

**Objects of thought? On the usual way out of Prior's objection to
the relational theory of propositional attitude sentences --- PRE_PRINTS**

Traditionally, 'that'-clauses occurring in attitude attributions are taken to denote the objects of the attitudes. Prior raised a famous problem: even if Frege fears *that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox*, it is unlikely that he fears a proposition, a sentence, or what have you as the alleged object denoted by the 'that'-clause. The usual way out is to say that 'that'-clauses do not contribute the objects of the attitudes, but their contents. I will show that, if we accept this answer, either we'd better stop working on attitude attributions or we'd better work harder on them.

1. Matching in content?

Take

(1) Dave loves Laura.

If (1) is true, then there is somebody, namely Laura, who is loved by Dave. Furthermore, if Dave loves Laura and Gabriel likes Laura, then there is somebody, namely Laura, whom Dave loves and Gabriel likes. Sentence (1) then seems to express the holding of a relation between Dave and Laura, and thus seems to have the form $R(a,b)$. Now take an attitude attribution such as

(2) Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox.

If (2) is true, then there is something, namely *that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox*, that is believed by Frege. Furthermore, if Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox and Gabriel knows that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox, there is something, namely *that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox*, that Frege believes and Gabriel knows. On the basis of the similarities between (1) and (2), we seem entitled to conclude that (2) has the form $R(a,b)$ as well and

expresses the holding of a relation between the denotations of 'Frege' and of the 'that'-clause 'that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox'. This is in fact part of the so-called *face-value theory* of attitude attributions (Schiffer 2003, 12). Let us assume, in good company, that this is really the case. Since the same 'that'-clause can be the object of the various different attitude predicates, as shown by the fact that we say that Frege believes what Gabriel knows, or that Frege himself claimed what Gabriel maintained, or that Frege will confess something Gabriel will find hard to believe, let us also assume, in good company again (Soames 2011, 214; Williamson 2000, 43), that 'that'-clauses always denote the same kind of thing, be it a proposition, a sentence, a fact, a flamingo or what have you, no matter in the context of what predicate they occur. If 'that'-clauses denote and always denote the same thing, the next question is what they denote, and the two most obvious candidates that have been put forward are in fact propositions and sentences.

Propositionalism is the standard account, partially because sententialism is generally considered to be obviously doomed. There are some specific issues with sententialism, but the main worry is the one that Prior famously put as follows:

A man might perhaps in some odd mood or condition fear sentences as he fears dogs – if Robinson Crusoe had seen not a footprint but the inscription 'The cat is on the mat' written in the sand, it might have set him trembling – but this is quite a different matter; such a man might fear the sentence without knowing what it means; and even if he did, he might fear the sentence 'The cat is on the mat' without fearing that the cat is on the mat. And to fear that the cat is on the mat is not itself to fear this sentence. (1971, 14-5)

The problem is not just with fears: according to sententialism,

- (2) Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox

expresses the holding of a relation between Frege and the sentence (whatever a sentence is) 'The Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox'. But Frege could believe that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox even if he did not speak English and did not even know that that English sentence exists, let alone believe it, whatever that might mean (Speaks 2014, 12). Put differently, the issue with sententialism is that sentences are not the direct objects of our and Frege's attitudes, as attributed in sentences such as (2).

Because of this general worry, sententialists need to hold that the relation Frege stands in with the sentence 'The Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox' is a more complex one. According to these more sophisticated sententialist accounts, (2) is true iff Frege's mental state and the sentence 'The Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox' are *samesaying* (Davidson 1968, 104), *match in content* (Higginbotham 2006, 102) or are such that the second *represents* the first (Matthews 2007, 223).

These enhanced sententialist accounts are immune to the worry raised by Prior. For the sentence is not supposed to be the direct object of an attitude and so it is not surprising that fearing a sentence is not like fearing dogs, which, for the many of us who fear dogs, are instead the direct objects of one of our fears. But these proposals are still subject to a different, quite obvious problem: How are we to define the *samesaying* (or *matching in content*, or *representing*) relation? This is, all in all, the relation of *synonymy*, and it seems that enhanced sententialism, in relying on it, needs to spell it out in details.

