can be met by the following
(final) emendation. Given that x is standard with respect to P, S
makes an honest truth-claim P by producing x if, and only if, (1)
S believes P when he produces x, and either (2) S produces x with
the intention of getting some hearer H to believe P, or (3) in the
event that S does not have this intention he is not justified in
taking H to be aware of this fact. A restricted analysis of a
dishonest truth-claim can be given in the same way by substituting

"S does not believe P when he produces x" for (1). (The reason for having condition (3) as part of the analysis of a dishonest truth-claim is that it is possible to make a dishonest truth-claim without intending to induce a belief. The following case illustrates this fact. After being threatened with torture, a captured officer agrees to radio back the following message to headquarters, "Our company is being pinned down by enemy fire. Send reinforcements." He goes on to give a location, thus setting up an ambush. Now in this case the officer clearly lied in saying that his company was being pinned down. Now suppose that the officer hopes headquarters will not believe him. If a person intends to do A, he either wants to do A or else he must think the doing of A is a necessary means for bringing about something else which he wants. The officer does not want headquarters to believe him, nor does he believe that getting headquarters to believe him is a necessary means for escaping torture. He realizes that telling headquarters this is what is necessary. So the officer cannot be construed as having intended to induce a belief in his audience.)

The third condition, which is the crucial one, needs considerable elaboration. Suppose that from the other room Mrs. Smith asks Mr. Smith what the weather is. Mr. Smith looks out the window, sees that it is raining, and tells his wife that it is raining. Now suppose Mr. Smith does not care if his wife believes him. Then condition (2) would fail to hold, but so far he would not be justified in taking his wife to be aware of this fact. Suppose now the action proceeds. Mrs. Smith asks, "Are you sure? The forecast did not call for rain." Mr. Smith replies, "I don't care if you believe me or not. It happens to be raining." Mr. Smith thereby indicates to his wife that condition (2) does not hold. And he is, therefore, justified in taking her to be aware of this fact.

Consider the suspect-detective case again. In this case the suspect honestly asserted that he was innocent of the crime in question, even though he did not think that there was any chance that the detective would believe that he was innocent. Thus, he did not make his assertion with the intention of getting the detective to believe him. In a normal case in which a speaker tells someone that he is innocent of a crime he intends that the hearer believe him. For this reason the suspect was not justified in taking the detective to be aware of the fact that condition (2) failed to obtain. He would have been justified if he had ample reason for thinking that the detective was aware of the fact that he (the suspect) did not think there was any chance of his being believed. For example, if the detective had previously said something like "Look, I know you are guilty. Nothing you can say will change my mind about that," then the suspect would have been justified in taking the detective to be aware of the fact that condition (2) did not hold.

Neutral truth-claims. An obvious objection now arises. Consider the suspect-detective case again. Suppose that the detective

had said something which would have warranted the suspect in
taking the detective to be aware of the fact that he did not make
his assertion with the intention of getting the detective to be-
lieve him. Then the case would be one in which neither condition
(2) nor condition (3) held. And yet the speaker would have made
an honest truth-claim.

My answer to this objection is that there is no good reason
for saying that the suspect made an honest truth-claim in this
(extended) case. I agree that a truth-claim would have been made,
and also that it would not have been dishonestly made. It would
follow that the speaker spoke honestly only if every truth-claim
must be classified as either being honest or dishonest. And, as
I shall argue, this is not the case.

An alternative classificatory scheme, which I shall defend,
consists in saying that all truth-claims are honest, dishonest or
neutral. According to this view S makes a neutral truth-claim P
by producing x if, and only if, S makes a truth-claim P by produc-
ing x, and S is justified in taking his hearer to be aware of the
fact that he did not intend to induce a belief that P in the hear-
er by producing x. If one adopts this classification, the revised
suspect-detective case would not be a counterexample to the
analysis given of an honest truth-claim, since it would be a case
in which a neutral truth-claim is made.

Of the two schemes the second one is preferable. This is
because it is easier to account for various distinctions by em-
ploying the second method of classification than it is by employ-
ing the first. There is, for example, an obvious distinction to
be made between a case in which a man says something which he
knows that his hearer knows to be true, and a case in which a man
says something in order to convey information. If both kinds of
cases were included under the category of honest truth-claims,
this distinction would be blurred. And for this reason it would
become virtually impossible to give any sort of acceptable
analysis of "honest truth-claim."

Concluding remarks

If what I have said in this paper is correct, I think I have
helped to clarify certain distinctions and problems which must be
clarified before one can give a complete analysis of what it is
to express a proposition. A sentence expresses a proposition on
a particular occasion if, and only if, the speaker makes a sup-
position or a truth-claim by producing it. A truth-claim is
either honest, dishonest or neutral. Given that a sentence x is
standard with respect to a proposition P. I have tried to ex-
plain what it is for a speaker to make either an honest or dis-
honest truth-claim that P by producing x. Hopefully this explan-
ation could be part of a complete analysis of "expresses a propo-
sition." As it stands the explanation given of what it is to

make a neutral truth-claim could not be part of such an analysis, since the term "truth-claim" was employed in giving that explanation. A complete analysis of "expresses a proposition" requires, first of all, an explanation of what it is for a speaker to make an honest or dishonest truth-claim P by producing x, where x is not standard with respect to P; it also requires an analysis of "neutral truth-claim" without employing the term "truth-claim;" and, finally, it requires an explanation of what it is to make a supposition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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