But Davidson urged that the relation is 'an unanalyzed part' (1969, 104) of the account and that 'to samesay' is 'from a semantic point of view a primitive' (ibid, f. 14). Similarly, Lepore & Loewer contended that 'it may prove impossible to explicate this relation in other terms' (1989, 103). Even some foes of sententialism granted that this is what sententialists can or should say (Schiffer 1987, 131. McDowell 1980, 83-4). On the other hand, some found this move 'an artful dodge' (Haack 1971, 358) and 'insofar as Davidson fails to provide us with any axioms or conditions for the employment of the samesaying relations his theory remains undeveloped.' (ibid. See also Lycan 1973, 138). Now, whether or not holding that giving the truth-conditions of (2) in terms of a

primitive notion of samesaying is a dodge, surely it makes the enterprise of understanding our language about attitudes a strange business. It does not seem that we already intuitively know when the relation holds. If we knew, then we would have no trouble in understanding when a sentence like (2) is true, but we do have trouble, for example because puzzles about attitude attributions are indeed puzzling. Although we might have some intuitions about when the relation of synonymy, or samesaying, holds, it also seems that our intuitions pull in different directions. If Frege believes that Hesperus is Hesperus, as we all do, does he also believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus? It seems he might not do. But as it occurs in attitude attributions, 'equality gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer' (Frege 1892, 157). For we also intuitively think that, since Hesperus is indeed Phosphorus, the two names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' should be synonymous; how can they not be, if they are names of exactly the same thing? Moreover suppose, with Kripke, that Pierre is a competent speaker of both French and English but that he learnt English by the direct method, without using any translation of English into French (Kripke 1979, 143-4). Pierre would assert both 'Londres est jolie' and 'London is not pretty'. Does he believe or does he not that London is pretty? This is a puzzling question: we do not already know whether Pierre's mental state stands in the samesaying relation with the sentence 'London is pretty'. Thus the relation is one we do not already intuitively know. If it is primitive and then undefinable, *de jure*, we will never know when an attitude attribution is true and when two beliefs are the same. This is very unpromising, and on top of that it does not seem right. The famous puzzles about beliefs are puzzling exactly because it seems indeed that we can know whether those sentences are true or false, it only seems difficult to reach such a piece of knowledge.

In fact, many sententialists felt they needed to and could define the relation. Although he does not suggest the way to go, Higginbotham holds explicitly that 'there is the serious business of elucidating what matches what in content' (2006, 116), and in a note added in 1982, Davidson maintains that radical interpretation will provide us a fully-fledged notion (1969, 104 f. 14). Matthews (2007) and Field (1978) and Richard (2013), moreover, put forward some positive

considerations on how the relation is to be defined. Matthews suggests to go dispositionalist, and holds that the sentence we denote in an attitude attribution represents the attitudinal state of the subject because it encodes what the subject is apt to do (believe, act, etc.) in virtue of having that belief. Field and Richard instead rely on the language of thought hypothesis and suggest, roughly, that the sentence we denote and the subject of the attitude are related because the subject has a sentence in her head that plays the same conceptual role played by the sentence we denote. These are not artful dodges, but neither the dispositional approach to attitudes nor the language of thought hypothesis are easy to defend, in particular if we take into account that attitude attributions are what speakers of natural languages use to speak about other subjects. When we attribute an attitude via an attitude attribution, it does not seem that 'we represent the power of the belief to produce the myriad effects that it might produce under the myriad of circumstances that might activate it.' (Millar 2009, 186-7). Similar considerations hold for the language of thought hypothesis: are we really thinking about the sentences Frege has in his head when we utter

(2) Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox

? Neither option is easy to defend. Moreover, even if one of the two were in the end really part of the correct explanation of attitude attributions, a lot still needs to be spelled out. Take the dispositionalist account: What is the power of a belief? What are activating circumstances? What is an effect? Take alternatively the language of thought hypothesis: What is a conceptual role? What does it mean that a sentence in the head plays a role?

Given all this, the general opinion concerning sententialism is, quite correctly, that either it relies on a disappointingly and hardly believable primitive notion, or, if the notion can be spelled out, that it has 'not yet been developed in sufficient detail' (Matthews 2011, 839) and Haack's objection that the theory is undeveloped is to be considered to be still unmet.

2. Being the content of?

Propositionalists seem to have a real advantage, then. For they can hold that the proposition *that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox* is the direct object Frege is related to when

(2) Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox

is true: Frege believes that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox iff he believes the proposition that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox. Thus, it seems, no complex relation between a subject and a proposition needs to be defined. But, as Prior remarked (1971, 16), and as it has been widely discussed again recently, as soon as we move away from belief, Prior's point against sententialism has a counterpart concerning propositionalism. The proposition that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox is not the direct object of Frege's fear: Frege fears that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox, but it is quite unlikely that he suffers from propositional phobia. Similarly, one thing is to know that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox, quite another to know the proposition that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox. Probably Frege knew the proposition while writing the Begriffsschrift, but clearly did not know that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox, or he would have done something about it! In order to save their account from this issue, defenders of propositionalism have generally suggested something similar to what sententialists have suggested, i.e. to complicate the relation Frege stands in with the proposition that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox when

(3) Frege fears that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox

is true. In (3), the proposition is not the direct object of Frege's fear, but, roughly, Frege's fear *has that proposition as content* (Forbes forthcoming; Grzankowski 2016, 317; King 2007, 154; Künne 2003, 260; Pietroski 2005, 236-41; Stanley 2011, 65) or, to adapt Davidson's idiom to the present

case, says that proposition. Is this a satisfactory way out? Even Rosefeldt, who strongly criticizes the face-value theory, holds that this way out is a good answer to Prior's problem (2008, 306), but the lesson we can learn from the debate about sententialism is that this move raises a new pressing question: What is this *having as content* relation? Like the early Davidson and Lepore & Loewer, Forbes suggests taking it to be primitive:

I therefore propose to introduce a relation, that of *being the content of*, tailored specifically to propositions and mental states, and to add the primitive **content**, of type $e(bb)$, to the type-theoretic language.

But, again, we do not know already what the relation is and, if it is primitive, we will never be able to define it. We could still, of course, have some intuitions about this primitive and know something involving such a primitive. For example we might get to know whether the relation is transitive. However, if the relation is a primitive we will never be able to know when something like (3) is true: we know that (3) is true iff Frege's fear has the proposition that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox as content, but since we do not know when it is that the fear has such a content, we do not know whether (3) is true. As we just saw, this is despairing and in any case it does not sound right. How can we define the relation, then? The only faint attempt in the literature is in Grzankowski 2016, who, while discussing other things, suggests very briefly more or less what some sententialists put forward:

Suppose for a moment that the language of thought hypothesis is true. On such a view, in V-ing that p , one stands in a relation to a sentence in the head that means or expresses that p (2016, 318).

This is clearly far from an innocuous supposition and it is anyway hardly a fully-fledged account.

Something analogous to Haack's objection to Davidson's sententialism can then be moved to propositionalism as well.¹ If the propositionalists' way out of Prior's objection does not make attitude attributions something uninteresting, it makes propositionalism underdeveloped: When are we related to a sentence in the head? In what way does a sentence in the head mean anything at all? What is the difference between being related to a sentence so that we have a certain belief, and being related to the same sentence so that we are victims of a fear?

Conclusion

Both sententialism and propositionalism are subject to the challenge advanced by Prior. Both accounts answered the challenge more or less in the same way by complicating the alleged relation subjects and propositions or sentences stand in. If the relation is primitive, attitude attributions are uninteresting and then we'd better stop working on them. If, on the other hand, the relation can be defined, attitude attributions are still very interesting, but we still need to define such a relation, and then we'd better work harder on them. If you want to hold on to the thesis that 'that'-clauses denote something and to the idea that we are able to say when an attitude attribution is true, simply re-labeling Prior's challenge in terms of 'samesaying' or 'being the content of' does not seem enough to completely meet it.²

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¹ Propositionalists sometimes phrase the complex relation in terms of truth. King 2007, 153, for example, holds that to fear that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox is to 'anxiously believe that the proposition might be true', and Grzankowski 2016, 318 maintains that 'when an attitude has a propositional content, the attitude is sensitive to the truth of the proposition'. That a propositional attitude somehow concerns the truth-value of what, if anything, a 'that'-clause denotes seems indisputable. But as in the case of phrasing the complex relation in terms of content, these remarks in terms of truth cannot be taken to constitute fully-fledged accounts: What does it mean to anxiously believe something, and how is sensitivity to truth to be spelled out in detail?

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Abstract

Traditionally, 'that'-clauses occurring in attitude attributions are taken to denote the objects of the attitudes. Prior raised a famous problem: even if Frege fears *that the Begriffsschrift leads to a paradox*, it is unlikely that he fears a proposition, a sentence, or what have you as the alleged object denoted by the 'that'-clause. The usual way out is to say that 'that'-clauses do not contribute the objects of the attitudes, but their contents. I will show that, if we accept this answer, either we'd better stop working on attitude attributions or we'd better work harder on them.

Keywords

Content; Samesaying; Primitive notions; Arthur Prior.